

# The Breath of Silence: Tracing the Origin of the Poetic through Mallarmé and Yeats

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**Abstract** Based on insights offered in the Symbolist oeuvres of Mallarmé and Yeats, this paper posits an interpretation of the *Idea* as the quasi-originary source of language, tracing the origins of the poetic to the notions of rituality and iterability. These qualities are characteristic of the prayer (considering, in particular, the Angelus devotion) and the *neume* (the earliest form of musical notation, which amounts to a chanting without words, a pure vocalization): the essence of poetry requires a suspension of knowledge, as in learning “by heart.” We ultimately locate the beginnings of the poetic in the “body of the letter” or the “carnality of sense”: at the zero point of metaphor where meaning is purely literal, the poem, as passion of and for the origin, entails a self-voiding of language, a casting-aside of being. The contact with the body of sense is only possible if the poetic soul, bypassing the cogito, can derail absolute knowledge, since the quasi-originary promise of language—as the very condition of its possibility—is anterior to reason and to knowledge.

**Keywords** Angelus prayer; Derrida; Mallarmé; poetics; Yeats

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## Introduction

The term “caught” appears in Yeats’s “Vacillation” within the familiar context of tutoring the soul of the aged poet in the “learned school” (*Poems* 203) of

masterpieces of “intellect or faith”: “No longer in Lethean foliage caught / Begin the preparation for your death ...” (255). The “Lethean foliage,” at first sight, seems to refer to the quasi-Arcadian refuge, so prominent in early Yeats, where one can forget a “world more full of weeping than you can understand” (16), and then, seduced by the ideal beauty of the “Rose upon the Rood of Time” (27) or by the *mysterium tremendum* of the “Secret Rose” (66–67), set “thought-woven sails” (33) for an inner Odyssey on the perilous sea to fight God’s battles and be inevitably vanquished. Thus, this type of poetry takes two forms that often overlap in Yeats: (i) the poet dreams, in a familiar Romantic gesture, of a retreat to nature, of coming away “to the waters and the wild” (16–17), of building a small cabin in the “Lake Isle of Innisfree” where he “shall have some peace” (35); (ii) the poet engages in solipsistic self-contemplation in the “chilly Palace” (Watson 50) of aestheticism where he holds captive the monster of self-love. In either case, the poet appears to subscribe to a passive detachment from the incarnate human world, intending to remedy or rather “sweeten” (Yeats, *Poems* 46) the overwhelming “wrong of unshapely things” (52), whether that wrong consists in loss of esoteric truth, inherent impermanence of forms (namely, love and beauty), or lack of national identity, by rebuilding things according to idealistic, inward-gazing, and radical, if not Utopian, values: “A man in his own secret meditation / Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made / In art or politics” (212). In other words, the poetry of the “Lethean foliage” would seem to suggest familiar Romantic and Symbolist modes of escapism that dominated the nineteenth century. The poet chooses to remain deaf to the sound and the fury of the modern world, to be transformed into the hollow reed on Lethe’s shore, unburdened of outward-gazing thought, “brood[ing] on hopes and fear no more” (39).

Needless to say, this oblivion into the labyrinth of solitary self-reflection, turning the key to one’s own prison of the mind, to be “alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses” (Yeats, *Early Essays* 252) can bring about incapacitating anxieties, of the kind Yeats held responsible for what he called the “disaster of my friends” (*Autobiographies* 235)—the nervous breakdowns and early deaths of his Rhymer’s Club companions and their larger circle in the 1890s London, young artists exploring artificial paradises with absinthe, hashish, dandyism, flaneuring and a specifically British brand of decadent poetry, guided by Walter Pater’s nihilistic aestheticism. According to Yeats, Pater “taught us to walk upon a rope tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm” (235). In other words, there is danger in the waters of Lethe, and in crossing the river one risks drowning in its murky depths.

Recognizing a similar threat, Mallarmé, in “L’Azur,” pleads with *Ennui* to rise

from “étangs léthéens” (Lethean ponds) (*Oeuvres* 37)<sup>1</sup> as a thick miasmatic cloud of memory, a memory of the same impervious decay of ordinary reality experienced on the near side of the window in the hospital-room by the speaker of the earlier poem “Les fenêtres,” the same “encens fétide / Qui monte en la blancheur banale des rideaux / Vers le grand crucifix ennuyé du mur vide” (“pall / of stale incense rising from drab white drapes / to the big crucifix tired of the blank wall”) (*Collected Poems* 10–12) that had prompted the poet to long for a window-shattering leap into the Lethean infinity of the Ideal (the azure of the sky). The memory of ennui, or, more precisely, ennui *as* memory, allows for a form of art that serves to tether the poet to reality, a reality which is, as far as “L’Azur” is concerned, deemed preferable to the unbearable horrors unleashed in the alluring confrontation with the radical alterity of *l’Infini* (the Absolute) in which the self-alienation of the poet is to be restored to the unity of self-knowledge: “Art now appears as a substance which one tries to interpose between the unbearable brightness of the sunlight and the divided soul of the poet” (De Man 40). The extent of this horror can be measured by how Mallarmé describes the apocalyptic encounter in “Les fenêtres”: a mystical or artistic experience in which “Je me mire et me vois ange! et je meurs” (“I see myself—an angel!—and I die”) (*Collected Poems* 12–13). Hence, in “L’Azur,” Mallarmé conjures the memory of decay to ward off any temptation to engage in the pursuit of the ideal, by filling up indefatigably “les grands trous bleus que font méchamment les oiseaux” (the large blue holes malevolently made by birds) (*Oeuvres* 37) in the dense fabric of the veil that poetry has erected against the perilous inundation of the Light of *l’Infini*, in effect, rendering the liminal window-screen opaque.

