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**The Clown Paintings of Jack Butler Yeats**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Cliona McColgan Stack**

to

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Abstract of the Thesis

**The Clown Paintings of Jack Butler Yeats**

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This thesis explores the clown paintings of Jack Butler Yeats with particular emphasis on those painted between 1920 and 1950. Yeats was interested in circus performances from a very young age. In general, his clown paintings seem to capture traditionally showy and exuberant images of both clown and circus. However, they also reveal Yeats' personal sense of the painter as clown. Laughter (who laughs, the permanent grimace) and the symbolism of the rose are significant in establishing the artist as a clown figure. Moreover, the idea of the clown also spoke to the arrival of the modern era. The balancing circus performer and the grotesque are particularly important to Yeats' use of comedy and tragedy. This thesis examines Yeats' clown paintings for their personal, cultural, and global significance. It attempts to situate the works with Yeats' own writings as well as a greater academic circle, including the works of Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, Samuel Beckett and W.B. Yeats. Finally, it looks to relate the clown paintings to the greater political scene in Ireland and abroad.

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## Introduction:

### Jack Butler Yeats, The Man and the 'Porpoise.'

Although his fame was eclipsed by that of his brother William Butler Yeats, Jack Butler Yeats (1871-1957) is often regarded as Ireland's national painter. Later in life, during a BBC interview, Yeats would self-effacingly claim that he painted merely "because he was the son of a painter."<sup>1</sup> Born in London to John Butler Yeats, himself an artist and portrait painter, Jack's interest in art began at a very young age. According to his father, Yeats' childhood drawings revealed an advanced sensitivity to interpersonal relationships.<sup>2</sup> Yeats maintained a lifelong interest in personalities, in individuality, and in describing these forthright. He thought of himself as an observer, and this fit with his quiet, attentive personality. It has been said that Yeats' first influences were his own "personality and family background,"<sup>3</sup> and it is quite clear that Ireland was his primary subject. Although his parents and siblings spent most of their time in London, Jack Yeats had spent most of his childhood in Sligo, and was raised by his maternal grandparents. His nostalgic feelings for Sligo are obvious in his early illustrations and paintings, depicting costal scenes, horse races, farmers, card players, local shops, colloquialisms and the common man.

Among his favorite pastimes, in fact, was visiting the circus. This interest may have sprung out of a greater love of performance; Yeats was enamored by the theater and spent much of his time in childhood building stage sets. Accordingly, Yeats' early work in illustration

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*. (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 3.

includes many scenes of circus performers and circus life. *The Travelling Circus* (1908) shows a circus ring brimming with spectators. The image is sketched to give the viewer the impression of sitting amongst the crowd in the upper levels of the risers. A horse gallops around the ring alongside clowns, jockey and ringmaster, and a woman on horseback, presumably the *haute école* act, stands by with attendants awaiting her performance. The banner reveals that this is ‘Peter’s Great Circus.’ Interestingly, both the subject matter – the circus – and the print making itself spoke to Yeats’ greater interest in popular culture. The circus was wildly popular in Yeats’ early life, and traveling circus shows were common throughout England and Ireland. Moreover, this particular circus image was published in the June 1908 edition of Yeats’ *A Broadside*, a publication that Yeats began that year as a follow-up to an earlier project known as *A Broadsheet*.<sup>4</sup> As Hilary Pyle notes, with the *Broadside* and *Broadsheet* publications, Yeats’ line gradually “had been strengthened by being grafted on to the traditional style of the anonymous woodcuts heading the nineteenth-century ballad sheets he collected.”<sup>5</sup> The Dun Emer Press printed the first issue of *A Broadside*, which included Yeats’ print *The Travelling Circus* as well as various poems. The poem accompanying this image suggests the simple fun of the performance,

Trumpets and fifes in the street, the circus is come to town,  
There’s a fine blue peacock’s plume in the tall white hat of the clown:  
    And the piebald horses feet  
Go sounding sounding sounding round and around the ring,  
And the lady leaps the hoops like a swift white bird on the wing,  
    And the bandmen’s drums are pounding.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> T.G. Rosenthal, *The Art of Jack B. Yeats*. (London, England: Andre Deutsch, 2003), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Pyle, “‘Men of Destiny’ – Jack B. Yeats and W.B. Yeats: The Background and the Symbols,” *Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 262-263 (1977), 195.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenthal, *The Art of Jack B. Yeats*, 10-11.

Yeats' illustration mirrors the poem exactly, exuding the thrill of the spectacle at hand. All eyes are fixed on the commotion in the ring, the centripetal motion of the clowns, horse, and ringmaster. A jockey prepares to, perhaps, mount the running horse when it circles in front of him. With Yeats' emphasis on the regular, circular promenade of the performers, one can imagine the sounding hoofs turning around the ring, as in the poem. The clowns appear to skip along the floor, their legs jutting out as if in a springing motion and feet flexed to bounce off the ground below, resonating with the merry, busy atmosphere. Moreover, there is great anticipation for the *haute école* rider, who waits with her attendants like sentinels at the edge of the tent, their formality contrasting the energy of the performers careening around the ring.

In general his prints are premonitory of his watercolors and early paintings. In such pieces, Yeats adheres to broad lines and flat surfaces learned from years in illustration. His 1912 painting *The Circus Dwarf*, which was included in the 1913 Armory Show in New York, is a great example of this. Here, the figure of the dwarf is duly outlined and formed by broad, flat planes of color. Within this painting there is minimal variation in Yeats' palette; rather, it is dominated by a single shade of red and of brown paint. The dwarf stands behind the scenes of the circus, and though he is physically diminished by the scale of the circus equipment surrounding him, his posture, firmly clenched fist, broad shoulders and serious expression give him tremendous presence and force.

Thus, on a fundamental level Yeats' clown paintings seem to capture a romanticized notion of the circus. These are images typical of the circus he would have visited as a child. His palette is vibrant, tending toward primary colors that reinforce the joyful, energized experience of a circus performance. *They Come, They Come* (1946) pinpoints the moment when a motley assortment of clowns enter the ring at a circus. Yeats' gestural application of paint and bursts of

color suggest the movement of the clowns, horses, and acrobats swirling into the ring. This image certainly captures the clown in his traditional role: a figure of absurdity, with masks and dress that are as exaggerated as his physical displays. The clowns are made of angular, awkward elements that convey their bodily humor, particularly the second clown in line, whose rocking, s-shaped body and upright, jutting elbow intimate his swaying movement. Many scholars have suggested that Yeats' clown paintings are images of the famous Irish clown Johnny Patterson, who was known as 'the Irish singing clown.' Yeats' *The Singing Clown* is alternatively known as *Johnny Patterson (Singing Bridget Donoghue)* (1928). This painting shows the 'Rambler from Clare' at his finest, performing a song that he himself penned lamenting lost love.<sup>7</sup> However, with the introduction of Patterson into Yeats' body of work also comes the element of tragedy. In 1889, Patterson was killed at his own performance; he was struck with a crowbar and killed by riotous spectators whilst singing 'Do Your Best for Another One' and carrying a green and a red flag in support of the coming-together of Ireland and Britain. Yeats would have been eighteen when the 'Irish Singing Clown' passed away.

And despite the allusion to Patterson, for Yeats the clown was more personally tragic as well. The expressive image of the clown emerged simultaneously with a new artistic process, that of *memory painting*. Yeats' deep interest in memory processes stemmed from his belief that "No one creates [...] the artist assembles memories."<sup>8</sup> As Hilary Pyle explains, memory painting, for Yeats, was a process that, "allowed memory to develop and fluctuate after it first gripped the mind, to distort the original experience. It gave license for the inclusion of extraneous forces, or for the addition of detail not necessarily relevant, but carried in by a fresh

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<sup>7</sup> Clare County People, "Johnny Patterson (1840-1889)," Clare County Library, [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/johnny\\_patterson.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/johnny_patterson.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Jack Yeats, as quoted in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 128.

emotion at the moment of painting. In this way the original experience was translated into a newly created and visionary happening.”<sup>9</sup> This stylistic change began around 1915. Yeats began to use medium to express emotion, using contrasting, feverish lines rather than the orderly, cartoonish lines and flat planes learned from his younger years in illustration. He also expanded his palette, allowing his colors to become increasingly non-descriptive. Even the physical act of painting changed for him; he experimented with squeezing paints directly onto the canvas, pushing paint around with his thumbs, fingers and palette knife, and relying on heavy impasto. In working through memory, furthermore, he focused on a highly personal art derived from past experiences. He declared, “The finest picture in the world will give the finest moment finest felt by the finest soul with the finest memory.”<sup>10</sup> These ‘fine memories’ included scenes of the circus he frequently visited in his childhood years. But their delicate sense of the tragic, of the performer both laughed at and with, spoke to a very current matter in Yeats’ life at the time: his sense of personal failure as an artist.

Jack Yeats was known as a romantic, observant child, constantly sketching in his book. Between 1887 and 1894, Yeats attended many art schools including South Kensington, Chiswick School of Art, West London School of Art, and Westminster, and though he was dutiful enough in his studies, Yeats was a somewhat “reluctant student,” earning a reputation for independence and unconcern with academics.<sup>11</sup> Early in his career, Yeats entered the field of illustration, working for many publications. As he used his black-and-white sketches and prints to earn a living, he also began to work in watercolor. His early watercolors, as mentioned earlier, were distinctly informed by his work as an illustrator, showing broad, flat planes of color and duly

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<sup>9</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 128-129.

<sup>10</sup> Yeats, as quoted in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), 36.

outlined forms. It was not until Yeats began to work in oils that he would come into his own as an artist, his early works in oil revealing the same illustrative quality and, gradually, breaking free of the illustrator's line in his later works. His mature style would be defined by indefiniteness – a freedom of color, expression, and form seemingly chaotic, rapid and palpable.

Yeats became well known as an illustrator in Ireland, and his first painting exhibits were considered successful. He gradually earned a reputation as a painter of Irish life, and acquired very dedicated followers. He had always had the devotion of his father; although John Yeats was a painter himself and had another son known as Ireland's national writer, he once declared that "Jack was really the poet of the family"<sup>12</sup> and that he was among those few 'geniuses' to "break fresh ground in art."<sup>13</sup> Among Yeats' other enthusiasts were Oskar Kokoschka, Victor Waddington, Earnan O'Malley, Thomas MacGreevy and Samuel Beckett. Each made their admiration known to Yeats via books, letters, connoisseurship and public criticism. Kokoschka, an Austrian artist and Yeats' contemporary, thought of him as 'Jack B. Yeats, the great painter (may-be the last!).'<sup>14</sup> His enthusiasm was most conspicuous in letters encouraging Yeats to continue his work, which pleaded "Please, after having had your rest, let your unruly soul for another turn out in the wonderfull [*sic*] world of your sagas and take up painting again! You alone can to-day tell in painting such touching stories!"<sup>15</sup> Victor Waddington, on the other hand, was to become Yeats' greatest collector. Earnan O'Malley, a political activist, guerrilla fighter, and writer, was also drawn to Yeats. He identified Yeats as a truly Irish painter, seeing clear

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon S. Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*. (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc, 1990), 159.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Oskar Kokoschka, as quoted in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 172.

