The “intimate enemies”: Edward Dowden, W. B. Yeats and the Formation of Character

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Abstract
Stung by Edward Dowden’s reluctance to endorse the Irish Literary Revival, W. B. Yeats distanced himself publicly from the TCD Professor. This act of distancing has largely been accepted by subsequent scholarship as a reflection of Dowden’s lack of influence on Yeats. Despite obvious disagreements on some key points, this essay will argue that Yeats is close to Dowden on a number of issues, by tracing their intimate dialogue about the writings of George Eliot, Shakespeare and Goethe. The concept of formation of character—an English translation of the German *Bildung*—will prove central to their related responses to the question of what sort of life is best suited to further the development of literary gifts. These findings are framed by a discussion of Yeats’s profound, and often underestimated, indebtedness to Victorian culture and ideas, and the essay also traces the biographical background to these two writers’ changing relationship.

Key words: W. B. Yeats, Edward Dowden, Bildung, Unity of Being, Irish Literary Revival, Victorianism, Modernism, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Goethe

Victorianism has always tended to provoke strong reactions. The staunch, if selective, defense of Victorian values embraced by Margaret Thatcher and cultural critics such as Gertrude Himmelfarb presents the exception rather than the rule. More typical is the kind of denunciatory pigeonholing espoused by modernist writers in the decades following Queen Victoria’s death in 1901. A defining instance is provided by Lytton Strachey’s quartet of satirical biographies, published together as *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Yet Strachey’s willful resistance to, and circumscription of, Victorian ideals did not appear out of the blue. Already in 1912, he was writing to Virginia Woolf of his hatred of the “set of mouthing bungling hypocrites” that were the Victorians (Woolf and Strachey 1969: 43). As Samantha Matthews has shown, Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907) and Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) provided even earlier indictments of the era (see Matthews 2010). One might even posit that the reaction to “Victorianism”—understood as a phenomenon, with attendant values, more than an era—actually began before the end of nineteenth century, for instance in the

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Decadent flouting of bourgeois conventions and critique of imperial verities in the 1890s.

Being an associate of figures such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons, William Butler Yeats was an active participant in the Decadent movement. His own autobiographical account of what he called "The Tragic Generation," in book four of *Trembling of the Veil* (1922), provided a defining interpretation of this counter-cultural group. Although occasionally patronizing about their illusions and effeteness, Yeats shared with his fellow members of the 1890s Rhymers' Club a strong resistance to the conservatism of the late Victorian establishment. His autobiographical writings have been read in light of George Moore's precedent, in *Hail and Farewell*, as well as later Irish-language autobiography (see Foster 1998 and Lynch 2009). The immense importance of Victorianism for Yeats's life-writing—particularly in the period from 1914 to 1922, which saw the writing and publication of not only the five books of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1921-22), but also the preceding *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (1916)—has however not been sufficiently stressed. Here, as elsewhere, it is worthwhile to pay heed to George Watson's general remark: "Yeats cannot be understood without being placed firmly in the Victorian context" (Watson 2006: 56). This essay will use the context of post-Victorian reckonings with literary and familial precursors not only to frame Yeats's own autobiographical account of his relationship to the Irish critic and poet Edward Dowden (1843-1913),[1] but also as a lead to question the comprehensiveness and, to a certain extent, accuracy of that account. Both political allegiances and a complex familial dynamic will be shown to contribute to Yeats's own influential interpretation of their relationship. In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats once described Dowden as one of his father's "intimate enemies" (W. B. Yeats 1954: 352): While critics are justified in depicting also the relationship between W. B. and Dowden as being characterised by plenty of public antagonism, much of the time they were nevertheless in implicit dialogue—or "intimate"—in ways that have not been sufficiently acknowledged. As a leading critic of his day, Dowden was an authority on many writers either embraced or dismissed by Yeats as influences on his own career: in this essay, comparisons of their

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[1] For a judicious and informative potted biography of Dowden, see Chapman 1993: 169-70.

respective interpretations of George Eliot, Shakespeare and Goethe will provide key focal points. Contrasting understandings of what the Germans call *Bildung*—the notion of a gradual and to some degree self-conscious formation of character—will provide a pervasive theme that not only is essential to Dowden and Yeats's readings of Eliot, Shakespeare and Goethe, but also self-reflexively rebounds on how these two Irish figures understand their own literary trajectories.