The borderline separating the subject from the Ideal, which is ironically also the subject’s very means of access to it, acts as an aesthetic medium of self-reflection, translating the experience of the Ideal into a mirror-play involving the subject and his self-image, a horrifying *mise en abyme* staged at the threshold of the absolute. It is this complex mirror-play at “le matin chaste de l’Infini” (“the chaste dawn of Infinity”) (Mallarmé, *Complete Poems* 12–13) that defines the, at first sight, contrasting attitudes of the two poems: (i) the speaker of “Les fenêtres” engages in but despairs of ever emerging victorious from the game, owing to the perceived impenetrability of “le vomissement impur” (“the foul vomit”) (12–13) of the beastly world of matter, that has unfeathered his wings, and hence, exposed him to the “risque de tomber pendant l’éternité” (risk of falling away for all eternity) (*Oeuvres* 33) into the regressive infinity of the same type of dialogue of self with self that

1 All translations are the authors’, unless otherwise indicated.

Yeats, following Arnold, diagnosed as “at once the fault and the beauty” in the “sad soliloquies” of his contemporary poetry and the “disfiguring introspectiveness” characteristic of modernism (Watson 40); (ii) the speaker of “L’Azur” recoils from playing the game in the first place, yet ultimately bears witness to the triumph of the Ideal, succumbing to its indestructible enchantment, with the poet’s voice being ominously abolished by other voices of language created in the text. In this respect, Helen Abbott’s reading of the last two stanzas of “L’Azur” in *Between Baudelaire and Mallarmé: Voice, Conversation and Music* is very enlightening. She traces the roots of the fin-de-siècle cult of synaesthesia in Baudelaire’s notion that a particularly skillful use of poetic language, namely *sorcellerie évocatoire* (evocative sorcery), can allow colors to speak (for themselves) as disembodied voices—a silent but productively resonant language menacingly infiltrating the poet’s voice: “the poetic voice allows for *evocation* [which] hints at a dislocation between voice and subject that is a feature of disembodiment, and also reinforces the notion that using language is part of an act of remembering (in the sense of evocation as conjuring up times past)” (Abbott 169; emphasis added). Mallarmé demonstrates a rich example of such poetic evocation in the penultimate stanza of “L’Azur.” The “éternel azur” introduced in the first line of the poem (the eternal vast of the blue vault of sky, which we may translate simply as “the azure”) is gradually transformed, in the poet’s desired oblivion of “l’Idéal cruel,” from a generic symbol of the Unity of Being to a mark of irremediable separation between the “inutile” (useless) fantasy of a dead *Sky* (“Le Ciel est mort”) and an increasingly overwhelming *Azure* (“l’Azur”) (*Oeuvres* 37–38). This *l’Azur*, now capitalized, is officially “personified” in the first line of the penultimate stanza as a man singing through the bells: it is given a “poetic voice,” challenging that of the poet himself, and, moreover, this gift is given in the form of a “voiced” entity capable of singing. But this is just the beginning of Mallarmé’s evocative sorcery: in the next line, we learn that, in order to augment his minatory presence, *l’Azur* turns itself into a voice, that is, the disembodied voice of a color (azure-blue), a color that itself has been given a voice: it rings the Angelus bell which calls to prayer the performers of the Angelus, the Catholic devotion commemorating the Incarnation. It *calls* to prayer, i.e., it addresses the congregation, through the repetitive ringing of the bell, as if animating the metal of which the church-bells are made: the metal functions like a mouth for the voice of *l’Azur*. This is not a far-fetched imagery since speech in general is generated by the rhythmic interruption of breath, that is, the intermittent opening and closing of the mouth, a repetition with-in difference, not unlike the ringing of a bell. In fact, Baudelaire used a similar idea in the poem “L’Horloge” (“The Clock”)

concerning the diabolical inexorableness of time: “Mon gosier de metal parle toutes les langues” (My metal throat speaks all languages). Regarding the significance of the haunting monotony of the synaesthetic voice in “L’Azur,” most conspicuous in the finishing line of the poem (“*Je suis hanté. L’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur!*”), Abbott writes: “Like the voice of the second hand in Baudelaire’s ‘L’Horloge’ with its ‘gosier de métal’ (v.14), the metallic timbre of the voice of ‘l’Azur’ reinforces its menacing regularity of recurrent repetition which chisels away at the poet’s own weakened voice” (170). Mallarmé’s analogy of the Angelus bell will provide us with an opportunity to sound the very depths of the poetic in the following sections.