<sup>15</sup> Kokoschka, as quoted in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 172.

relationships between the painter's work and the intense political atmosphere in Ireland. Similarly, Thomas MacGreevy, who was an art critic, a member of the first An Chomhairle Ealaíon,<sup>16</sup> and the director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950-1962,<sup>17</sup> regarded Yeats as the first truly Irish painter and also held him in great esteem. In his book on Yeats (over which Yeats corresponded with the writer), MacGreevy wrote, "Jack Yeats fulfilled a need that had become immediate in Ireland for the first time in three hundred years, the need of the people to feel that their own life was being expressed in art."<sup>18</sup> As for Samuel Beckett, writer and poet, one need not look past his "Hommage à Jack Yeats" and countless letters detailing visits to the elder Irishman to see his enthusiasm for both the man and the work. As Armstrong points out, Beckett's admiration was best shown in his own imitating of Yeats' style in his writings.<sup>19</sup> Because of this admiration, many parallels can be drawn between the works of the two men. In "Hommage," Beckett sings Yeats' highest praise:

What is incomparable in this great solitary *oeuvre* is its insistence upon sending us back to the darkest part of the spirit that created it and upon permitting illuminations only through that darkness.

Hence this unparalleled strangeness which renders irrelevant the usual tracing of a heritage, whether national or other.

What is less magic than this extraordinary craftsmanship, as if inspired by the thing to be done in its own urgency?

As for references that have been unearthed— Ensor and Munch at the top of the list – the least that can be said is that they are not much help.

The artist who stakes his being comes from nowhere. And he has no brothers.

Shall I embellish? There is neither place nor time for reassuring notes on these desperately immediate images. On this violence of need which not only unleashes them but disrupts them beyond their vanishing lines. On this great internal reality which incorporates into a single witness dead and living spirits, nature and void, everything that

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<sup>16</sup> Irish Arts Council, a government agency for the promotion of the arts in Ireland.

<sup>17</sup> "Thomas MacGreevy," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_MacGreevy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_MacGreevy)

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Barrett, "Irish Nationalism and Art," in *Sources in Irish Art*, ed. Fintan Cullen (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2000), 277.

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 10.

will cease and everything that will never be. And finally on this supreme master who submits to what cannot be mastered, and trembles.

No.

One can simply bow, wonder-struck.<sup>20</sup>

Beckett makes no effort to conceal his extreme enthusiasm, describing Yeats' oeuvre as "incomparable." Here, he admires Yeats' penetration of the human spirit, the "internal reality" whose consequence is primary. Most importantly, Beckett recognizes *no* forerunners for Jack Yeats, dismissing other artists as irrelevant and claiming for Yeats that his being "comes from nowhere." Undeniably, Beckett's "Hommage" is quite a tribute. Simply put, Jack Yeats had in fact developed a truly devoted group of followers.

However, even supporters such as Kenneth Clark recognized some element of unruliness and strangeness in Yeats' work, declaring "Colour is Yeats' element in which he dives and splashes with the shameless abandon of a porpoise. And colour knows no laws: it is the language of the free, the passionate, the impulsive, the intoxicated."<sup>21</sup> With this statement, Clark recognized the import of color in Yeats' painting. But despite his supporters, during his career Yeats experienced disappointments and tremendous mockery from non-supporters who could not recognize such significance in his seemingly chaotic works. His group of followers was small and consisted primarily of family and friends; devoted followers from the general public were few and far between.<sup>22</sup> Among his biggest disappointments was a New York show at the Clausen Gallery in March and April of 1903 in which twelve of sixty-three paintings were purchased, and ten of those by a close friend; many claimed that Yeats' was living in his brother's shadow.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Hommage à Jack Yeats," trans. Ruby Cohn, in *Jack B. Yeats: A Centenary Gathering*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1971), 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Clark, as quoted in Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 301.

<sup>22</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 82-86.

Other assaults included a cartoon published in the *Dublin Opinion* in 1929 that shows a man contorting his body in every possible way to try to understand a Jack Yeats painting, only to be carried off to the asylum in the end.<sup>24</sup> Critics lambasted him with accusations of lacking skill, throwing paint at canvases and mucking about in it, and so on. His work was seen as primitive, and his technique “tortured.”<sup>25</sup> A 1936 review of the Royal Hibernian Academy exhibition even claimed, “Now we demand of a painter, or of a plumber, that when he begins a work he should have some idea of what the result will be. Jack Yeats’ method does not allow of this.”<sup>26</sup>

According to Bruce Arnold, Yeats in fact suffered a nervous breakdown over the failure of his art between 1915 and 1916, calling it a “depressive period” marked by indifference and a lull in productivity.<sup>27</sup> Suffering from disappointments and criticisms, Yeats isolated himself from others, forbidding access to his studio.<sup>28</sup> He no longer brought friends in to talk about paintings and inquire about their opinions. He rarely let others see him paint. Pyle further notes that living in isolation near the coast also contributed to this episode.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding, from this series of criticism emerges a pattern of non-recognition that would contribute to Yeats’ sense of being an artist without an audience.

In order to understand this non-recognition we might look to Heinz Kohut’s theory of relational analysis. This theory established interpersonal relationships as central to one’s well

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Robinson, “Speech to mark the launch of exhibition: *Jack B. Yeats: Amongst Friends*.” in *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures*, ed. Yvonne Scott (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press Ltd., 2008), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism’s Love of Motion*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), footnote 344.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph F. Connelly, “Narrative Art of Jack B. Yeats’s Sligo and Sailing, Sailing Swiftly.” *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Samhradh/Summer 2002), 107.

<sup>29</sup> Hilary Pyle, “Jack B. Yeats: ‘A Complete Individualist.’” *Irish Arts Review*, Vol. 9 (1993), 94.

being. Kohut recognizes the individual's need for mirroring from another person. This reflective relationship, in which the other "feels in" or acts as twin to the self, allows the individual to feel approval and empathy from another being. Central to these experiences are *selfobjects*, or objects that an individual experiences as part of the self. In a way, selfobjects act as surrogates for the self. Interactions with selfobjects are either positive or negative, resulting in a cohesive or a fragmented self, respectively. Furthermore, the adult wavers between cohesion and fragmentation depending on such interactions.<sup>30</sup> Kohut further explains that failure to achieve a cohesive self results in disorders. Ultimately, with this theory, the fluctuations of one's relationship with the mirror – the other – determines one's psychological soundness. Donald Woods Winnicott explores something similar with his idea of the 'holding environment' in which the individual can truly begin to feel *real* and to navigate the world as oneself.<sup>31</sup> As with Kohut's mirroring, the holding environment is a reflexive experience that confirms the self. However, it too can fail, producing a negative effect of fragmentation.<sup>32</sup> Winnicott attributes a primary role to the mother, declaring that the mother is the precursor to the mirror. He describes "The Mirror Role" of the mother as "giving back to the baby the baby's own self"<sup>33</sup> through her gaze and expression. With this interaction, the infant finds confirmation of the self through the environment. Whether through mirroring or through the mother, the individual ultimately finds positive affirmation through *reflection*.

With these two theories of relational analysis, one can extrapolate that artists seek

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<sup>30</sup> Heinz Kohut and Ernest S. Wolf, "The Disorders of the Self and Their Treatment: An Outline." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 59 (1978), 414.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 127-128.

<sup>32</sup> Phillips, *Winnicott*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Winnicott*, 128.

mirroring relationships with the audience. In this scenario, art works act as selfobjects, and the audience's positive reception of these selfobjects is a means to success and self-validation. Yeats himself believed in the importance of interpersonal interactions and affirmation. He said, "There's too much old chat about the Beautiful: it's something that I've been turning over in my mind and I have a definition. The Beautiful is the Affection that one person or thing feels for another person or thing, either in life, or in the expression of the arts."<sup>34</sup> Here, Yeats suggests that positive interpersonal relations are the stuff of true beauty. It is this sort of relationship that he sought with his audience. Yeats consistently tried to engage the audience over his art, "to pass on the moment to his fellows"<sup>35</sup> or find some sort of consensually validated permanence through his art. Hilary Pyle notes that at studio gatherings and at-homes, Yeats would give minimal accounts or small anecdotes about the painting before inviting the viewer to provide the true meaning,<sup>36</sup> highlighting the artist's need for a reciprocal relationship regarding his selfobject, his art.<sup>37</sup> For Yeats, the painting was a point of interaction.

There is great evidence of his desire to engage the audience within his own paintings. In many paintings, the artist himself enters into the scene, unbeknownst to the viewer.<sup>38</sup> Pyle notes that his own likeness appears in many paintings, including *Morning after Rain* (1932),

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<sup>34</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 213.

<sup>36</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 133.

<sup>37</sup> This would be important for Marcel Duchamp as well, who, at a meeting of the American Federation of the Arts in 1957, declared that the "creative act" was completed by the spectator. See Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds. (New York, New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 140.

<sup>38</sup> Self-portraits, whether implicit or explicit, are a common convention through which an artist may establish a direct and intimate relationship with the viewer. A similar device is used in Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. As Foucault explains, here, the direct gaze of the artist forces the spectator "to enter the picture, assign[s] him a place at once privileged and inescapable." See Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 1970), 5-6.

*O'Connell Bridge* (1934), the Banquet Hall paintings (1942, 1943), *Where Fresh Water Meets Salt Water* (1947), *Silence* (1944), and *The Great Tent has collapsed* (1947).<sup>39</sup> Entering into the image is one way to affect a relationship with the audience. The audience could, in viewing him leaning pensively over a bridge and golden water in *Morning after Rain*, place themselves into *his* moment. Yeats also employed subtler invitations to the audience, however. In other paintings, he uses the composition of figures to place the viewer directly into the scene, thereby inviting their direct participation with the painting. This is often accomplished with figures drawn at the very front of the foreground, as with the faces of the crowd in *The haute école act* (1925), of which the audience becomes a part.

More specifically, individual elements within artworks can be read as selfobjects, and given his incessant reworking of the motif, perhaps the clown itself is a selfobject in Yeats' work. The clown is a similarly marginalized figure. Moreover, the clown, as performer, is himself an artist (and, as will be explored later, *the* artist). In *The Mask of Shame*, Leon Wurmser explores two drives which cause the performer to attempt to establish relationships through visual means, namely *delophilia*, a drive to exhibit and be seen,<sup>40</sup> and *theatophilia*, a drive to control through mutual seeing related to voyeurism.<sup>41</sup> Clowns are masters of comic performance, displaying their showy costumes, antics and routines for a group of spectators. Within Yeats' paintings, then, there is a double performance of sorts on the part of both the clown and Yeats himself. There is an opportunity for recognition between the painted characters

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<sup>39</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Leon Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 158.