Yeats became a neighbour of Dowden in Dublin in 1884, when their respective ages were nineteen and forty-one. The older man had long been a close friend of the poet's father, the painter John Butler Yeats, and had since 1867 held the Chair in English Literature at Trinity College Dublin. John Butler Yeats would pass on to his son a critical attitude towards the lifestyle and academic career pursued by Dowden at Trinity, yet early on Dowden gave W. B. encouraging praise for his poetry, and afterwards the two men remained on amicable private terms. The brief portrait of Dowden given in chapter 24 of Yeats's *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, written shortly after Dowden's death in 1913, expresses some gratitude towards the deceased. When Yeats was a young poet, he admits, "Dowden was wise in his encouragement, never overpraising and never unsympathetic, and he would sometimes lend me books. The orderly prosperous house where all was in good taste, where poetry was rightly valued, made Dublin tolerable for a while, and for perhaps a couple of years he was an image of romance" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 94). The main tone of Yeats's portrait is however grudging. He seeks to minimise the significance of Dowden's life-long friendship with his father, casting even their contact in the 1880s as a futile attempt "to take up again their old friendship," while claiming that later—as evidenced by Dowden's correspondence—"the friendship between Dowden and my father had long been an antagonism" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 94, 95).

Yeats primarily finds fault with Dowden for his intellectual allegiances. The latter's acclaimed biography of Percy Shelley—a figure who proved to be a life-long inspiration for Yeats—is not interpreted as facilitating a fertile meeting of minds: "Once after breakfast Dowden read us some chapters of the unpublished *Life of Shelley*, and I who had made the *Prometheus Unbound* my sacred book was delighted with all he read. I was chilled, however, when he explained that he had lost his liking for Shelley and would not have written it but for an old promise to

the Shelley family" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 95). Even more damning, for Yeats, was Dowden's devotion to George Eliot's novels: "Though my faith was shaken, it was only when he urged me to read George Eliot that I became angry and disillusioned and worked myself into a quarrel or half-quarrel" (95). A letter from early 1887 to Frederick Gregg—who previously had attended the Erasmus Smith High School in Dublin with Yeats—confirms that Yeats read *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Spanish Gypsy* and "a volume of selections" by Eliot around this time (W. B. Yeats 1954: 31), and was provoked not only by Eliot's naturalist rebellion against the aesthetics of beauty, but also her rationality and stress on morality.

Interestingly, no mention is made in that letter of *Daniel Deronda*, which surely would have appealed more to Yeats than any of the mentioned titles. According to Dowden's analysis included in *Studies in Literature, 1789-1877* (1878), the eponymous hero of Eliot's novel experiences a crisis, whereby he "has fallen into a meditative numbness, and is gliding farther and farther from that life of practically energetic sentiment which he would have proclaimed to be for himself the only life worth living" (Dowden 1878: 292). As Eliot herself puts it, Deronda's "early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action" (307). Dowden's letters and quick critical response to the novel show that he responded keenly to Deronda's predicament. For the Irish critic this is however not merely the fate of an individual, but one representative of an age: "An entire class of persons must find this searching and exquisite study the analysis of their own private sorrow and trial, and will appropriate each sentence as a warning, a check, and a substantial instrument of help" (Dowden 1878: 292). Dowden's essay on "Victorian Literature," included in *Transcripts and Studies* (1888), reveals that he saw this as the characteristic intellectual problem of the era. Where Hazlitt identified the French revolution as the source of the spirit of the Romantic age, Dowden claims that Victorianism's defining struggle is with a "*maladie du siècle*" (Dowden 1888: 210), where moral relativity leads to the dissevering of the practical from the intellectual realm. Given this state of affairs, where no authority is absolute or self-evident, it is tempting to adapt a position where "to yield to circumstance, to accept one's environment seems inevitable; and men forget that in every complex condition of life we are surrounded by a

hundred possible environments" (Dowden 1888: 170-1). Dowden is not without sympathy for those who are stuck in this predicament, such as for instance the French poet Sully Prudhomme, whose "unhappiness exists from the lack of a cause, a creed, a church, a loyalty, a love, to which he could devote his total being, knowing that such devotion is the highest wisdom." Prudhomme is "a born eclectic, and the only remedy he can apply to his malady is more eclecticism" (Dowden 1878: 427).

For Dowden, only a decision that can have no firm theoretical footing, but entails embracing a practical commitment, can provide a way out of this existential aporia. The increasing strength of his commitments to democracy, Unionism and a sense of professional ethics in the 1880s and 1890s appear to signify a willful escape from a state of metaphysical paralysis. They may not have been entirely successful, and Dowden's early description of himself—in a letter dated July 6, 1876—as a man who "serve[s] many masters" and wears a "coat [. . .] of many colours" bears evidence of an attitude that may itself be deemed to be eclectic (Dowden 1914b: 120). This provides a key to understanding why he could only grudgingly and awkwardly accept Daniel Deronda's endorsing of the cause of Israel in Eliot's novel, and freely expressed—as we shall see—his skepticism concerning Yeats's nationalism. Although there are differences in emphasis, Yeats's autobiographical account of the 1890s indicates that he, too, was subject to this *maladie du siècle*. Book three of *The Trembling of the Veil* shows him being frustrated in his quest for a Unity of Culture, as "image called up image in an endless procession, and I could not always choose among them with any confidence; and when I did choose, the image lost its intensity, or changed into some other image" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 215).