### ***Idea as the Source of the Poetic***

The *Idea*, in its more demonic and sinister aspect (as *l’Azur*), speaks all languages (“parle toutes les langues”), even though this speech is constrained by the same time limits as the poet’s voice (the ringing of the bells will eventually stop). This capacity to speak in all tongues issues from the fact that the *Idea* is the very source of speech, a source which, in and due to its non-human (“metallic”) nature, increasingly differs from what we recognize as articulated speech until it altogether vanishes into silence when the corresponding oscillation of the Angelus bell is damped to zero. The *Idea* serves as the ‘(non)origin’ of language, the common *source* of speech and writing: speech in its most graphic aspect and writing in its most vocal form—that is, the gestural or the rhythmical beginnings of language, as in the oscillatory motion of a bell, or the back and forth movement of the hand waving a fan such as the one poetized in Mallarmé’s “Autre éventail.” As we will see shortly, the (im)proper mode of this gesture is one of *assent*—a sometimes unspoken, almost Joycean, *yes*. But, for the time being, let us focus on our choice here of the term ‘(non)origin’ instead of ‘origin’ and on what precludes us from attributing an absolute, static, and stable ‘point of origin’ to the anteriority of the *Ideal* gesture. The answer lies in the subtle distinction that has to be made between the terms *origin* and *source*. In examining the *proper/literal* meaning of “source” in Paul Valéry’s oeuvre, Derrida restates the question we’ve posed here in terms of the very possibility of knowing such meaning prior to its entanglement in the metaphorical play of language: “Is not the source the origin, the point of formation, or rather emergence, of a flowing body of water, brook, stream, river? Nothing is more familiar to us than water, and than the very familiarity of the earth with water, which is sealed here and there, and unsealed in the *point d’eau*—incalculable syntagm—that is called source: *origo fontium*” (*Margins* 279). The problem is the impossibility of getting rid of the supplement, of metaphoricity, of repetition anywhere within the territory of

language: for one thing, to claim that the “source” is an *origin* we should already have a notion of what *origin* means in the first place; to make a claim about language itself, to ask the question of language, i.e., to define its proper source or origin, is already to be caught up in language in that very questioning. It is as if at any point we engage with/in language, including when inquiring about its very nature (that is, asking the “question of the question”), we have already *assented* to what makes language possible. We have always already made a promise—a *given word*, as it were, but one that is always yet to be received but never is, a *word* that is not yet a word but which is the condition of possibility of any word that is to be uttered or written. A retrospective logic is at work here: this *gift* is never *given*, or, more precisely, is *given without giving*, since, otherwise, it would stop being a *gift*; this *present* eludes *presence*, since it has always already been given, a *debt* that has always already been *paid* for. In *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Derrida explains that this promise, “opening every speaking, makes possible the very question and therefore precedes it without belonging to it: the dissymmetry of an affirmation, of a *yes* before all opposition of *yes* and *no*” (94), some un/representable presupposition as the condition of possibility of all representation. He continues: “The call of Being—every question already responds to it, the promise has already taken place wherever language comes. Language always, *before any question*, and in the very question, comes down to [*revient à*] the promise” (94). Thus, the “sometimes wordless word” of assent (130) is the (quasi-)originary gesture of language, like the waving of a fan<sup>1</sup> or the ringing of the Angelus bell in Mallarmé’s profound analogy. The bell rings: on this auditory cue, a pause strikes the daily routine of the devotee; wherever he stands he abandons whatever he is doing, almost instinctively, to heed the call to the devotional prayer. The devotees respond to the call with obedience, a repetition of the promise, reconfirming the pledge to the *Ideal*, *re-paying the debt* to the Christ who bought them their salvation with His blood. This obeisance (which gesture takes on a vocal as well as a physical quality, as the ritual is performed in accordance with the text and instructions of the Angelus prayer), this *yes*, resonates through the metal-speech of the bell and clapper (the tintinnabulation) and through the august silence of the Azure.

As that which precedes and exceeds the question, the promise consists in an event that is not an “event”—a (non)event our recollection of which precedes all possible attempts at remembering it. Hence, this is a memory of that which can

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1 Mallarmé’s poem about the fan, “Autre éventail” (“Another Fan”), was inscribed, in elaborate typographical detail, on the paper folds of an actual fan and given as a gift to his twenty-year-old daughter, Geneviève.

never be remembered, can never become a remembrance: a memory of oblivion, of (the act of) forgetting. A gap at the heart of memory forever separates the past from the present: this is the caesura of the present, the absence built into the structure of presence, the split within being. This memory is not of the past, but, paradoxically, of the present: it is the (painful) memory of the quasi-originary divide that constitutes temporality itself—the irremediable self-division which is the very predicament of the post-Romantic thought given deliriously to thinking itself with-in the same dis-jointedness of time Hamlet observes following the visitation of his murdered father’s ghost. To put it in Heideggerian terms, albeit risking a certain degree of oversimplification, it is a “thoughtful remembrance” [*Andenken*] that expresses its thanks [*danken*], i.e., *pays its debt*, in the form of mourning—mourning the loss of what was never there, or, was always already there without being there—there in the beginning, which is not a beginning. Mallarmé projects the primeval mode of memory discussed here in the poet’s sense of being haunted (by the *Idea*), expressed at the end of “L’Azur,” following the angelus imagery of the penultimate stanza. The poem concludes with a confessional tone: “Je suis hanté” (*Oeuvres* 38). Now the question arises as to the nature of this haunting and how it relates to the memory of the present.