<sup>41</sup> Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame*, 153.

as well as the viewers of the painting itself. Both the clown and Yeats seek the confirmation of their success through their audience.

And yet, as mentioned earlier, Yeats was largely unsuccessful in his time. He did not find the positive recognition of an audience. Returning to his so-called depressive period, the writings of André Haynal are particularly useful. As stated above, this period was marked by relatively low artistic activity. In *Depression and Creativity*, Haynal notes that withdrawing in this way is characteristic of depressive illness and indicates an awareness of a negative change. This negativity, furthermore, is internalized and concentrated on the self.<sup>42</sup> Haynal elaborates that depression is inherently tied up in the past. Often, one despairs at the feeling of extreme disappointment arising from the discrepancy between one's ideal self and one's actual self.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the sense of change and loss cause a narcissistic wound. For Yeats, the nervous breakdown was triggered by a sense of inadequacy as an artist, of failing to become the truly successful painter he had expected of himself.

For his own part, Yeats maintained a front of bravado. He once informed W.B. Yeats, "But I know I am the first living painter in the world. And the second is so far away that I am only able to make him out faintly. I have no modesty. I have the immodesty of the spear head."<sup>44</sup> Many would not recognize the import of his work until after his death. But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his limited success was that the depressive period seems to have forced a break in Yeats' art. He began his more expressionistic works, which would gradually evolve into a late style removed completely from his years in illustration. His figures lost their

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<sup>42</sup> Andre Haynal, *Depression and Creativity*. (New York, New York: International Universities Press, Inc, 1985), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Haynal, *Depression and Creativity*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 124.

definitive outline and solid shape over time, his colors move from descriptive to emotional, and he begins to rely on new techniques. Yeats was moving away from his illustrative depictions of surrounding Irish life, those images whose figures were immediately and easily relatable, toward an art built on dream and memory. His figures become distorted and hurried, slapped around with fingers and painting tools. In working through memory, furthermore, he focused on a highly personal art derived from past experiences. He declared, “the artist compromises when he refuses to paint what he himself has seen, but paints what he thinks some one else would like him to have seen.”<sup>45</sup> He accordingly began to concentrate heavily on the past, his finest memories. Concurrently, Yeats’ style evolved and the oil paintings of clowns began.

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<sup>45</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 105.

## I.

### The Artist and the Clown.

There is perhaps no greater comic than the clown. In exploring a theory of comedy, Ruth Nevo asserts that, “A good beginning [...] is in what appears to be an archetypal comic situation [...] A sawdust arena, a clown grotesquely painted or masked, an obstacle of some sort – say, a pail of whitewash if we are thinking of the contemporary circus, over which or into which the clown will tumble: these are the first ingredients of primitive comedy.”<sup>46</sup> With painted face and showy costume, the clown’s origins can be traced back to Greek theater of comedy and tragedy (wherein exaggerated masks were meant to bring the actors’ faces to life for the audience, especially those at great distance). Clowning types have persisted through all generations and civilizations in some manner, whether in the Italian *commedia dell’arte*, the court jester, the circus clown, or the modern stand-up comic. In addition to these roles in the performing arts, the clown also has a long history in the visual or plastic arts. Many artists even represented themselves as clowns, perpetuating a tradition of the artist and clown as outsiders, as those who see beyond. The clown is eternally at odds with his audience, appearing as an exaggerated, strange being. His painted mask, his colored costume, his zany behavior, his antics and jokes are a distortion. And yet not only is he universally relatable, he is the counterpart to the divine, affirming the existence of god: “There is no better role opposite the great than that of a fool.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ruth Nevo, “Toward a Theory of Comedy.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Spring 1963), 327.

<sup>47</sup> Helen O. Borowitz, “Painted Smiles: Sad Clowns in French Art and Literature,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January 1984), 25.

The *Foolscape World Map* (ca. 1590) is an early example of a clown-type in the plastic arts. The map shows a traditionally dressed court jester, donning a bright suit of gold, green, and red. Atop his head is a whimsical, ruffle-edged cap decorated with baubles. Yet one thing is amiss. In place of the jester's face is a map of the world. As Sebastian Brant writes in *The Ship of Fools*, "For fools a mirror shall it be, / Where each his counterfeit may see."<sup>48</sup> The map intended to show that everyman is a fool, a plaguing thought in the early modern world. This general sense of man's decrepitude rose alongside an ever-increasing awareness of the changing, mutable world, which was brought on by the clash between scientific discovery and theology. The map itself contains many other clues that resonate with the idea of man as fool, including a cartouche on the left side, which translates, "Democritus of Abdera mocked it, Heraclitus of Ephesus wept for it, Epichthonis Cosmopolites disfigured it."<sup>49</sup> Democritus and Heraclitus, philosophers of the ancient world, legendarily came to the same realization, that man is foolish, monstrous, and mad. However, their reactions were entirely different. But where Heraclitus wept, Democritus laughed. The cartouche also mentions a third person, Epichthonis Cosmopolites, which can be understood as 'every man.'<sup>50</sup> Thus, the clown of the *Foolscape World Map* is a melancholic one and heralds a new role for the clown in the modern era as the envoy of modern man.

Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) created an iconic painting of a clown in his piece *Pierrot* (1718-1719), which shows the popular *commedia dell'arte* figure in his traditional billowy white costume. However, he appears sorrowful, wistful, with arms flaccid and shoulders rounded in

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<sup>48</sup> Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, (Toronto, Canada: General Publishing Co, Ltd., 1944), accessed 12/13/2010 via Google books, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Anne S. Chapple, "Robert Burton's Geography of Melancholy." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 33, No. 1, The English Renaissance (Winter 1993), 116.

<sup>50</sup> Chapple, "Robert Burton's Geography of Melancholy," 112.

the soft landscape. His almond eyes are not bright with comedy; rather, his face is still and placid. Watteau's Pierrot typifies the romantic clown, who assumes the same dreamy, delicate qualities as the Rococo style in which he is painted. Establishing clowns as melancholic dreamers attracted many artists to adopt the clown as a self-referential figure. In many ways, clowns were seen as mirrors for artists, for they too were visionaries, inspired to perform and elicit the recognition of an audience. Édouard Manet's series of Polichinelles, including *Polichinelle Presents "Eaux-Fortes par Édouard Manet"* (1862), *Ball at the Opera* (1873), and *Polichinelle* (1874), can each be read as implicit self-portraits. In *Ball at the Opera*, the placement of Polichinelle at the edge of the canvas is the first clue to the masked self-portrait, for, as Linda Nochlin points out, Manet appears in *Music in the Tuileries* (1862) as a similarly marginalized character. Nochlin states, "it is entirely in character for Manet to tuck himself modestly into the margin of a scene, as he had in *Music in the Tuileries* more than a decade earlier, so that he could be both a participant in and the observer-constructor of the painting."<sup>51</sup> Other artists would continue the tradition of the clown in their works. Pablo Picasso's *Three Musicians* (1921) shows *commedia dell'arte* figures Pierrot, dressed in white, Harlequin, in his bright mosaic costume, and a monk, shrouded with a dark cloak. Picasso painted many harlequins, including the 1901 *Harlequin*, which shows the clown at a coffee shop, posed as if deep in thought and equally humorless as Watteau's Pierrot.

Yeats' oeuvre contains many examples of the clown. *The clown among the people* (1932) shows a clown exiting a performance, mouth agape, eyes apprehensive, and a general appearance of dejection. A jeering crowd surrounds him. Women's faces are distorted or even cut in half with quick strokes of shadowy paint. Other faces are barely recognizable amongst the haphazard background, distinguished perhaps only by the smudge of a red mouth. Overall, the figures are

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<sup>51</sup> Linda Nochlin, "A Thoroughly Modern Masked Ball," *Art in America*, Vol. 71, No. 10 (November 1983), 195.

identifiable but bizarre. In many ways, this image reflects the personal mockery Yeats may have felt over his own “performance.” He, like the clown, failed to establish a relationship with his audience. In essence, he attacks the other (the audience and the cause of his breakdown) with paint strokes. The very process the artist uses, involving thumbs, the palette knife, and quick, heavy movements of paint, reveals a degree of destruction and aggression towards the crowd. Ultimately, this painting suggests his sense of alienation and relational failure, his sense of being an artist without an audience. It is interesting to note that Yeats’ brother William Butler Yeats similarly believed that the artist (and the hero) must mask themselves in order to defend against the assaults of public criticism.<sup>52</sup>

Aligning himself with the clown, however, also romanticized the artist as outsider and as one who *sees beyond*. On a basic level, Jack Yeats has established himself as part of the artistic tradition of the vertical; he understood his reliance on memory as an upward inclination toward the unconscious, something the arts had long been associated with anyway.<sup>53</sup> With this painting in particular, however, the viewer’s perspective is also integral to elevating the artist. Despite the fact that the viewer is invited to become one of crowd circling around the clown, the viewer also maintains some degree of spectatorship from afar. We observe *with* and *apart* from the crowd, observing clown and audience alike. We thus extend our sympathy to the clown in his fretfulness. He is quite noticeably the only figure who, because he is more defined and uniform, does not at first glance merge into the background. This further establishes the clown and Yeats alike as those who see beyond, who are outside, who experience the mad visions and *phantasia* of the artist. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire even described the modern

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<sup>52</sup> Cynthia D. Wheatly-Lovoy, “‘The Silver Laughter of Wisdom’: Joyce, Yeats, and Heroic Farce.” *South Atlantic Modern Language Association*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (November 1993), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 29.

painter as a *flâneur*, one who observes while he strolls. He wrote, “The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito,”<sup>54</sup> emphasizing that the *flâneur* remains hidden from the world while observing it. Yeats’ ‘incognito’ extends beyond remaining hidden, nevertheless, as even his visions are unseen by the crowd. Yeats was in fact satirized as an artist who hurled paint on a canvas and stomped around in it with his boots.<sup>55</sup> A cartoon from the *Dublin Opinion* in 1930 shows Yeats firing paint from his hands and buckets at a canvas (a foreshadowing of criticism to come for Jackson Pollock) and having his dog roll around on top of the painting before completing it.<sup>56</sup> Thus, we are given the sense that this artist has come before his time and his place, and that there is no audience for his artworks. This resonates with Nietzsche’s parable of the madman, in which a madman proclaims the death of God and is mocked for his prophecy,<sup>57</sup> as well as Beckett’s madman in “Endgame.” Hamm speaks,

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter-  
and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum.  
I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising  
corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!

[Pause.]

He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was  
ashes.

[Pause.]

He alone had been spared.

[Pause.]

Forgotten.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. (London, England: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 9.

<sup>55</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 126.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson, “Speech to mark the launch of exhibition: *Jack B. Yeats: Amongst Friends*,” 18.

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame & Act Without Words I*. (New York, New York: Grove Press, 1957), 52.