Yeats felt uneasy about his autobiographical account of Dowden's role in his life. In a complex, intellectual *ménage à trois,* Yeats in the *Reveries* not only seems to be demonstratively rejecting Dowden as a mentor, but also attempting to drive a wedge between John Butler Yeats and his old friend, even as he insists upon his own closeness to his father. A letter to J. B. Yeats dating from this period shows that Yeats was anxious about how his father would respond to all this:

> I am rather nervous about what you think. I am afraid you will very much dislike my chapter on Dowden, it is the only chapter which is a little harsh, not I think, really so, but as compared to the rest, which is very amiable, and what is worse I have used, as I warned you I would, conversations of yours. [. . .] I couldn't leave

> Dowden out, for, in a subconscious way, the book is a history of the revolt, which perhaps unconsciously you taught me, against certain Victorian ideals. Dowden is the image of those ideals and has to stand for the whole structure in Dublin, Lord Chancellors and all the rest. They were ungracious realities and he was a gracious one and I do not think I have robbed him of the saving adjective. (W. B. Yeats 1954: 602-3)

Daniel T. O'Hara has drawn attention to the manner in which Yeats's autobiographical writings use his friends and associates as dramatis personae in a tale of the author's own intellectual maturation: "His friends and relatives become [. . .] metaphors of possible selves whose differences from one another point to and outline that 'simplifying image' of the creator—Yeats's anti-self—he needs to recognise and understand" (O'Hara 1981: 47). The autobiographical account given of Dowden presents Yeats as being drawn towards, but then decisively rejecting, a less than fully satisfying intellectual exemplar. Thus it depicts a kind of personalised version of the psychology Yeats promulgated in *A Vision,* where every individual must choose between false and true masks in order to facilitate the authentic cultivation of the self.

Yeats's one-sided and patronising depiction of Dowden in the *Reveries* has not been devoid of influence. Thus Terence Brown, for instance, primarily reads Dowden through the lens provided by Yeats, and derides the critic—whose international stature arguably has not been equalled by any subsequent Irish literary scholar—as "a second-rate sensitive mind" (Brown 1988: 35). The narratives of history are always shaped by the victors, and by both espousing Unionism and dismissing the Irish Revival, Dowden effectively doomed himself to a scapegoat position outside the mainstream of modern Irish cultural history. If even Yeats has been (again in the words of Terence Brown) "seen to exhibit 'the pathology of literary unionism'" by essentialising Irish critics, and therefore "must, it seems, pay the price before the bar of history" (Brown 1996: 288), then Dowden—who never made a comparable investment in the institutions, history or traditions of Ireland—must suffer an even more ignominious fate. Certainly he could see his own marginal position already in the 1880s, defensively describing himself—in a letter to Aubrey de Vere, on 13 September 1882—as "a low half-breed Irishman" (Dowden 1914c: 185). Given the current post-nationalist tenor of much criticism, it should however be possible to readdress his alignment in

Irish literary history from a less exclusionary point of view, where Dowden's commitment to universalist rather than nationalist tenets—dismissed by Brown as "verging on the neurotic"—might even be granted some value (Brown 1988: 43).

Also by virtue of being defined as a representatively Victorian, Dowden was being cast by Yeats as a marginal figure on the losing side of literary and cultural history. Yeats's attack on him predates Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* by only two years, and enacts in part the same generational struggle against unfashionable forefathers. Yeats alludes to the importance of such struggle for the entirety of his *Reveries over Childhood in Youth* in a letter to his father, on Boxing Day in 1914: "Some one to whom I read the book said to me the other day: 'If Gosse had not taken the title you could call it *Father and Son*'" (W. B. Yeats 1954: 589). Like his friend Gosse before him, Yeats is engaged in an act of rebellion, rewriting his own history in a way that revises, and marginalises, the views of his Victorian precursors. His mixed feelings for his father also colour and complicate his view of Dowden: unhappy with the parental role played by his feckless but intellectually brilliant father, Yeats's autobiographical writings show him seeking other father figures—even as he tries to reassure his father, and justify his choices in light of the aesthetics handed down by John Butler Yeats.