### ***Idea and the Poet’s Haunting***

The poet is haunted. Haunting is not an event that has befallen him at a particular point: he can never know when he was haunted. Nor is haunting a case of demonic possession, as if some demon had entered his mind (or soul or body) like an uninvited guest and had taken residence there. After all, the personification of the *Idea* as *l’Azur* is a mere attempt on the poet’s part to familiarize the radically Other by giving it a name or a face—a fictional reduction through tropology. The poet’s haunting is not an intrusion from without: it is the illusion of poetry that registers the threat to the constitution of the poet’s “I” as an exteriorized totality (the *Idea*), projecting the voice of *l’Azur* as a “separate” or independent poetic voice. While Romanticism, in its signature concern with the consciousness of the poet as a subject, regards the poet’s voice itself as a poetic voice present in the scene of poetry, the Romantic poet is not particularly concerned with “I” as his *property*, as *myself*, since this “I” often borders on the impersonal and the universal, and tends to embody such large notions as imagination and autopoiesis; that is, until his identity is threatened, with the advent of Symbolism, by the sudden revelation of a defect at its very foundation, a fundamental inconsistency, a fatal lack, exposing the subject *qua* subject, putting the subject on trial for the first time in the history

of poetry—what we may refer to as the “crisis of logos.” Any attempt to remedy the flaw, in the form of an intrusion by the Other, creates a plethora of other flaws since the intrusion is from within: it is (quasi-)originary. Every crumbling piece of the fictional subject’s identity constitutes another partial-*I* or non-*I* within an *I* that is no more *one* and is *more than one* (*le plus d’un*)—multiplying representations of the *self*, contending and conflicting irreconcilably for the throne. The poet’s voice becomes a barely audible poetic voice among many others, what Jean-Luc Nancy in a rather different context (his heart transplant surgery and its aftermath) describes as follows: “I become indissociable from a polymorphous dissociation” (“L’Intrus” 12). In other words, the poet “cède l’initiative” (gives the initiative) (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 366), at this stage, to the “others with-in me” as the “I” disintegrates into a *possible* autonomy of language itself, an ideal delegation of enunciative authority to the words themselves, an act which would amount to the creation of the Grand Work (the alchemical project of Symbolism). If irony is defined as the dissociation of the enunciating subject from the subject of his enunciation, generating a duality of voice, then the poet’s haunting exhibits the most radical, or, if you will, irremediable, case of irony: a heterogeneous self-interruption no alignment of poetic tropes can supersede—a multiplicity of voices. It is like a Greek play that consists entirely of choruses addressing each other instead of an actual audience. Yeats considers the chorus as what endowed Greek drama with the “emotion of multitude,” a quality created by “vague symbols that set the mind wandering from idea to idea, emotion to emotion,” allowing the mind to go on “imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured the world” (*Early Essays* 159). The (post-Romantic) poet’s haunting, in which one self-intrusion is shadowed by another, *ad infinitum*, engenders a most intense “emotion of multitude” within the singular, a feeling of self-ruination and vanishing (*évanouissement*), of “a passage through nothingness, of an entry into a space emptied of all property, all intimacy” (Nancy, “L’Intrus” 7). The absolutely proper *I* (which we may refer to as Narcissus) is brought to the brink of extinction, of an almost *nothing*, and thereby to the fulfillment of the golden dream of Symbolism, through the becoming-multitudinous of excrescences of nothingness, of the traces of *néant*—the reciprocal self-erasures of the expanding congregation of non-*I*’s within the *I* that is, by the same token, not *one*.

The poet is haunted, namely, by the *Idea* (which is self-materialized as *l’Azur* in Mallarmé’s poem). First of all, this spectral *Idea* allows the relation of the poet to himself, opening a primeval space for poetry as autobiography, hence marking the poet’s (quasi-)originary ruination since this space of “réciproques