Beckett's use of the artist as madman and his deep admiration for Yeats only corroborates the idea that the artist is a true visionary, and in Yeats' case in particular, that the world had failed to see his genius.

Another circus painting was done in 1925, *The haute école act*. This painting shows a clown leading the *haute école* rider through the ring on her horse, the audience's attention fixed upon the rider, as emphasized by their straining, up-turned faces. The clown gazes up at her longingly, slumped in a posture of defeat. She sits proudly upon her high-stepping horse, gazing down on the audience, aloof to the clown's attention. The pole at the center of the tent creates a visual divide between rider and clown as well, an effect continued by the arching neck of the horse. Even their garb drives a rift between the two figures; the clown dons a suit of white, billowy and loose, while the rider sports a dark, refined riding jacket. A later work, *This Grand Conversation Was under the Rose* (1943), continues this narrative to further expose the relationship between the clown and the rider. With the title of the latter painting we are immediately impressed with the idea of the artist as seer. The title refers to an Irish ballad, which is also referenced in Yeats' play appropriately titled "Harlequin's Positions." In the play, the guard states, "There was a song once, 'This grand conversation was under the rose.' Did you ever hear tell of it?... That was a song of great warriors. Greater than the one you see before you now."<sup>59</sup> With this, the painting's title reveals the hardship of adapting to the *new* and modern, and the simultaneous "lingering" of the old, of something lost.<sup>60</sup> The painting presents those great warriors of a bygone era, warriors of a mythic Ireland. In terms of the image itself, the work is once more highly emotive; color and movement overshadow form and the paint is feverish. Once more the clown seems to be a stand-in for the artist, this time ever more isolated

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<sup>59</sup> Jack Yeats, as quoted in Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Donald Kuspit, *Psychostrategies of Avant-Garde Art*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

and tragic. Yeats paints a large horse, a rider, and a clown. The three figures stand outside the circus ring, as indicated by the slight glance to the audience members beyond the fabric curtain on the left. Interestingly, the rider stands tall and aloof with her whip as the clown shrinks sadly on his crate, consoling himself with a cup of tea. Moreover, the rider holds the rose, which, according to many scholars, was Yeats' personal symbol for inspiration and creativity. She is the muse. One character in one of Yeats' plays declared, "People with second sight should only see roses."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, *The Scene Painter's Rose* (1927) further divulges the personal significance of this flower. Hilary Pyle notes that Yeats always painted with a rose attached to his easel (like the clown, he stood under the rose), and that his interest in the rose stemmed from the greater symbolic context of the rose in Ireland.<sup>62</sup> One can obviously look to the symbol of the rose in Joyce's green rose. He writes, "Lavender and cream and pink roses were beautiful to think of. Perhaps a wild rose might be like those colours and he remembered the song about the wild rose blossoms on the little green place. But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could."<sup>63</sup> Joyce's emphasis on *wild* roses growing unfettered on a *green* place and especially the emphasis on the *green rose* itself, its very remote possibility and relegation to a place of longing and imagination, are very obvious allusions to Ireland. There is also the name 'Róisín Dubh,' meaning little black rose or Dark Rosaleen, the eternal metaphor for Ireland itself. Yeats in particular understood that the "shadow land of the rose" provided the

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<sup>61</sup> Yeats, as quoted in Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Hilary Pyle, "The Jack B. Yeats Archive: a collection of gold bricks and 'significant deformity,'" in *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures*, ed. Yvonne Scott (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press Ltd., 2008), 29.

<sup>63</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (New York, New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1916), accessed 3/1/2010 via Google Books, 8.

innermost view of the world.<sup>64</sup> For Jack Yeats, artistic visions, it seems, occur under the rose (*sub rosa*, in secret), giving further indication of the artist as mad, as visionary, as outside.

Yeats envisioned the artist as a masked clown, as one who puts on an exaggerated face when confronting the world. In *The Charmed Life*, he wrote, “Seeing funny things is a protection, but when the curtain falls on fun what then my children?”<sup>65</sup> *Alone* (1944) captures this sentiment exactly. Here, the clown appears distant, despondent within the Big Top. Whether the show has ended or is about to begin, we are unsure. Yet the clown is abandoned inside the circus ring as horses are shuffled to and fro just outside the tent in the background. The clown’s eyes are cast downward, his lips formed by two tight lines. He clasps his fingers together in a gesture of contemplation and sorrow. Moreover, he seems to stand in a shadow-land of sorts with curling bits of grey-blue and black paint forming the ground upon which he stands. Rigid lines of the same murky color run along the fabric ceiling of the tent, creating shadows above his bright white countenance. The tent opening is in stark contrast to this darkened interior, a bright, trapezoidal shape of clear white and blue paint. Perhaps Yeats’ shadow-land of inspiration is at work here, too. Of interest, the same clown seems to reappear two years later in *Glory* (1946). Despite the suggestion of the title, here the clown maintains the downward gaze and sorrowful expression as in *Alone* as he stands before his audience. But in Yeats’ writing, as with the title of this particular painting, there is some suggestion of the desirability of the mask’s mutability. In another passage of *The Charmed Life*, Yeats writes,

Sea-gulls have the gift of changing their shape, and size, at will. One type of gull will in an hour look as all types. And a herring gull can hang in the air close to your face, his jeering cry still, and be for a time an albatross. In mist he can draw the grey gauze round him and disappear behind its curtain, and he comes back a pierrot of the first melancholy

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<sup>64</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 66.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Yeats, *The Charmed Life*. (London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1938), 6.

type, cringing at Pierrette's door. Then with a flirt of his tail, he can stand up into the sky a white-washed tabernacle.<sup>66</sup>

Here, Yeats specifically references the great clown archetype, Pierrot, and recognizes the power of the gull's metamorphosis. Of great interest is his description of the seagull emerging from behind a *curtain* as a clown-figure, suggesting the assumption of a mask as one transitions between a personal reality and an assumed role. Charles Baudelaire similarly compared the poet to an albatross in his poem "L'Albatros," writing, "The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds."<sup>67</sup> Baudelaire's poem set a precedent for the admiration of the bird's simultaneous beauty and mutability, recognizing the albatross' greatness in the sky and comic inelegance on land. In *Alone*, the clown, despite his get-up, appears as a true person rather than an agent in the role of comedian. We are glimpsing at his true reality as he stands heavyhearted, alone inside the ring, the only sign of activity just distinguishable beyond the tent's threshold.

Yeats in fact valorized all outsiders, tramps, vagabonds, and travelers as those brave few wandering through life without ties. Yeats' travelers have even been recognized as Pierrot-types, with "ghastly white" faces, seemingly "disenfranchised of [their] big tent."<sup>68</sup> The two wandering characters of *The Charmed Life*, whom he understood as his own disparate alter-egos, were Mr. No Matter and Bowsie. Similar characters seem to appear in Yeats' *Shouting* (1950) in which three people journey down an empty road. The central figure throws his arm into the air in a wave of exuberance, and all seem to be singing, skipping, and contorting with energy, each

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<sup>66</sup> Yeats, *The Charmed Life*, 138.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Albatross," trans. Richard Wilbur, in *The Flowers of Evil*, Marthiel Mathews and Jackson Mathews, eds. (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1955), 10.

<sup>68</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 112. He states, "More striking still, the other man's face is not a fleshy face, exactly, but a fancifully invented, papier-mâché, Pierrot sort of face – a ghastly white surface punctuated, if not punctured, by black eyebrows, or possibly dark eyes, and a black mouth. For Yeats, every traveler is a clown of the landscape or, better, ex-clown, just now disenfranchised of his big tent and shocked by the perception that there never really was or is a place, a human locality, but only this or that moment of physics."

comprised of curving, loose line. When looking at this painting, one is reminded of the beginning of the chapter “On the Road with Bowsie,” in which Mr. No Matter declares, “The sky is circling over us in every colour that is, and silky, a tinker twisted withy tent. The old tunnel shape and we two, like tinker fleas, skipping on the tent floor.”<sup>69</sup> This passage and the painting alike suggest that all the world is a circus, with the sky for its tent, through which Mr. No Matter and Bowsie (and Yeats and the clown) traipse around. Yeats in fact develops these two characters as leg-pullers, jokers who traverse life with a sense of freedom and adventure. Again, these are characters of a bygone era, often seen to represent an Irish identity on the fringe or “out West,” away from modern urbanization. These travelers are mere shadows in what Yeats regarded as the “jaded,” “foolish”<sup>70</sup> modern world. Mr. No Matter is a philosophical figure representing artistic visions coming in and out of focus before vanishing into *no matter* (i.e. the imagination), and Bowsie is his only constant companion, an exuberant, clowning figure with hidden intuition (i.e. the actual being).<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, Bowsie is feared to have drowned at one point in Yeats’ story and in fact attends his own funeral, revealing the indestructibility of this traveling, clowning character. This of course is yet another aspect of the clown that is indispensable to his comic routine. As Nevo points out, *survival* is essential to the comic effect. She explains that as the clown enters into his little kingdom of an arena, his pomp-and-circumstance must be deflated by a “blunder.”<sup>72</sup> But,

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<sup>69</sup> Yeats, *The Charmed Life*, 136.

<sup>70</sup> Tricia Cusack, “‘A living art’: Jack Yeats, travelling west and the critique of modernity.” In *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures*, ed. Yvonne Scott (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press Ltd., 2008), 80.

<sup>71</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 205.

<sup>72</sup> Nevo, “Toward a Theory of Comedy,” 328.

more importantly, he must emerge from said blunder, triumphant and whole.<sup>73</sup> This is what separates the comic from the tragic. With Bowsie, nevertheless, we see that Yeats believes the ‘funny things’ are a protection. In another section of *The Charmed Life*, Mr. No Matter calls to Bowsie, and thus Yeats to himself, “I propose, Bowsie, now that we each take a stroll apart... We will be pleased to see each other’s small dots of heads, on bodies that will look like sucked comfits across the blue and tinkling waters of the bay. Each of us will commune with our own nonsensical souls, which at these times will not be said nay to, but peak up in their squeaky voices, which it amuses them to think are like the human ones.”<sup>74</sup> Mr. No Matter, Bowsie, Yeats and the clown all travel through life aware that their “nonsensical souls” are truly not like the “human ones,” that they have not lost their ability to penetrate reality. Theirs is a life under the rose.

The idea of the vagabond and clown, outside their personal significance for Yeats, all spoke to the arrival of the modern era. Brian O’Doherty notes that these characters all belonged to the romantic canon and were “paradigms for a soul the bourgeoisie felt they had lost.”<sup>75</sup> In an era of disruption and unrest, particularly with the World Wars, many began to question the human condition in the modern age. For Jack Yeats, troubles extended to the homeland as well. The Easter Rising, the shooting on Bachelor’s Walk, and his awareness of country and brothers

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<sup>73</sup> Nevo, “Toward a Theory of Comedy,” 328.