Where Yeats's memoirs cast their disagreement over Eliot in the late 1880s as signifying a decisive parting of ways, critical scholarship on Yeats's biography reveals something more akin to a series of skirmishes over a longer period of time. Perhaps the most important and defining of these is the controversy pitting Yeats and his associates within the Irish literary Renaissance against the Trinity professor in public debate. In an essay first published as "Hopes and Fears for Literature" in 1889, and later reprinted as the introduction to *New Studies in Literature* (1895), Dowden ungenerously parodied the leading lights of the movement as "flapping a green banner in the eyes of beholders and upthrusting a pasteboard 'sunburst' high in the air" (Dowden 1895: 18). Yeats came to see the polemical use in having such an opponent, mixing faint praise with vehemence in his responses. Although Yeats granted that Dowden was "one of the most placid, industrious and intelligent of contemporary critics when he writes on an English or a German subject," he lamented that his prejudiced criticism of Irish writing was "doing incalculable harm" (W. B. Yeats 2004: 289).

This debate fed into Yeats's later, autobiographical portrait of Dowden. In a letter to his father—stemming from early 1916—Yeats describes his chapter on the TCD professor as

> not hostile, [. . .] merely a little unsympathetic. It is difficult for me to write of him otherwise; at the start of my movement in Dublin he was its most serious opponent, and fought it in ways that seemed to me unfair. He was always charming in private but what he said in private had no effect on his public word. I make no allusion to these things but of course they affect my attitude. (W. B. Yeats 1954: 606)

Kathryn R. Ludwigson has claimed that the Irish literary movement was characterised by three tendencies that were anathema to Dowden: "the Celtic, the nationalistic and the esoteric" (129). Longer perspectives should however alert modern readers to that several of the views Yeats was battling against at this point were not all that far removed from positions he would later embrace. Philip Marcus's has shown that, while Yeats and Dowden had in fact been in disagreement about the value of contemporary Irish literature since the 1880s, even at the high point of the debate there was considerable common ground: "Dowden's position and Yeats's own coincided at several points: the need for correct judgments unblurred by patriotism, the desirability of infusing Irish culture with the 'best ideas of other lands,' and the goal of stylistic improvement in Irish literature" (Marcus 1970: 108). Having a high-profile Anglo-Irish opponent with strong Unionist sympathies was obviously very useful in strengthening Yeats'a nationalist credentials, but he and Dowden were in fact closer to one another than appearances suggested.

The next important flashpoint in this literary relationship occurs early in the next century. During the spring of 1901, Yeats visited Stratford-on-Avon. Attending the Spring Festival of Shakespeare plays staged by Frank Benson's company, he prepared for a planned critical essay on Shakespeare by immersing himself in the available criticism on the poet and playwright. Dowden's early monograph *Shakspere: His Mind and Art* (first published in 1875) had ensured its author international fame, and this study was given close attention by Yeats. The work done during and after this visit would strongly influence the shape of Yeats's most Shakespearean play, *On Baile's Strand* (1904), and also bore tangible, and more immediate, fruit in the essay "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901). The latter essay is relatively scathing about

Dowden's work on Shakespeare, finding it bourgeois and narrow-minded. The Dublin academic is cast as an apologist for the coarsely pragmatic values of the British Empire, against which Yeats pits a more generous and adventurous tradition of Merry England. Most critics have been satisfied with paraphrasing Yeats's views on this matter. In an otherwise thoughtful account of Yeats's use of Shakespeare, Neil Corcoran allows himself only a moment of doubt before pressing on:

> Yeats castigates Dowden's criticism as a kind in which characters such as Coriolanus, Hamlet, Timon and Richard II are reproved for their behavior, so that the plays become exercises in self-correction for audiences and readers. If we suspect that Yeats is unjust to Dowden, the suspicion will not survive a reading of his *Shakspere,* where Shakespeare is indeed characterized solely as a means towards the formation of character. (Corcoran 2010: 29-30)

For Corcoran Dowden's work on Shakespeare boils down to an act of "strenuous moralizing" (Corcoran 2010, 30),[2] and as such it provides a purely negative example that only could sting Yeats into doing otherwise.

The letters Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory from Stratford in 1901 provide a hint, however, of that matters are more complicated than this. True enough, on 25 April Yeats allows Dowden a place of prominence among Shakespeare critics only on dismissive terms: "The more I read the worse does the Shakespeare criticism become and Dowden is about the climax of it. I[t] came out [of] the middle class movement and I feel it my legitimate enemy" (W. B. Yeats 1954: 349). Writing to Gregory from Sligo a few weeks later (on May 21), though, Yeats is in a more appreciative mood: "I think I really tell for the first time the truth about the school of Shakespeare critics of whom Dowden is much the best" (W. B. Yeats 1954: 350). If the work of Yeats's father's friend were of no use at all to the poet, then surely a very different assessment would have been made.

Corcoran's conflation of the idea of a "formation of character" with judgmental nit-picking may provide a key to untangling this apparent contradiction. The former is a powerful and encompassing idea, deriving from the German notion of *Bildung*, and as such a key concept for the

[2] Corcoran later claims that Yeats's "concept of tragic joy [. . .] originates in a further revulsion from the moralizing of Dowden" (49).