néants” (reciprocal nothingnesses) (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 435), based on our speculations in the previous paragraph, is (de)constitutive of the subject as self-intruding *I*. The *Idea* as *néant* can never be but that which never is, i.e., an opaque (almost) “nothing” never presenting itself. If the *Idea* is to be equated with the *source*, the question arises as to the ontological condition of the *source*. Here, we may refer back to the distinction between *source* and *origin*. The source is “often described as a glance, as the site of the glance” (Derrida, *Margins* 284) in a theatrical allegory: everything related to this source is put onstage as a visible object, and hence given presence to, through the objectifying glance of this perpetually self-erasing I/eye, this cosmic mirror which opens the space for the poet’s haunting—this *I*, no longer an individual, is what Derrida, à la Valéry, refers to as the “singular universal” pronoun (282). However, this eye’s “brightening glance” (Yeats, *Poems* 221) cannot brighten itself: “being always opened wide and thrown toward the visible, [it] cannot itself perceive itself, never emerging from its night ... always turned in the same direction, toward the outside” (Derrida, *Margins* 284), like a supermassive black hole at the center of most galaxies including our Milky Way. As the absolutely proper *I*, as the *Idea per se*, the source, in its attempt to elude the nihilating effect of the multiplicity of self-intrusions, “withdraws to an infinite distance” (Nancy, “L’Intrus” 12) and almost completely destroys itself: the desperate echolalia of “L’Azur! L’Azur! L’Azur! L’Azur” (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 38) is all that remains of the poet’s voice, which continues to fade away as the ringing sound of the Angelus bell turns into silence. Thus, the supposedly pure *I* of self-consciousness, the Romantic source of all presence, is rendered “almost impersonal, very close to being a non-I” itself, “this I which is not an I, this unconscious consciousness, this X which probably has or is nothing” (Derrida, *Margins* 282, 283). The source inhabits, or rather, haunts, a space opened for the elision of the *I*: Mallarmé’s post-Romantic poet is haunted by what he cannot put into words, as he utters “Je suis hanté!” (I am haunted!) (*Oeuvres* 38) which implies “Je suis hanté par je ne sais quoi” (I am haunted by I don’t know what) inviting an entire congregation of specters, a multitude of spectral possibilities with no actualization in sight. This elision reduces the pure *I* “to an abstract point, to a pure form, stripped of all thickness, of all depth, without character, without quality, without property, without an assignable duration. This source therefore has no proper meaning” (Derrida, *Margins* 281).

The *Idea* sets in motion a concatenation of metaphors, bringing together notions such as obedience, assent, prayer, veneration, mourning, and memory. It calls to us with the divine serenity of an azure sky above a church as the Angelus

bell is rung and the metal-speech of the bell and clapper begins, the source sending forth, successively, centrifugal ripples of sound, “*échos esclaves*” (slave-like echoes) (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 76), with every ripple ultimately to “glide fatally (‘so couler’) into the ripples which preceded it and merge (‘au fond de l’unanime pli’) into the indifferentiation of silence” (Pearson 200). The source always remains radically anterior to the vibrations it generates, just like a stone thrown into a river maintains a definitive alterity to the ripples it creates: “Nothing of that which proceeds from it belongs to it” (Derrida, *Margins* 281). The incarnation of the Idea as *such*, that is, the poet’s voice, become merely one poetic voice among others, as the absolutely *proper* (non-*I*) adrift within the multitude of all the non-*I*s that (de)constitute the poet as subject, is reduced to an almost-nothing, an infinitely withdrawn non-word, indissociable from and yet other to the entire system of representations which allows us to speak of the *Idea*, such as the imagery of the blue sky and its intimidating force, the Angelus bell and its metallic tongue, or haunting and its ineluctable repetitions: “it is nothing outside its metaphors, nothing except that which transports it outside itself and throws it outside itself at the instant of its birth, as the irruptive welling up, the sometimes discreet, but always violent effraction of the emerging source” (283). The origin point of flowing water cannot itself be part of the structure of rivers and streams it gives birth to, at least insofar as a ‘spring’ is not confused with the ‘stream’ that gushes forth from it; in other words, the “point d’eau” (source of water) is always already “point d’eau” (no water at all): “As such, this source, in the purity of its waters, is always disseminated far from itself, and has no relation to itself as source” (283). The absolutely proper *I* is nothing outside its own self-annihilation(s).

On the other hand, all these speculations about the nature of the source are only possible through and within the medium of language which, as we have discussed in length, presupposes the radical anteriority of a *yes*, of an always already expressed *assent*, of a pledge or promise to that which precedes and makes language possible without belonging to it. Concordantly, in order to find its own seat on the stage of representation, the source has always already been reduced, by the tropological *turn* of the signifier, to the incessant play of difference, to its “presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole” (vibratory near-disappearance according to the play of speech) (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 368): “In order to speak of the source, which remains interdicted, first it has had to be *turned*: by means of a trope, it must yield to being seen and yield to seeing” (284). The tropological turn allows the *Idea* qua source to divide itself so that it can itself become a mirror-effect, the same as everything else that has been rendered visible and present only by being presented

to this source as an object, only through *being seen* by the impoverished I/eye of a cosmic mirror that is itself always already broken into a multitude of shards of glass.

If in the beginning, at the source, there (is) the turn, the repetition, the representation, the response, or the metaphor, if the source (is) itself a result, a trace, an effect, then there is no beginning, or, rather, the beginning has always already begun: “at first” and “once again” go hand in hand in the construction of the present. This repeatability, or, if you will, iterability is the condition of possibility of language itself. Sure, the bell eventually stops ringing, but it will ring again upon the next Angelus, just like it has rung again and again before—the specter-*Idea* returning, that is, returning to returning. This iterability is built into the nature of any prayer, at least in the formal sense of the word: it is a form of “ritual.” An obsession with the ritual was characteristic of *les Symbolistes* in France and the Pre-Raphaelites in Britain, a quality which Yeats inherited and which shaped his approach to poetry, particularly in his early career.