<sup>74</sup> Yeats, as quoted in Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 154.

<sup>75</sup> Brian O’Doherty, as quoted in Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 201.

divided (as Jack and W.B.'s political alignments were in many ways at odds) all contributed to a sense of the world undone.<sup>76</sup> Earnan O'Malley declared,

By the year 1921...Yeats found his world in a greater feeling for the emotional use of paint... one of the factors may have been the heightened sensibility which could result from the tension of life during the struggle for freedom in Ireland... His figures now enter a subjective world in which they are related to the loneliness of the individual soul, the vague lack of pattern in living with its sense of inherent tragedy, brooding nostalgia, associated with time as well as variation on the freer moments of old.<sup>77</sup>

In many ways, civil and global upheavals contributed to a new sense of the Fall of Man amongst society at large. A new awareness of unprecedented doom and horror spread throughout Europe and the world. In the 1930s especially, art earned a reputation for *escaping* reality despite being informed by it. Yeats was not the only artist to focus on the image of the clown at this time.

Many expressionist painters began to explore the idea of circus performers as heroic figures, as individuals from a bygone era of livelihood, harmony, and 'original unity.'<sup>78</sup> Such figures seemed to represent something against the urban mentality of the modern age.<sup>79</sup> Max

Beckmann's 1928 *Aerial Acrobats*, for example, shows two figures performing tricks in the sky. As Sean Rainbird explains, gravity operates within this piece to reveal a simultaneously "endangering" and "liberating force,"<sup>80</sup> juxtaposing the topsy-turvy turns of the male figure with the expanse of sky and absence of firm ground. Thus, the sense of gravity (both as natural force and implied risk) gives weight to the perilous performance of these force-defying acrobats.

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<sup>76</sup> For further reading, see J.C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603-1923* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966), or Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>77</sup> Earnan O'Malley, as quoted in Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 230.

<sup>78</sup> Janice McCullagh, "The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 4, (December 1984), 633.

<sup>79</sup> McCullagh, "The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image," 637.

<sup>80</sup> Sean Rainbird, "A Dangerous Passion: Max Beckmann's 'Aerial Acrobats'." *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 145, No. 1199 (February 2003), 96.

Similarly, at this time vagabonds and travelers also suggested a sense of freedom or escape from oppressors, and scenes of rural life gave the impression of being closer to nature and truth.

An especially intriguing aspect of these circus performers, however, were those whose primary physical act was to *balance*. A popular circus act, this image of a balancing figure did not escape Jack Yeats' collection of clown paintings. In 1916 he painted *The Double Jockey Act*, in which two riders balance on horseback while running around the ring. A clown runs along easily on foot beside them, mocking their performance atop the rocking horse. Janice McCullagh points out that many artists inspired to paint trapeze artists were greatly influenced by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, exploring the ways in which the text corroborates certain expressionist images of tightrope walkers.<sup>81</sup> It is well known that W.B. Yeats was greatly influenced by the writings of Nietzsche, whose works W.B. became acquainted with through the recommendation of John Quinn.<sup>82</sup> Quinn was of course a friend to Jack Yeats as well. Perhaps Jack was also influenced by the German philosopher, and we can certainly see a Nietzschean influence in Yeats' *The Double Jockey Act*. Of note, in this text Zarathustra proclaims the death of God,<sup>83</sup> a reprise of Nietzsche's earlier parable of the madman in *The Gay Science*. As mentioned earlier, the madman's prophecy seems to align with Yeats' presentation of both artist and clown as seers. With Yeats' *The Double Jockey Act* in particular, one is also reminded of "Zarathustra's Prologue," in which Nietzsche writes,

Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss.

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<sup>81</sup> See McCullagh, "The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image."

<sup>82</sup> Adrian Paterson, "'Neiche is not Celtic': Raferty, Yeats, and the Making of a Modernist Self-Consciousness." (paper presented at the Ireland and Modernity Conference at Queens University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland, November 11-13, 2010).

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Mumbai, India: Wilco Publishing House, 2005), 19.

A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still.<sup>84</sup>

In Yeats' image, the jockeys are engaged in a physical and metaphorical balancing act: balancing on the horse, on the 'wire,' between life and death, between inhuman and the ideal. The second jockey appears most implausible with his eyes and arms raised skyward, as if in awe<sup>85</sup> and yet serving in no way to balance him atop the horse's hindquarters. Moreover, his left leg extends precariously in the air, making no contact whatsoever with the horse's careening body. The jockeys, like the trapeze artists, strive toward physical limits to defy their own body in order to soar. In this way, they are clowning, brutish figures of the circus who strive to be more than human, to be the 'Superman' and attempt the 'dangerous going-across.' Yeats presents them in this state, between man's worldly body and his greatest potential.

Interestingly, this theme stuck with Yeats, and he revisited this image twice more in his oeuvre with *The Circus* (1921) and in *The Jockey Act* (1928), suggesting a preoccupation with this idea. *The Circus* shows a ring of spectators, all eyes on an acrobat who balances atop a horse while simultaneously balancing a woman on his right thigh. Her pose is reminiscent at once of a graceful dancer and, because the billows of the circus tent suggest the shape of wings below her arms, of *Nike of Samothrace*. The balancing here is two-fold, but not as a double act like that seen in the 1916 painting but rather as a *balance on a balance*. Once more there is a sense of the impossible as the man does not seem to balance the woman in any believable fashion. His arm merely rests at her side, and she seems to float beside him. In the final of the jockey series, *The Jockey Act*, a solitary rider is shown lying perpendicular to the horse's body, his elongated form protruding in a dangerously horizontal fashion. This piece suggests even

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<sup>84</sup> McCullagh, "The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image," 635.

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps in reverence as he gazes toward the concentrated golden light in the upper corner?

greater movement, as the horse and rider fill the majority of the scene with their curving form. One imagines that the rider has been suspended on Yeats' canvas in the midst of tricks and turns, perhaps captured in the moment he leaps upon the running horse's back.

It is no wonder that Baudelaire states that laughter occurs between heaven and earth, "at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery,"<sup>86</sup> and that Yeats has situated these painted masters of comedy just so. Moreover, the technique of memory painting, utilized in the jockey act paintings, further conveys a sense of the in-between, born out of the artist's mind. Yeats' act of painting from memory establishes a conversation about past and present converging, meeting in one dream-like vision upon the canvas. In a broader context, this similarly reflects the Irish tendency, under colonization of the British, to turn an eye backward in an attempt to try to maintain a culture that *was*. As Brian O'Doherty commented, "In Ireland the future was full of regret and the past was full of promise."<sup>87</sup> The Irish balanced between these two, living an in-between. Yeats' modern Ireland truly struggled to assert a cultural identity, to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable traditions *of the past* and expectations of the future. The modern, here, was synonymous with British, with urban and new, while the ideas of tradition, the past, and the outsider were seen as truly Irish. Even in a greater global context, the world was experiencing the flux of the past, when man lived in a more unified society, and a present, where man faced unfathomable inhumanities and unprecedented doom in the World Wars. The mask of the clown, perhaps, was one's greatest protection.

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<sup>86</sup> Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 154.

<sup>87</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 166-167.

## II.

### Disruption brings Clarity.

Interestingly, one can reexamine the surface work of Yeats' other clown paintings to see this notion of the comedy and tragedy of the modern era acting within the paint itself. Specifically, Yeats uses the grotesque to show that disruption brings clarity. This is particularly evident in the spectators of *The Singing Clown* and *The Clown Among the People*, those masses jeering and laughing at the clown. In his color choice, Yeats has given the spectators the appearance of being masked as well, and this is the first unmaking of our expectations. The spectators often have a whitewashed, Pierrot-like countenance interrupted by strokes of garish color along the cheeks and eyes, exaggerating their facial features just as the clown's makeup does. In applying non-representational color and thick gesture to their faces, Yeats has also given the audience the appearance of animals. The most human aspects of appearance, the face and expression, are smeared, smudged, degraded with paint. Grotesque half-faces emerge from the background of these paintings, some appearing skeletal, others broken. The second figure at the lower left of *The Singing Clown*, seen in profile, appears spectral and garish. His face is sunken and skeletal, with seemingly no facial musculature as his skin is stretched over the bone structure. His teeth are barred, his hair is a flat wave of grey and his nose does not protrude from his face, again adding to his spectral appearance. Bedient identifies a similar animal-like appearance in the faces of Yeats' painting *Forgive Him*, and relates this to both Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and to Beckett's idea of "deanthropomorphisation."<sup>88</sup> These figures are

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<sup>88</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 79.

both human and animal, both animate and unearthly, and yet they are none of the above. They are part of an in-between.

However, in other examples of Yeats' crowds, it is not a disturbing countenance but rather a solitary, disembodied image of a mouth that meets the viewer's eye. In *The Clown Among the People*, we see these red remnants of mouths in both foreground and background, surrounding the central figure of the clown. The motley faces fade in and out of the background in grotesque instability. And with these mouths, the viewer is reminded once more of Beckett, Yeats' close friend, and of his play "Not I." Here, Mouth stands alone, "whole body like gone...just the mouth... lips... cheeks... jaws... never... what?... tongue," as a mute discovers the sensation of her ability to speak.<sup>89</sup> The monologue, an "aural assault"<sup>90</sup> of logorrhea, features a pitch-black stage space with the only illumination falling upon the red slits of the actress's lips. Inspired by Caravaggio's *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Beckett desired the stage to be occupied solely by "a pair of blubbering lips."<sup>91</sup> In *The Clown Among the People*, Yeats, by means of a disrupted, painterly surface, also makes the clown's audience appear mechanical, like Beckett's Mouth. Here the mouths are also disembodied, floating in space, as two red paint strokes upon the canvas. Looking to the painting, the viewer is also reminded of Baudelaire's poem "Le Désir de peindre," which reads,

Yet, in the lower part of this disturbing countenance, with sensitive nostrils quivering for the unknown and the impossible, bursts, with inexpressible loveliness, a wide mouth, red and white and alluring, that makes one dream of the miracle of a superb flower blooming on a volcanic soil.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Not I," in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. (London, England: Faber & Faber, 1986), 380.

<sup>90</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace Hovanovich, 1978), 623.

<sup>91</sup> Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, 622.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Le Désir de peindre," in Jean-Luc Nancy, "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death." *MLN*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (September 1987), 720.

Within the painting, the strange mouths burst forth from the background, small, hurried bits of red 'blooming' out of the paint. In fact, in looking upon these spectators, the viewer does not focus on or in some instances even *see* their eyes, the traditional window to the soul (and, therefore, the mark of their humanity). The laughter of these painted faces is frozen into grimaces, augmenting the sense that these are not persons but automatons. Their cheeks are permanently hoisted, teeth permanently bared, interiority permanently on display.