German Romantics, Goethe and Schiller that also is at the heart of the modern, Humboldtian idea of the university (see Bruford 2010). As a Trinity Professor, Dowden perceptively grasped that his métier involved something more fundamental than a mere inculcation of technical skills. If he identified the wider notion of what both he, as a university teacher, was seeking to communicate as a kind of "moralism," this was not to be mistaken for a mere following of conventional rules. The same goes for the creative writer:

> Let us remember that a chief function of the poet is to free, to arouse, to dilate the consciousness of his reader. [. . .] It is his part to be through his finer sympathies and through his imagination a moral pioneer, discovering new duties of the heart or hand or head. But to quicken a new life in men, he is sometimes compelled to wage war against a morality that has stiffened into mere routine. (Dowden 1888: 248-9)

This explains Dowden's repeated defenses of authors such as Whitman, Goethe and Percy Shelley, despite the moral opprobrium this incurred upon him from some Victorian contemporaries. Of Charles Baudelaire, Dowden commented that "in truth so much of cheap zeal and noisy claptrap have found their centre in the word 'progress', [. . .] that it is hardly surprising that a writer hating imposture, dreading delusions, and conscious of singular gifts should sever himself from the popular movement" (Dowden 1878: 411).

A notion of "formation of character" that can embrace such skepticism and iconoclasm is not to be mistaken for the moralism of the mob. It also has close connections with Yeats's stress on the necessity of vigilantly cultivating the self, evident for instance in the desire—in "Meditations in Time of Civil War"—that the example of "Sato's gift, a changeless sword" might "moralise / My days out of their aimlessness" (W. B. Yeats 1997: 206). To be sure, Yeats in 1901 does have a serious disagreement with Dowden. Much of it concerns the Shakespearean figure of Richard II, whom Dowden reads as a limited character, caught up in his own fantasy world and unfit to rule. There are interesting anticipations of his reading of the character of Daniel Deronda, but ultimately Dowden finds the deposed king to be irredeemable. For the Irish critic, there is such a thing as an "artist in life": this is someone who "seizes upon the stuff of circumstance, and, with strenuous will and strong creative power, shapes some new and noble form of human existence" (Dowden 1881: 172). Richard has "a kind of artistic relation

to life," but since it is utterly passive he cannot be deemed a true artist. For Yeats, on the other hand, the deposition of Richard II does not entail that Shakespeare sees him as being inferior to worldly figures such as Bolingbroke or Henry V:

> To suppose that Shakespeare preferred the men who deposed his King is to suppose that Shakespeare judged men with the eyes of a Municipal Councillor weighing the merits of a Town Clerk [. . .]. He saw indeed, as I think, in Richard II the defeat that awaits all, whether they be Artist or Saint, who find themselves where men ask of them a rough energy and have nothing to give but some contemplative virtue, whether lyrical phantasy, or sweetness of temper, or dreamy dignity, or love of God, or love of His creatures. (W. B. Yeats 2007: 79)[3]

Where Dowden emphasises that the historical plays depict a world where pragmatism and cunning are necessary, Yeats embraces idealism and a non-purposive vitality of soul.

For Dowden there is no full severance between these opposing sets of values. His Shakespeare was neither bluff businessman nor imperial administrator, but rather someone who tried to bridge the very gap between contemplative and practical that Yeats would later (in his chapter on Dowden in the *Reveries*) see as endemic to the character of the Trinity Professor. Despite Yeats's claims, Dowden himself very clearly expresses that there are limits to Shakespeare's sympathies with characters who are merely practical and successful in the ways of the world:

> We discern that in his secret heart he knew there was a more excellent way. "The children of this world," Shakespeare would say, "are wiser in their generation than they children of light." Let us borrow from the children of this world the secret of their success. Yet we cannot go over to them; in spite of danger and in spite of weakness, we remain the children of light. (Dowden 1881: 349)

Where Yeats, in this essay, presents himself as steadfastly opposing Dowden, he is often merely rephrasing his ideas or giving them an extra twist. Thus the former, for instance, points out that "Fortinbras was, it is likely enough, a better King than Hamlet would have been," but argues against this that Hamlet—like Coriolanus and Richard II—was in fact

[3] William M. Murphy argues that Yeats's view on Richard uncannily echoes that of his father, expressed in a letter to Dowden several decades before (see Murphy 1978: 98-100 and 229-30).

"greater in the Divine Hierarchies" (W. B. Yeats 2007: 78). This clearly echoes Dowden's claim that "Hamlet, who failed, interested Shakspere; Fortinbras, who succeeded, seemed admirable to him, but in his presence Shakspere's sympathies and imagination were not deeply moved" (Dowden 1881: 350). Dowden finds a similar structure underlying several of Shakespeare's historical plays, thus preparing the ground for Yeats's Shakespearean "myth," which "describes a wise man who was blind from very wisdom, and an empty man who thrust him from his place, and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness" (W. B. Yeats 2007: 81).