The *Idea* calls to us, it speaks to us and for us, through the Angelus bell: a call to prayer, a call to re-cite the words “Domini nuntiavit Mariæ / Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto...” (the Angel of the Lord [Gabriel] declared unto Mary / And she conceived of the Holy Spirit...), to reconfirm the fundamental principles of Christianity that are always already accepted at the point of prayer (if you were not already a Christian, saying a Christian prayer, at least in the formal sense of the word, wouldn’t make sense): not only the Annunciation and the Incarnation but also Christ’s Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection are recounted, and therefore commemorated, in the text of the Angelus. It is a form of re-paying the debt the Christian owes to the Savior, a repayment that is never, i.e., always-already, finished but repeated upon each prayer, as an en-gagement to the *source* of Christian Truth, that is, God’s *mystery* (μυστήριον). The Angelus bell each time bears witness to this *yes* of the *quasi-originary mystery*. Hence, *Idea* as *mysterium* shares with the quasi-originary *yes* of language the infrastructural quality of irreducibility to the binary structures of language and metaphysical philosophy: for instance, in the context of the Incarnation, the form its revelation was to have taken is neither flesh nor word even as it is both flesh and word.

### **The Body of the Letter**

One crucial implication of our argument here is that the ‘iterability’ and ‘rituality’ that are so prominently built into the fabric of the prayer approximate it, albeit asymptotically, to the very origins of language and to the condition of possibility

of poetry. Furthermore, there is a certain automaticity or mechanical routine in the act of saying a prayer, a certain ellipsis of knowledge—of the substance, of the subject or even of speech: it is a matter of saying *by rote*; you recite what you have memorized, what you have “learned by heart,” without being preoccupied or paying particular attention to the words themselves. Prayer is the closest speech can get to the immediacy characteristic of divine inspiration; it is the closest speech can get to its own disappearance. The manner in which prayers and incantations, such as the Angelus, have been set to music in the history of the Church is rather enlightening in this context. The Gregorian chant tradition is of particular interest to us since the earliest form of musical notation, the *neume*, was invented for this plainchant, employed from the eighth or ninth to the twelfth century. Unaccompanied and monophonic, the neume is a “pure vocalization” which corresponds to “chanting without words”—a mode of manipulating the “breath” (a short recapitulation of air) in a manner that suspends the knowledge of articulated speech, including the form of articulation embodied in modern notation protocols for accent and melody. The “breath” most effectively erases—or at least blurs—the difference between the three kinds of voice defined by Rousseau, that is, the speaking voice, the singing voice, and the affective voice: breath is what they have in common, “a speaking and singing breath, breath of language which is nonetheless inarticulate” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 249). This breath is none other than the *neume*.

The *neume* is linked via *pneuma* (πνεῦμα: breath, wind, soul, spirit, divine inspiration, angelic being, life-giving fire, etc.) to the Holy Spirit (Ἅγιο πνεῦμα), and hence the Annunciation which is the subject of the Angelus prayer. Concordantly, the neume is divinely inspired and is accorded to God alone, whose ineffability disarms the capacity of words to celebrate Him properly in words. According to Rousseau’s *Dictionary of Music*,

The Catholics authorize this singular custom on a passage of St. Augustine, who says, that no words being possible to be worthy of pleasing God, it is laudable to address him in a confused music of jubilation. “For to whom is such a jubilation suitable, unless to an ineffable Being? and how can we celebrate this ineffable Being, since we cannot be silent, or find anything in our transports which can express them, unless unarticulated sounds?” (qtd. in Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 249)

Mallarmé finishes his essay “Le mystère dans les lettres” with the mention of “l’air ou chant sous le texte” (the melody or song under the text) (*Oeuvres* 387): this

infrastructural rhythm approximates a mode of music comparable to the neume, as defined here. Furthermore, in a similar manner to Yeats's so-called 'posthumous' poem "Cuchulain Comforted," the neume "aim[s] at an unearthly music beyond the human" (Vendler 98): the bird-like shades or shrouds the fallen hero Cuchulain joins in his afterlife sing a song in chorus which has "nor human tunes nor words" (Yeats, *Poems* 340), what Vendler aptly describes as "a pure avian vocalization" (98). The breath which embodies the neume "cannot have a human origin and a human destination. It is no longer on the way to humanity like the language of the child, but is rather on the way to superhumanity" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 249). In "Che cos'è la poesia?" Derrida redefines this superhumanity in terms of a (desire to) return to an impossible primeval state of language: the non-metaphorical, the purely literal, the non-mimetic, a P/poem before poetry, the *poematic* limit-experience. Derrida writes, "*Literally*: you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from *the body of the letter*. In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic" (*Points* 292–295; emphasis added). The *body* of the letter: meaning is no longer bound by the metaphorical abstractions that separate the poet from that nascent state of joy, adoration, and passion (the a-topos of the *heart*). It is the state of the absolutely proper *I* chased by the multiplicity of self-intrusions to its zero *point*, where there is nothing, nothing but this very *nothing*, this *almost nothing*—an infrastructural void beyond language(s) and "older than 'logic'" (303), "very low, an all-low, absolutely low" which is a low "without opposition to height" (325). The *body* of the letter: the passion of natural voices is inscribed upon the corporealized meaning. It is this carnality of sense that opens up the origin of the poetic: the *poematic* experience is one of touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing, feeling, breathing, in short, 'sensing the sense.'