One might ask, how do we understand a laugh without sound? Laughter, by its very nature, emulates its antithesis in sound and sight. One can mistake laughter for crying and vice-versa when either visual or auditory information is lacking. Moreover, laughter is a momentary, passing phenomenon, uncontrollable and unable to be prolonged. It is a rupture. It simultaneously deprives us of our bodily and mental control. We presume the laughter in Yeats' paintings as a clown is usually a highly comical figure eliciting a laughing response from the crowd. Yet this laugh has no sound, and this laugh has no end. Yeats has disrupted the idea of the laugh itself in creating this paint-laugh. This is a laugh that emerges after the Fall of Man, a point at which Baudelaire also pinpoints the emergence of laughter. Painted into permanence, it is also a maniacal laugh, elongated and palpable. In *The Clown Among the People*, the crowd laughs at the clown, who, as mentioned before, is the only figure to meet the eye as a true surface: recognizable, uniform, whole, human. The clown does not fade in and out of the background, he holds still, he stays clear to our eye. Yeats has inverted their roles, in a sense, allowing the crowd to become the absurd and the clown to become the human.

Even in a broader sense, Yeats' general themes seem to suggest something unraveling. For example, the overarching theme of the comic suggests the potential to turn a situation, to upturn our expectations. The comic is by nature a grotesque inversion, subjecting man to a

bodily urge that cannot be controlled. Baudelaire's theory of laughter is once more pertinent, showing that man is suspended between higher and lower orders. Additionally, the theme of *performance* similarly engenders a sense of man's duality. During a performance, the actor is an agent for another thing: his character. The performance itself requires a split through which the actor may project something he is not. Moreover, the actor is supremely aware of this split. This is what Denis Diderot understood as the *paradox* of acting. The greatest actor, according to Diderot, has a profound talent for "knowing well the outward symptoms of the soul we borrow, of addressing ourselves to the sensation of those who hear and see us, of deceiving them by imitation of these symptoms, by imitation which aggrandizes everything in their imagination."<sup>93</sup> Fundamental to a great performance, then, is *moving* without being *moved*. All is imitation, fallacy, or concealment. The clown, too, is a performer, and so all of Yeats' characters exemplify the actor split upon his stage.

Yeats had a lifelong interest in the theater that would inform his painting. From a young age, he constructed miniature theaters, stages, shadow shows and plays. His interest has been described as a "life long addiction,"<sup>94</sup> and constructing puppet shows would remain a hobby in adulthood. In fact, Yeats would eventually dabble in serious play-writing in later years, a venture that speaks volumes about his affection for theatrical arts. Among his written plays are *Harlequin's Positions*, *The Green Wave*,<sup>95</sup> and *The Deathly Terrace*. With his painting *In*

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<sup>93</sup> Denis Diderot, "The Paradox of Acting," trans. Walter Herries Pollock, in *The paradox of acting by Denis Diderot and Masks or faces? By William Archer*, ed. Eric Bentley. (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 53.

<sup>94</sup> Terence de Verve White, "The Personality of Jack B. Yeats," in *Jack B. Yeats: A Centenary Gathering*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1971), 25.

<sup>95</sup> In *The Green Wave*, Yeats reveals some of his understanding of painting. As Roger McHugh describes, "he also wrote a short 'conversation piece' for the stage, *The Green Wave*, in which two elderly gentlemen discuss a painting. One of them is a down-to-earth, business-like person, who wants to know what the wave *means*. 'I think it means just to be a wave' says the second: if that wave could speak it might say 'I'm an Irish wave and the Irish are generally supposed to answer questions by asking questions', and the wave might ask you what was the meaning of

*Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi* (1937), Yeats even memorialized one of Ireland's great playwrights and actors, Dionysius Lardner Boucicault, as a further testament to the theater. Interestingly, Boucicault was known for his propensity for tragic parts. The painting itself suggests a stage performance; a ring of spectators, perhaps Boucicault's own characters, stands by, encircling a horse-drawn Bianconi coach that emerges beside a serene waterfall. One spectator on the left side of the canvas is shown gesticulating, with stiff, outstretched arms thrown in the air as if in excitement for the grand entrance. The dabs of vibrant yellow paint that shine forth from the darkened background and dance upon the tops of figures also suggests the intense lighting of a stage production, set against a darkened backdrop. The painting itself is the show. Even Yeats' color palette, itself as electric as a stage show with primarily unmixed colors, was informed by his love of the theater. He once said of his use of indigo, "Indigo was the strongest colour in the old pictorial theatre posters which used to decorate two or three corners in the Seaport Town in the West of Ireland, where I first saw stage play."<sup>96</sup> And indigo, "that dark indigo blue,"<sup>97</sup> as curator Lara Byrne qualified the specific hue, was quite an important color for Yeats, featured most prominently in his works of the 1940s.<sup>98</sup> The same color seems to have struck both Yeats brothers as W.B. Yeats held the color in esteem as well. In "Reveries," W.B. declared that the deep, intense blue was "a color that always affects me."<sup>99</sup> Undoubtedly,

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yourself." See Roger McHugh, "Jack B. Yeats, 1871-1957," in *Jack B. Yeats: A Centenary Gathering*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1971), 17. Yeats was known to usually ask the audience to describe what they saw in a painting, rather than to set out the meaning forthright.

<sup>96</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 135.

<sup>97</sup> Lara Byrne, "Lara, Jack B. Yeats, and a wintery night in Mayo." *The Model*, <http://themodel.ie/weblog/lara-jack-and-a-wintery-night-in-mayo>

<sup>98</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 135.

<sup>99</sup> Pyle, "'Men of Destiny' – Jack B. Yeats and W.B. Yeats: The Background and the Symbols," 189.

something might be said of his poem “Lapis Lazuli,” which may have been inspired by his affinity for the color blue. For Jack, the blue pigment would dominate his later works.

In addition to personal interests, however, Yeats’ own colleagues and friends were also greatly interested in theater. Samuel Beckett recognized the stage as a “symbol for life, for the schismatic self,” and identified the relationship between the unconscious and conscious vis-à-vis his understanding of the stage.<sup>100</sup> As explained by Armstrong, Beckett was interested both in the way in which an observer will identify with the viewed performance and the catharsis experienced through this identification.<sup>101</sup> Beckett even identified the performative aspect of Yeats’ paintings, writing to Thomas MacGreevy that “One does not realize how still his pictures are till one looks at others, almost petrified, a sudden suspension of the performance, of the convention of sympathy & antipathy, meeting & parting, joy & sorrow.”<sup>102</sup> Here, he is referring specifically to a painting showing a man under a hedge of fuchsia with a storm brewing in the background. Beckett’s reaction to this painting certainly indicates some level of personal identification with the figures on the “stage,” or here, on the canvas. Furthermore, given the importance of the clown to Yeats’ understanding of himself as an artist, it is clear that he understood his own role as that of a performer, one who perfectly studies and knows the world so that he can recite these observations for an audience from behind a mask.

In addition to the theater, Yeats was eternally interested in local observation, gradually putting his finger on the pulse of a world *in motion*. It seems that both the weather patterns of his island nation, which was infamous for mercurial patterns of light and mist, and the modern

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<sup>100</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Armstrong, *Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats, and Jack Yeats: Images and Words*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Letter to Thomas MacGreevy 14 August 1937,” in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 540.

world, which was turning faster and faster with technological change and globalization, were tremendous influences on his art. This awareness of the mutability of the world would inform Yeats' style tremendously. Calvin Bedient, in *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, describes Yeats' figures as "expressions of an energy they frustrate and deform but cannot evade,"<sup>103</sup> elaborating upon what was perhaps first identified by Monk Gibbon in 1945. Gibbon wrote in the *Irish Times* of Yeats', "I have come to see in many of the pictures [what] appears to owe nothing to any forerunner. It is as though Yeats, desiring to create a new cosmos, had elected to accept chaos first. Out of this chaos emerges presently significance."<sup>104</sup> The energy within Yeats' work is blatant. Brushwork is feverish, swirling, and chaotic. The impasto builds up and out of the canvas, and much of the pigment is mixed directly upon the canvas, avoiding the subdued effect of fully mixed colors and revealing an intensity that is nearly tangible. As Yeats himself said, "The pure colors cut through the air quicker."<sup>105</sup>

The suggestion is less an event, narrative and linear, and more a *moment*, simultaneously coming forth and passing away, yet fixed upon the canvas. As with the mouths in *The Clown Among the People*, there is a simultaneous emergence and submergence in Yeats' works, a lively energy. Bedient ascribes Yeats' chaotic images to an interest in physics, in motion, in "disorder spilling into order or out of order into order's background- that is, into still *more* potential for becoming."<sup>106</sup> It is no surprise that entrances feature prominently in his works, as seen in *They Come, They Come*, where clowns swirl into the circus tent, and *In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi*, where the horse-drawn coach pulls out in front of its audience. *Now* (1941) also

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<sup>103</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 79.

<sup>104</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 21.

<sup>105</sup> Ann Saddlemeier, "'An almost psychedelic impact': Jack Yeats." *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1999), 234.

<sup>106</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 101.

represents a stage, performers once more entering an arena from the right side of the canvas. It is as if many of Yeats' works are a holding space through which something may occur, an intersection of experience conjured up from Yeats' own memories. Perhaps some of this process is revealed by Yeats' alter-ego, Mr. No Matter, when he states, "If I let my imagination pull me about, I will be seeing wild things, wilder than I ever saw them. Just now this man steps off the roadway to walk by its side, where a long strip of emerald grass, short as the fur on a young seal's back, lies by the road. And I could think that before each footfall the little blades of grass made themselves into a little pattern, to take the tread of his foot."<sup>107</sup> In this scene, the cosmos is pulsating as the grass prepares itself for the walking man. There is a simultaneous seeing past and present as he conjures up an image of the grass forming its pattern before the footfall. The temporal nature of Yeats' art works, too, suggests a destabilization and opposition of internal experiences from the past and external representation in the moment. This process reflects Yeats' interest in *memory painting*, in the primacy of one's own memories as they are experienced and *re-experienced*.

Overall, logic, expectation, and order are annihilated in Yeats' works, contributing to the surrealistic, dream-like qualities of his paintings. To inlay the clown against the crowd, the actor and the action, and the moment of becoming and passing, only clarifies their opposition and highlights the tremulous balancing act of modern man. The world, constantly in motion, is turned inside out upon itself, and the clown, the artist, is the only person possessing clarity of vision. This idea resonates with a statement by Theodor Adorno, who in his 1956 essay "Sociology of Art and Music" similarly noted that the early twentieth century was "a time in which the gesture of happiness has become the mask of sadness and the sad faces of madness the

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<sup>107</sup> Yeats, *The Charmed Life*, 141.

sole sign to which any hope is still attached.”<sup>108</sup> In the wake of a changing world, we return to the idea that the clown is seeing beyond, that the artist has foreseen the tragedy of the modern world.

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<sup>108</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Sociology of Art and Music,” trans. John Viertel, *Aspects of Sociology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 106.