Yeats is at this time interested in creating an absolute distinction where Dowden sees tension, interrelatedness and the ability to "borrow" from the other side. In his 1898 essay "The Autumn of the Body," for instance, Yeats drives a firm wedge between related dualisms. In sonorous sentences the material world is cast off, together with everything that smacks of trade, industrialism or modernity. "Man has wooed and won the world," Yeats intones, "and has fallen weary, and not, I think, for a time, but with a weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves" (W. B. Yeats 2007: 141). Yeats's understanding of Richard II is in agreement with this languorous and decadent apocalypticism, as is also his later symbolist play *The Shadowy Waters.* But the mood will not last. Yeats soon grows wary of praising contemplative virtues that do not issue in action. Although critics are not in agreement about the continuity, or lack of it, between the Yeats of the 1890s and his later, more acclaimed work,[4] the poet himself is adamant that a significant change takes place. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a strong commitment to the theatre is accompanied by a growing sense of that he has left the style of his early work behind. In Yeats's own accounts, this is cast as a gendered shift from femininity—"sentiment and sentimental sadness, a womanish introspection"—to a more manly form of writing (W. B. Yeats 1954: 434). Although no evidence remains to document their conversations during these years, Kathryn Ludwigson comments that "Dowden would have approved the change taking place in Yeats

[4] There is an argument for the essential unity between early and late Yeats in Ellmann 1964. For a more fractured reading of his career, where Yeats's critical comments about his early work play a more defining role, see for instance Brown 2001.

during the first decade of the twentieth century, a change which Yeats's father, however, forcefully opposed" (138). Ludwigson draws attention to a letter of John Butler Yeats to his son—undated, but possibly written in 1906—where the father explains the son's change in emphasis as follows: "You are haunted by the Goethe idea, interpreted by Dowden, that a man can be a complete man. It is a chimera—a man can only be a specialist" (J. B. Yeats 1999: 70).

In the *Reveries,* Yeats criticised Dowden for abandoning "that study of Goethe that should have been his life-work" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 193). Despite being president of the English Goethe Society from 1888, Dowden never wrote a major monograph on the German poet, and his published work on the author of *Faust* is accompanied by the admission that—due to linguistic and cultural barriers—"one always advances in any literature except one's own with uncertainty and difficulty" (Dowden 1895: 152).[5] Dowden's critical accounts of Goethe's life and career are nevertheless noteworthy, and focus squarely on the maturation of Goethe's character: Dowden seeks to identify where the turn toward maturity occurred, and what constituted its essence. For the Irish critic, this turn entailed the discarding of the limitless desires and egotism of the *Sturm und Drang* movement for a more well-grounded position. One aspect of this is "the Goethe idea" referred to by Yeats's father. In Dowden's words: "by degrees it became evident to Goethe that the only true ideal of freedom is a liberation not of the passions, not of the intellect, but of the whole man: that this involves a conciliation of all the powers and faculties within us" (Dowden 2008: 6386).[6] For Dowden, this provides justification for the administrative work performed by Goethe at Weimar: only by immersing himself in practical affairs, could the author of *Faust* become a whole man and artist.

In "The Stirring of the Bones," the fifth and final installment of *The Trembling of the Veil,* Yeats gives measured acknowledgement to the importance of Goethe's ideal:

> I still think that in a species of man, wherein I count myself, nothing so much matters as Unity of Being, but if I seek it as Goethe sought, who was not of that species, I but combine in myself, and perhaps now as it seems, looking backward, in

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[5] A more extensive explanation is given in Dowden 1914a: 194.

[6] Perloff 1971 contains a brief, but rich, account of how Yeats's interpreted Goethe via the mediating instances of Dowden and Walter Pater.

> others also, incompatibles. Goethe, in whom objectivity and subjectivity were intermixed, I hold, as the dark is mixed with the light in the eighteenth Lunar Phase, could but seek it as Wilhelm Meister seeks it, intellectually, critically, and through a multitude of deliberately chosen experiences; events and forms of skill gathered as if for a collector's cabinet; whereas true Unity of Being, where all the nature murmurs in response if but a single note be touched, is found emotionally, instinctively, by the rejection of all experience not of the right quality, and by the limitation of its quantity. (W. B. Yeats 1999: 268)

This is actually a grudging admission, expressed in the terminology of types and phases articulated in *A Vision,* of a proximity of thought. The Goethe Yeats here recognises as an ancestor of his own idea is clearly identifiable as being marked by Dowden—or at least Yeats's interpretation of Dowden. For the previously discussed chapter on the latter in the *Reveries* works with the same distinction between intellect and emotion, citing Yeats's father's claim "that Dowden believed too much in the intellect" (W. B. Yeats 1999: 96).