At one point in "Ellipsis" Derrida underscores the relationship between passion and the origin: "It is the origin itself which is impassioned, passive, and past, in that it is written. Which means inscribed" (373). Later in the text, Derrida compares two approaches to writing, the affirmation of play *and* the pronouncement of the absence of a center, asking a pivotal rhetorical question, "is not the desire for a center, as a function of play itself, the indestructible itself? And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us? It is here that the hesitation between writing as decentering and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite. This hesitation is part of play and links it to death" (375): it creates a *rhythm*, a dance, if you will, that is bound up with a primordial state of pain, a pain inseparable from,

and perhaps even prior to, feeling pain. This pain is neither objective nor subjective, neither infection nor homesickness, neither monastic self-abnegation nor Adam's curse of hours of labor the artist takes upon himself in order to "articulate sweet sounds together" (Yeats, *Poems* 78): "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blar-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil" (221). It is still pain, but one which consists in the tension of the in-between of multiple non-*I*'s, like a membrane always about to be punctured (yet, for the same reason, never punctured). The body of meaning is not a body in the proper sense of the word, in the same manner that, through the Incarnation, *both* Word and flesh undergo an essential transformation, namely the Word itself *becoming* flesh, logos corporealized qua logos. This body has not yet entered the economy of language, and consequently, is not yet implicated in the Cartesian duality of mind and body, or in the double bind of life and death: it is intra-uterine, pre-natal, fetal, matrixial, always-being-born. This fetal body, naturally, is in tune with an extension (in all senses of the word) of the mother's heartbeat which resonates through the amniotic fluid wherein floats the fetus (whose movement within the womb is the source of the particular mode of pain we have associated here with the body of the letter). Thus, it is a body inseparable from its corporeal rhythmicity: it is a rhythmic corporeality which marks the primordial stage wherein we can never "know the dancer from the dance" (221) or sense from its sensuality. The possibility of poetry rests in this sensuality of sense laid bare by the painful yet indestructible passion of and for the origin, and it could be claimed that no passage describes this passion more accurately than the following excerpt from Nancy's "Sens elliptique":

C'est ainsi que l'écriture est dite "passion de l'origine." Cette passion ne survient pas à l'origine: elle est, elle fait l'origine elle-même. L'origine est une passion, *la passion de soi dans sa différence*, et c'est cela qui fait le sens, tout le sens. Tout le sens est toujours passion, en tous les sens de ce mot "sens." [...] Ce qui fait sens dans le sens, ce qui l'origine, c'est qu'il se sente lui-même sentir. (Sentir le sens, toucher à l'être sens du sens - fût-il insensé- , c'est la passion de Derrida. Toucher au corps du sens. Incorporer le sens. Griffer, entamer, tatouer. Mettre à feu et à sens. Je n'écris ici que sur ça.)

(Thus writing is said to be the "passion of and for the origin." This passion does not arise at the origin: it is, it makes the origin itself. The origin is a passion, *the passion of and for oneself in its difference*, and that is what makes sense, all the sense. All sense is always passion, in all the senses of this word "sense." [...] What makes sense in the meaning, what engenders it, is that it

feels itself feeling. (To feel the meaning, to *touch* its “meaning-being”—even if it has no meaning in and of itself—this is Derrida’s passion. To touch the body of the sense. To give flesh to meaning (to render it corporeal). To scratch, cut into, tattoo. To set on fire and give meaning to. I will speak on nothing else than that.) (328)

If the origin of the poetic is in the zero point of metaphor, then only a self-voiding of literary language may bring the poem into the light of day (*mettre au jour*). For Yeats, the origin seems to lie in the contact with this infra-liminal Darkness, this *nothing*, this almost nothing. It is darkness pulsating with possibilities of life and of death, heartbeats barely heard through the metal chest and ribcage of history, through the crust of conventional wisdom and “enumerate[d] old themes” (*Poems* 355) which does not constitute tradition in Yeats’s view. This heart is not very different from that which Derrida describes in “Che cos’è la poesia?”: “A heart down there, between paths and autostradas, outside of your presence, humble, close to the earth, low down” (Derrida, *Points* 295; emphasis added). In this marvellous text, Derrida uses the hedgehog (*hérisson*) as his catachrestic figure for the poem: a hedgehog, rolled into a ball, self-stranded on the road, with the ominous sound of a vehicle approaching to crush it. According to Derrida, “Un hérisson est bas, très-bas, ‘humble,’ humilié peut-être, ce qui veut dire près de la terre, terre-à-terre, mais le bas aussi comme ‘signifiant,’ prononcé *tout bas*, à voix basse, presque sans voix, et puis le coeur qui bat, là-bas, au loin” (“A hedgehog is low, all-low, ‘humble,’ humiliated perhaps, which means close to the earth, down-to-earth, but low also as ‘signifier,’ pronounced very low, in a lowered voice, almost without voice, and then the heart that beats, over there, far away”) (*Points de suspension* 335; *Points* 325; emphasis added). The pun on the term *tout bas* is essential: “all-low, very low” (spatially speaking) and “almost silent, whisper-like.” The poem experience consists in listening to this near-silence, this almost nothing, this rumor or hearsay (*oui-dire*)—what practically amounts to eavesdropping. David Solway finds a similar quality in Irving Layton’s poetry, based on Derrida’s reading of the *neume*, discussed above, as the origin of language (a pure vocalization, untainted by supplementarity, and divinely inspired) which Solway relates to “the irruption of the sense of festival” and “the plunge into the conjugal amalgam of the Creation”: “This may account for the feeling one often has in the presence of great poetry, as in the best of Layton’s work, that one is not listening or reading directly: *one is eavesdropping*” (95). Yeats is delving down, without really delving, down to the zero point “where all the ladders start,” where all poetry begins, “the foul rag and