### III. Politics.

Many have questioned whether or not there is a political agenda in Yeats' work. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of his work that cannot evade political connotations. Johnny Patterson, the Irish singing clown who appears in many of Yeats' clown paintings, is himself a politically charged figure. As mentioned earlier, Patterson was killed whilst performing "Do Your Best for Another One," a song calling for the reconciliation of the Irish and British. For this clown it seems the shedding of the mask, the producing something overtly un-comic, the movement from the margin to center, had the direst of consequences. Yeats' painting of Patterson, *The Singing Clown*, recalls the clown in the act that would bring his untimely death. Although here he sings *Bridget Donoghue*, a song of lost love, the viewer is keenly aware that there is something greater lost as one returns to Patterson's own final *act*.

Does Jack Yeats step into some political arena through his art? Samuel Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy, two of Yeats' greatest supporters, were stalwartly divided on the possibility of a political meaning in his work. MacGreevy saw Yeats as Ireland's first national painter, aligning him with nationalist and idealist agendas, while Beckett claimed that Yeats stood apart from politics and should not be pigeonholed into narrow, Irish constructs. He maintained that Yeats' work captured a human sentiment, rather than a particularly Irish one. His declaration that "the national aspects of Mr. Yeats's genius have, I think, been overstated"<sup>109</sup> very clearly sets forth a view of Yeats' work as non-political, as not specifically Irish, as free from external

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<sup>109</sup> Samuel Beckett, "MacGreevy on Yeats," in *Jack B. Yeats: A Centenary Gathering*, ed. Roger McHugh (Dublin, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1971), 73.

influence of any kind. This statement was actually put forth in an essay entitled “MacGreevy on Yeats,” in which Beckett in fact addresses the differences between their respective understandings of the artist.

Nonetheless, Ireland has a long and tumultuous history with Great Britain. During his life, Yeats witnessed pivotal years of Ireland’s struggle with Britain. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a string of frustrations and upheavals that would give shape to a divided country. For years, Irish nationalism was growing, and the desire for a free Irish state spread throughout sections of the island. The campaign for Home Rule, initiated by Charles Parnell, sought to abolish the Act of Union of 1801 (which united Ireland and Great Britain) and establish Ireland’s autonomy. In 1914, Home Rule was passed with the exclusion of Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Monaghan, and Tyrone – the counties that form Ulster, or Northern Ireland. On Easter Monday of April 1916, republicans, including Patrick Pearse, Eamon de Valera, Michael Collins, and James Connolly, organized and staged the Easter Rising in Dublin in an attempt to eradicate British rule in Ireland. They sought to declare the Irish Republic through insurrection. The Rising was a failure, however, and many of its leaders were executed for treason. Between 1919 and 1921, the Irish War for Independence, a guerrilla war, ensued, ending in truce with the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty. The treaty established Irish self-governance of twenty-six of Ireland’s counties, which would remain a dominion of the United Kingdom. However, the truce was nothing if not a hiatus, and the cease-fire was temporary. The Irish Civil War soon followed, lasting until 1923. The divide in the country ran deep, and it would not be until 1949 that the Republic of Ireland was officially declared and recognized, and the ethno-political turmoil would ravage the country long past Jack Yeats’ death.

Yeats was undoubtedly sensitive to the turbulent political atmosphere in Ireland. The country itself was as mercurial as many of his painted figures. Himself Anglo-Irish, his political allegiance is hard to read, and his political statements lend themselves to aloofness. Yet he did have a romantic connection to Ireland, and to Sligo especially. He seemed to side with the republicans, declaring, “but I believe in the Sinn Féin ‘idea.’ I think it’s a good thing for its full of living ginger.”<sup>110</sup> He would treat many subjects and events of the Irish struggle for independence within his art. *The Public Speaker* (1915) is thought to be an image of the great orator Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, informed by a speech that Yeats himself attended. The speaker is shown serene before a crowd, commanding attention. Interest in the republican movement can even be gleaned from titles of Yeats’ work. Among his politically relevant works are: *The Exile from Erin* (1913), Erin being the Irish name for Ireland, *The Funeral of Harry Boland* (1922), commemorating a political figure who partook in the Easter rising, *Communicating with Prisoners* (c. 1924), which shows women communicating to those imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol, *Patriotic Airs* (1923), which shows a nationalist event, and *Going to Wolfe Tone’s Grave* (1929), memorializing the man regarded as the first Irish republican, among other works.

A work of particular consequence was his 1915 work *Bachelor’s Walk, In Memory*. Painted at a crucial time in Yeats’ personal life that was marked by disappointment, the painting commemorates the victims of the shooting on Bachelor’s Walk, in which British army officials opened fire on Irish civilians. In this image, a woman walks down a cobblestone street and places a solitary rose at the scene of the shooting. There is a suggestion of sunset as the bright yellow light diffuses in the background, casting dark shadows below the cart in the street. The woman herself is nearly a silhouette, draped in dark clothes and lit from behind. Each of these

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<sup>110</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 91.

elements carries a connotation of something passing, but, being immortalized on canvas, a lost something that has been memorialized. Surely the years around the failed Easter Rising were of tremendous emotional consequence for Jack Yeats, as his style began to change dramatically in these years. His brother W.B. Yeats captured the weight of these political events in his poem “Easter, 1916,” writing:

I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.<sup>111</sup>

In Jack’s painting, the sense of utter change is as undeniable as the light passing over the scene. The woman’s simple gesture brings forth a complex history, one full of the ‘terrible beauty’ that W.B. writes of in his poetry.

The rose, as seen in *Bachelor’s Walk: In Memory*, was a recurring motif in Yeats’ work, and one that had earned personal significance for the artist. W.B. wrote of the mystical, mythologized rose, professing, “I would, before my time to go, / Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways: / Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days”<sup>112</sup> and, similarly,

... Thy great leaves enfold  
The ancient beards, the helms of ruby and gold  
Of the crowned Magi; and the king whose eyes  
Saw the pierced Hands and Rood of elder rise  
In Druid vapour and make the torches dim.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> W.B. Yeats, “Easter, 1916,” in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 182.

<sup>112</sup> W.B. Yeats, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 31.

<sup>113</sup> W.B. Yeats, “The Secret Rose,” in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 69.

In the former, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” the rose is qualified as “sad” and situated upon a cross of time, suggesting the impossibility of a return to the epic “ancient days.” In the latter, “The Secret Rose,” the pinnately compound petals of the rose harbor numinous figures of Celtic mythologies and religions. Where W.B. romanticized the rose as a symbol of some weighty, bygone mythology, Jack Yeats saw the rose as both a national and artistic symbol. As established earlier, in *That Grand Conversation was Under the Rose*, the rose was the meeting place for Yeats’ clowns and altar egos, and Yeats himself always painted with a fresh rose beside him or fastened to his easel or to his lapel,<sup>114</sup> conducting his own work *sub rosa*. Eventually, he even procured a large velvet rose, which he affixed to his easel as well and replaced once it had grown “shabby.”<sup>115</sup> The constant company of the rose was so pervasive in his life that even his alter-ego Bowsie sports a velvet rose in his coat in *The Charmed Life*.<sup>116</sup> In 1927 Yeats painted *The Scene Painter’s Rose*, a scene suggesting how his own studio appeared. The canvas is dominated by a bright, red-orange background with a ladder, table and stool occupying the center of the room. The rose peeks up from the corner of the table, a small bit of red and green peering from out of its glass vase. The miniscule stature of the tiny painted flower, plunked down on the very edge of the table, stands in stark contrast to the import given to it by the title. *This is* the rose of the artist. *This is* his inspiration.

But, generally speaking, the rose also had tremendous political implications in Ireland. Ireland has been permanently feminized as ‘Róisín Dubh,’ a metaphor for Ireland born out of the *aisling*<sup>117</sup> genre meaning ‘little black rose’ or ‘Dark Rosaleen’ and used to covertly refer to

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<sup>114</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 133.

<sup>115</sup> Pyle, “‘Men of Destiny’ – Jack B. Yeats and W.B. Yeats: The Background and the Symbols,” 204.

<sup>116</sup> Yeats, *The Charmed Life*, 106.

<sup>117</sup>In an *aisling* (political song), Ireland always appears as a woman.

Ireland during times of occupation. Again, Jack Yeats was not alone in his adoption of the symbol. James Joyce wrote of the green rose in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, engendering notions of a free Ireland. As stated previously, Yeats' own brother even wrote of the "Far-off, most secret, and inviolate rose"<sup>118</sup> in his poem *The Stolen Rose*. And Jack Yeats himself not only inserted the rose into many scenes but even dedicated himself to creating a rose series, which included *A Rose*, *A Dusty Rose*, and *A Rose Dying*. Hilary Pyle notes that these four images comprised Yeats' only still life images in oil, and that he reported on the series in a letter: "I painted the other day a new subject for me – a rose. I painted the rose alive, and then followed it into the ante room of the Rose's Shadowland, and painted another little panel of it departing."<sup>119</sup> Yeats' understanding of its "Shadowland" of poetic inspiration is poignant as he traces its trajectory into its own shadowland – death. Samuel Beckett was particularly struck by the immortalization of the cut rose's little life upon Yeats' canvas, writing in a letter, "The refusal of the rose to crumble, its embalming of itself instead, compelled him to take it off the mantelpiece & on a table with the room all round."<sup>120</sup> Perhaps this self-same rose appears in *The Scene Painter's Rose*, absolutely engulfed by the 'room all round' and yet sitting up proudly in its vase. Connotations of the wavering political situation in Ireland come easily with the rose series. At once crumbling in defeat, as with the failed Rising and abortive civil war, and also 'embalming,' or persisting despite outside forces, Irish nationalism was not unlike Yeats' study on a solitary rose.

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<sup>118</sup> W.B. Yeats, "The Secret Rose," 69.

<sup>119</sup> Pyle, "'Men of Destiny' – Jack B. Yeats and W.B. Yeats: The Background and the Symbols," 204.

<sup>120</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Letter to Thomas MacGreevy 19 September 1936," in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 370.