Like Yeats, Dowden granted *Wilhelm Meister* a crucial place in his understanding of Goethe, devoting a separate, lengthy chapter of *New Studies in Literature* to this work. Dowden's reading does not focus on Yeats's dichotomy of choice versus instinct, insisting instead that "we must be on our guard against reducing a book so full of reality and life to an idea or an abstraction or a theory" (Dowden 1895: 151). Furthermore, Goethe's hero cannot follow a single, rational plan in his process of self-discovery: "the way is long: delusions, snares, wanderings must be experienced; by error he must be delivered from error" (154). Yeats's critique of the "intermixed" nature of subjectivity and objectivity in Goethe seems to paraphrase the German writer's own critique of the Beautiful Soul, a sensitive representative of religion in *Wilhelm Meister* whom Goethe claimed—in a passage quoted by Dowden—to be the embodiment of "the most delicate confusion between the subjective and the objective."[7] A less tortuous and covert form of appropriation is evident in Yeats's turn away from indefinites and abstraction in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the words of Dowden: "A life of emotion which cannot be converted into action is, according to the teaching of Goethe, a life of disease. William is to be led in the end from vain dreaming to wholesome practical activity" (Dowden 1895: 161). It is here Yeats's famously Nietzschean interpretation of his self-

[7] Goethe in a letter to Schiller, 18 March 1795, quoted in Dowden 1895: 169.

transformation may be somewhat misleading. Writing on 15 May 1903 to John Quinn—who had introduced him to Nietzsche—Yeats expressed his dissatisfaction with his own collection of essays entitled *Ideas of Good and Evil*:

> The book is too lyrical, too full of aspirations after remote things, too full of desires. Whatever I do from this out will, I think, be more creative. I will express myself, so far as I express myself in criticism at all, by that sort of thought that leads straight to action, straight to some sort of craft. I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively, I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place. (W. B. Yeats 1954: 403)

Thus a decisive shift in Yeats's career—affecting not only his critical work, but also his poetry and drama—is presented as having a Nietzschean mould. Yet Nietzsche never grew "weary of that wild God Dionysus," and never reduced the dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian to one exclusively concerning the creation and transcendence of forms. A much closer fit is actually provided by Dowden's account of Goethe's insight of February 1798, just after completing the first book of *Wilhelm Meister*: "Goethe made a characteristic and highly significant entry in his diary: 'Bestimmteres Gefühl von Einschränkung und dadurch der wahren Ausbreitung'—*a more definite sense of limitation and thereby real expansion.*" This, for Dowden, constituted "the most important lesson of life learnt by Goethe during the ten years of service at Weimar" (Dowden 1895: 152).

Yeats was himself performing a "service" of a kind during this stage of his career, through his indefatigable work devoted to founding an Irish national theatre. In a 1908 issue of the periodical *Samhain*, expressing "First Principles" for the theatre, he drew a parallel between the theatre's future and his own development:

> what I myself did, getting into an original relation to Irish life, creating in myself a new character, a new pose—in the French sense of the word—the literary mind of Ireland must do as a whole, always understanding that the result must be no bundle of formulas, not faggots but a fire. We never learn to know ourselves by thought, said Goethe, but by action only; and to a writer creation is action. (W. B. Yeats 2003: 118)

Limiting himself to the local, institutional level in this way caused some strain, and for a while Yeats the poet receded from public view. Goethe too founded a theatre, in Weimar, and it would have been easy for both Yeats and Dowden to have seen in the Irish poet's busy endeavours during this time a parallel to the German's efforts.

For Dowden, there was also a latent parallel to his own use of his gifts on a local level, through the toil of his academic post at Trinity. Yet like John Butler Yeats, who always questioned Dowden's acceptance of the professorship, Dowden waa aware something had been lost in the process: his gift of poetry. Despite the early publication of his *Poems* (1876), the workmanlike demands of his full-time job effectively spelt out the demise of Dowden's career as a creative writer. An early letter, dated 29 July 1874, distinguishes the "life absolute" of Dowden's poetry from the "life provisional" of his critical prose (Dowden 1914a: 108). Time would confirm that the poetry's focus on "something rugged and untamed. A strength behind the will" (Dowden 2010: 46) could not be maintained with equal intensity amid the daily rigours of Dowden's academic life. Regret over this process is tacitly evident in Dowden's appraisal of the contrast between Matthew Arnold's early work as a poet and his later critical fame, in a passage that echoes his own analysis of the character struggles of Shakespeare's history plays: "A thoughtful observer might have predicted long since that the poet, the shy, refined elder brother in Mr Arnold's twofold nature—would have withdrawn, saddened and unnerved" (Dowden 1888: 209). On the other hand, the demise of this figure entailed that "the stirring, effective, and happier younger brother, the critic, came forward and played a brilliant part in the world." Yet for Dowden "these elder brothers are dear to us by virtue of the very qualities that lead them to shade. [. . .] our heart reverts fondly to the elder brother, the vanished poet" (209).