Of course the rose begs an association with Róisín Dubh, the little black rose or Dark Rosaleen that signified Ireland herself during times of conflict, which must be explored in greater depth. Yeats painted two images entitled *Singing the Dark Rosaleen*, referring directly to a patriotic air written under the guise of a love poem. An allegorical representation of Ireland as female is pervasive in Irish history, the most notable forms being the *spéirbhean* (sky woman) and *cailleach* (old croon). The *spéirbhean* has taken on many names, including Róisín Dubh, Gráinne Mhaol, and Caitlín Ní Ullacháin (of note, each of these female names appears in titles to Yeats' work). As R.A. Breatnach explains, the essential aisling unfolds as follows:

The poet is asleep when there appears to him a *spéirbhean*, a beautiful maiden, a queenly figure from another world, who is in grievous distress. He speaks to her, asking her who she is: is she Helen or Venus or Dirdre or Céarnait? Why is she weeping? She answers that she is the true spouse of the ancient kings, and she sorrows for her rightful prince who is in exile across the sea. Then she vanishes, usually not before giving utterance to a banal word of hope for the return of him who, the later poets at least knew, would never come.<sup>121</sup>

Key to the aisling, then, is that the *spéirbhean* is mourning the absence of the *spéir-fhear* (sky man), her male counterpart, or the king. It is the idea of a “vacant High-kingship” that haunts both the figurative *spéirbhean* and the patriotic reader.<sup>122</sup>

It seems that Róisín Dubh herself may appear in both *The haute école act* and *That Grand Conversation was Under the Rose*. Returning to these images, the female equestrian seems to be a muse for the clown, perhaps appearing in a vision as the *spéirbhean* did in aislings. Yet this muse appears distant, unattainable. In the first, she rides proudly upon her steed, and in the second, she stands erect with the rose on her whip. She does not seem to see the clown, our artist, our poet. He – the jester, the fool – is indeed no replacement for the *spéir-fhear*, her absent king. No court hierarchy could provide for this type of gross inversion, there is no

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<sup>121</sup> R.A. Breatnach, “The Lady and the King: A Theme of Irish Literature,” *Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 167 (1953), 322.

<sup>122</sup> Breatnach, “The Lady and the King: A Theme of Irish Literature,” 325.

Cinderella story here. In these paintings, the clown persists within his marginal role, and the queenly Róisín subverts her role as the mystic, woeful woman. There is no sense of her longing. Whether or not there are implications for some greater reading of Ireland as a country is unknown, and perhaps it does no service to read a political interpretation into the paintings. Yet there is an added complexity to Yeats' woman-muse when layered with the history of the dark Rosaleen.

Yeats' imbued other paintings with a distinctively Irish mythology, and this also imparts a sense of his allegiance to Ireland. Once more, titles divulge a great deal of information about his interest in Irish culture and heritage. Among the most obvious of these titles are *An Abhrán Nuadh* (The New Song, 1943), *An Mangaire* (The Grafter, 1944), *And Grainne saw this sun sink* (1950). Even his series of clown paintings does not escape an Irish mythology. *The Clown of Oceans* (1945) is a costal scene of ochre and cerulean blue. A small town can be made out in the distance along the coastline. Water and sky meet along a greenish horizon, and a clown sets sail on his raft behind a pair of low-flying seagulls. As the clown ventures out into the vast expanse, toward a world unseen, one is reminded of the ancient Greek myth of Hades and the Underworld. According to this myth, Charon would ferry one along the river Styx in passage from life to afterlife. Yet an even stronger association lies with the Irish myths of Tír na nÓg and Mag Mell. In Irish mythology, both Tír na nÓg and Mag Mell are otherworlds. Meaning 'Land of Youth,' Tír na nÓg was considered to be beyond the reaches of land, far out west. Mag Mell, similarly beyond earthly limits, was considered a place for afterlife, yet unlike many underworld counterparts, it was seen as a place of eternal pleasure, reachable only through death. Yeats himself was quite aware of these lands, painting *In Tír na nÓg* in 1936 and *Drive through a city in Fairyland* in 1938. In the first, a figure reclines in the land of the youth, and in the latter, a

coach drives through the magical place. Perhaps, then, the clown of oceans paddles away toward these far-off places, steering ever westward.

The use of the clown itself can even be read in political terms. Yeats valorized the clown figure, adopting it as a self-referential persona. Within this particular painting, the clown paddles proudly upon his raft, standing erect with head turned slightly skyward. His stance, straddling the two planks of wood that comprise his raft, suggests confidence. Again, he is possibly traveling to a great, mythical otherworld. However, the valorization of this marginal figure is starkly contrasted to nineteenth-century British cartoons in which the Irish were satirized as “bestial” and “apelike.”<sup>123</sup> Such political cartoons fueled a highly gendered stereotype of the Irish people, oftentimes depicting Ireland as a young, beautiful, and vulnerable woman being protected from wild, uncivilized, and dangerous Irish men by the honorable British. Connotations of the Irish as fools, as banal, animalistic, *lower* beings persisted via such cartoons. In adopting a tradition of the clown as *above* the crowd, as a person possessing a higher vision, and as a representation of self, Yeats has rejected negative connotations of the Irish as clowning savages. Instead, the clown is the hero of Yeats’ paintings, a master of the transformative possessing clarity of vision.

In addition, the very basic act of traveling, seen in *The Clown of Oceans*, clearly becomes a political endeavor in a nation torn by conflict and civil war. To travel or to be on the move, and not necessarily only to mythic destinations such as Tír na nÓg but even within the earthly, known land, is to escape the oppressor. For the Irish, the west was specifically seen as representative of true Ireland. Out west lay those great otherworlds of myth, out west was untouched by and away from the British, out west was freedom. Yeats painted *Westward in the*

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<sup>123</sup> C.L. Innes, “Virgin Territories and Motherlands: Colonial and Nationalist Representations of Africa and Ireland.” *Feminist Review*, No. 47 (Summer 1994), 6.

*Morning* in 1947, showing a heroic figure gesturing in celebration as he sets off on a westward-bound journey. This is just another example of Yeats' travelling, wandering types, featured in so many works. These types of wanderers encourage a reading of the patriot on the run, of the Irishman escaping his oppressor. These images are again reminiscent of Yeats' two alter-egos, Mr. No Matter and Bowsie, who he describes in *The Charmed Life* as "Successful wanderers from no prosaic shore."<sup>124</sup> Key, here, is just that: these two characters, and many of Yeats' painted persons, *wander*. In *Westward in the Morning*, they specifically wander in the cardinal direction associated with Irishness. But even on the most basic level, the traveler him or herself carries immense political weight as a rebel on the loose.

Perhaps the subtlest political element in these works is the use of place, or more accurately *no place*, to reveal his sympathy to the Irish cause. National identities, especially in post-colonial states, are often conflated with a sense of *your place* such that "national identities [are] complicated by colonialism and the primacy of space, place, mapping and the geographical."<sup>125</sup> The implication here is for a national identity rooted in the land. The importance of the land, and of one's geographical knowledge, forever changed the Irish landscape as the British undertook a program of deforestation, seeing the land as something the Irish could use to their advantage during guerilla warfare. Similarly, to have *no place* might equally be to have numerous places, to be on the move and untraceable. The circus theme, too, carries with it a sense of a thing that has no place. The circus is notoriously fleeting, alighting in a location temporarily only to be uprooted and whisked away to the next destination. Some of Yeats' works suggest these uprootings and re-rootings, as suggested by the title *The Great Tent*

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<sup>124</sup> Yeats, *The Charmed Life*, 149.

<sup>125</sup> Breda Gray, "Longings and Belongings – Gendered Spatialities of Irishness." *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (1999), 194.

*has Collapsed*. Contemporaneously, Otto Wolfgang Schulze (Wols), himself in exile, created art works that similarly conjure notions of displacement. These works reveal objects standing in stark isolation, surrounded by a nothingness that “could stand as metaphors for Wols himself: isolated and alone, slowly and surely being locked up in a prison as tight and claustrophobic as the photographic space he created.”<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, Jack Yeats himself seems to be a somewhat displaced figure on many levels, the most obvious being that he was an Anglo-Irishman living in Ireland.

Another painting of great interest in working out the political underpinnings of Yeats’ work is *The Great Tent has Collapsed* (1947). To some degree, this painting calls into question the Irish political readings of Yeats’ work. Having been painted two years after the end of World War II, some scholars have read this image as the collapse of Europe in the post-war era, suggesting a global rather than local import to the work. This reading is in keeping with Beckett’s understanding of Yeats’ art, which called for a human universality rather than an Irish specificity. The grotesque spectacle of the war, then, has finally come to an end as the tent falls to the ground, the field deserted save a few solemn figures. Others counter that this image is not of political but rather personal consequence for Yeats. Terrence de Verve White wrote about his first viewing of the painting, which aligns with an interpretation of the autobiographical symbolism of the painting. Of this piece, he explains,

Most people outgrow their youth; Yeats remained close to his childhood in Sligo. The theme reappeared endlessly in his paintings. For a time the Irish troubles made a mark; then, I would say – on the evidence of the painting alone – that the death of Mrs. Yeats was reflected in at least one painting, ‘The Great Tent is down’, which shows stragglers going home and deserting the field; a pole stands where, earlier, the tent spread its canvas. I remember looking at it in the company of Richard McGonigal [...] We were

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<sup>126</sup> Joseph Monteyne, “Circus at the End of History: Wols in the Late Thirties and Early Forties.” *Revue d’art canadienne*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1-2 (1991), 47.

both overwhelmed by the painting; but McGonigal said ‘I couldn’t live with it. It’s too tragic’.<sup>127</sup>

Hilary Pyle comments that with this piece, Yeats himself has entered the painting, portraying himself as one of the figures viewing the scene of a collapsed circus tent in a quiet landscape.<sup>128</sup>

This idea corroborates de Verve’s reading, for if indeed it is a reflection on the loss of his wife, Cottie, the artist as clown has come full circle. Here, Yeats is disenfranchised of tent and mask alike, vulnerable to the world in the wake of unimaginable personal loss.

Perhaps the most that can be said is that Yeats’ work *lends* itself to an Irish reading, and that he was sympathetic to the Irish cause. It seems of utmost importance is we, the viewer, avoid Andrew Murphy’s “danger that [...] may end up not explaining the present but rather oversimplifying the past.”<sup>129</sup> Irish allegories, mythologies, and politics can enrich an understanding of the man and the work, yet these should not be limitations to understanding such complex art works.

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<sup>127</sup> de Verve White, “The Personality of Jack B. Yeats,” 48.

<sup>128</sup> Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A biography*, 133.

<sup>129</sup> Andrew Murphy, “Ireland and the Ante/anti-colonial Theory.” *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (1999), 153.

#### IV. Conclusion.

Ultimately, it seems that Yeats' clown paintings reveal much about the comic experience of life, both personal and societal. As described by Calvin Bedient, Jack Yeats' artworks "are toward and beside and between and against, more than they are of or about."<sup>130</sup> In this way we understand his clown series as something more than exuberant images of circus acts. These images embody the duality of modern experience, our great balancing act of comedy and tragedy. One may look toward the end of his clown series to try to grasp Yeats' greater view or premonition for what is to come for mankind. With the fall of the tent in *The Great Tent has Collapsed*, and thus the fall of the romantic notion of the past and of carnival, this image seems to suggest a permanent loss of man's 'original unity.' It suggests that there is no longer an arena for the clown, for Yeats, for the mad artist who sees beyond. I would argue, however, that by 1952 there is hope again in Yeats' clown series. Five years before his death, Yeats painted *The Circus has Come* (1952) in which a young boy looks out to the arrival of the circus not as a grotesque spectator but as a young boy looking to partake, as young Yeats once did, in the joys of the spectacle.

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<sup>130</sup> Bedient, *The Yeats Brothers and Modernism's Love of Motion*, 178.

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