It is from this vantage point, and not just in the light of political disagreement, that one must frame Dowden's concern for Yeats's professional priorities. In a letter to Rosalind Travers, 14 April 1907, Dowden notes the frequency of Yeats's visits: he "comes and goes and is always intelligent and interesting" (Dowden 1914c: 351). Further, Dowden recalls a recent visit, which was filled with "an amusing account of the wars of the Theatre." In the eyes of Dowden, Yeats "is a little losing his finer self in 'movements' and petty leadership. Still he smiled over the whole story, and was only half engaged in the strife. I wish that

he were wholly out of it, and consulting his genius" (350-1). This encounter is replete with irony, in light of the fact that Yeats's commitment to the theatre in many ways follows the example of Goethe (and Daniel Deronda) as advocated in Dowden's critical prose. A poem such as "The Fascination of What's Difficult"—with its acerbic impatience with "Theatre business, management of men"—shows that Yeats did not submit to this discipline without frustration (W. B. Yeats 1997: 92). But his commitments would not allow him, for many years, to fully pay heed to the "vanished poet" within. That figure could only resurface through a process of consolidation, which in many ways led Yeats to embrace the forms of settled respectability that he—and even more his father—had derided in Dowden. Not only marriage and fatherhood, but also a comfortable existence in a Dublin suburb, would at later stages be embraced by Yeats.

As early as in 1910, though, Yeats was granted an annual Civil List Pension by the British authorities. During the same year this was followed, somewhat surprisingly, by Yeats seriously considering taking over Dowden's professorship at TCD, when the elder man experienced health problems. Compared to the controversy of the mid 1890s, this was a more complicated and mediated episode, providing an ironic epilogue to the history of relations between the two men: Yeats harboured understandable doubts about whether academic life was the right thing for him, and Dowden entertained equally justified concerns about the younger man's suitability for scholarship and lecturing. Yeats was both flattered and interested, though. The timing was good for him, as this marked the beginning of a period where he sought a more settled and secure existence: his "wandering life," as he described it in a letter to Sydney Cockerel on 22 September 1910, was beginning to appear untenable in the long run (W. B. Yeats 1954: 551). Where he formerly had derided Dowden for having embraced a bourgeois and provincial life, Yeats from now on was starting to take a cooler look at the long-term effects of a bohemian existence. In the end, though, Dowden decided against retiring in 1910. His death in 1913 led to a brief revival of this question, but it was clear that those in power at Trinity did not consider Yeats a serious candidate for the job. Soon after, pressed by Yeats's father, his sisters pushed through the posthumous publication of a collection of Dowden's late verses entitled *A Woman's Reliquary.* With some justification, Yeats protested that this book would do nothing to

forward the Cuala Press's reputation or finances. Consciously or not, his criticism of Dowden's verse as being merely local and as showing evidence of poor craftsmanship echoed the very terms the latter used to belittle the writings championed by the Irish literary Renaissance in the 1890s.

The second half of Yeats's career would see him adopting positions much more in tune with Dowden's ideals for poetry, and also embracing Irish Protestantism in outspoken ways that were more provocative and extreme than Dowden's Unionism of the 1880s and 90s.[8] Yeats became, in fact, more of a cosmopolitan writer, adopting motifs from classical philosophy and Renaissance art in a manner that would have been unthinkable during his early, concerted focus on Irish themes. Yeats also decisively left behind the idea of having a merely instinctual or emotional basis for his work, in his attempt to become a philosophical poet. Thus the antagonism between the two seems at least in part a matter of timing, as the common ground is quite considerable. The question of what sort of life is best suited to the further the development of literary gifts may be one that they frequently answered in differing ways, but their answers did in fact vary over time—and the way in which they framed the question was in fact very similar. Both came to aspire to a unified existence, where the aesthetic distance of writer or critic was to be transcended through a life of action. The more one reads Dowden closely, and on his own terms, the more does his affinity with the famous son of his close friend come to the fore. Their relationship is, as such, typical for that between many modernists and Victorians: As time passes, it is becoming evident that differences between Modernism and Victorianism that initially seemed crucial increasingly reveal themselves as having been overemphasised in comparison to undeniable proximity. Edward Dowden is in fact more modern than Yeats let on, while Yeats himself is also far more Victorian than he tended to admit.

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[8] My account of the later stages of their relationship is indebted to the biographical narratives of Foster 1998 and Murphy 1978.

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