bone shop of the heart” (*Poems* 356), down there, too low, close to the earth. There lies the humble, perhaps helpless, hedgehog of the poematic: “One would like to take it in one’s hands, undertake to learn it and understand it, to keep it for oneself, near oneself” (Derrida, *Points* 292–293)—to learn it by heart [*apprendre par coeur*] or to eavesdrop on it. One would like to recite it, to repeat it like a prayer, as though it were dictated by a nameless other or inspired by God, but not so as to ‘know’ it, or to ‘name’ it, or to treat it as a center of will or individual consciousness. As Peter Dayan explains, “the poem, like the animal, gives itself no name that belongs to the living. [...] The poem must be abandoned by the living. It must be left. It cannot be known; it cannot speak its name; it can only be learnt by heart, entire. It is not individually alive, and therefore it cannot die” (11).

The peculiar relationship, discussed here, between the fruitful void and the heart, between the luminous emptiness and the origin of the poetic, may direct us to Heidegger, especially, in this case, his reading of Hölderlin. Poetry for Heidegger is the “setting-into-work of the truth” of Being, the opening in language of a space for the ontological epiphany attendant upon an authentic encounter with *nothing*, a way of using language through which beings stand revealed in the truth of their being; in other words, poetry allows the unconcealing-illuminating encounter with a “clearing” [*Lichtung*] in the middle of the forest of beings, a space from which all the trees have been removed, as if set fire to (17–86). This un/concealing fire originates from the heart or, in Heideggerian terms, the *soul* [*Gemüt*]: Derrida, following Hölderlin, names the poet “the *Beseeler*, not the animator or the ringleader but the one who insufflates the soul” (*Of Spirit* 79). The poet as the *Beseeler* [soul-giver] is “consumed in fire, close to becoming ash” (81). It is the passion of this poetic soul that, undermining the sovereignty of cogito, can render meaning palpable and let it set itself on fire [*se mettre à feu*]. The body of sense is never far from the mystery of flames and ashes: it is not without significance that Mallarmé intended his manuscript of the Book to be consigned to fire. The poematic event “always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge” (Derrida, *Points* 299): the poet has to reduce the Tree of Knowledge to ashes, “to disable memory, disarm culture, know how to forget knowledge, set fire to the library of poetics” (295). The blankness of the blank page is none other than the whiteness of these ashes, words gathered in the urn of language, no longer merely words, but in-corporated non-words, down there where a heart beats in near-silence, where one could feel the meager heat emanating from the word-cinders, smoldering in the hesitant presence of the breath (*πνεῦμα*)—a mode of passion so eloquently described by Mallarmé as “*lucide désespoir*” (lucid despair) (qtd. in Chapman 21). We have come a long way from the Æolian harp of



the Romantics and the “wild and various ... random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject Lute” (Coleridge) so as to quicken its strings into a highly subjective, self-reflective poetry of totalizing individuality.

### Conclusion

An overview of the dangers of solipsism in Symbolist poetry leads one to a vision of the post-Romantic subject stranded between two different but interrelated responses to the encounter with the Ideal as *L'Azur* (the blue infinity of the sky), both equally frustrating. This prompts the question of what happens to the Symbolist poet's voice in the vicinity of the ideal: the poet's voice, the *I*, as a poetic voice in its own right, is threatened and penetrated by other poetic voices that become more and more multitudinous as we approach the critical origin-point of the Ideal. Thus, the absolutely proper *I*, supposedly designating as such the poet's voice among the rest of the poetic voices, could be described as, and has always already been disseminated into, “a multiplicity of self-intrusions” or *non-I*'s, or to put it in other words, a tension between fragmentary *I*'s as poetic identities, resulting in the experience of a schism within the poet's psyche, an ontological anachrony. In this regard, the Ideal could be interpreted as the quasi-originary source of language, the infrastructural *yes*, and the origins of the poetic could be traced to “rituality” and “iterability,” qualities characteristic of prayers (considering, in particular, the Angelus devotion), and the *neume* (the earliest form of musical notation, which amounts to a chanting without words, a pure vocalization): the essence of poetry, or, borrowing a term used by Derrida, the “*poematic*” limit-experience, requires a suspension of knowledge, as in learning “by heart.” The origin of the poetic is located in the “body of the letter” or the “carnality of sense,” the perfume of words. At the zero point of metaphor where meaning is purely literal, the poematic, as passion of and for the origin, entails a self-voiding of language, a casting-aside of being: the contact with the body of sense is only possible if the poetic soul, bypassing the cogito, can derail absolute knowledge, since the quasi-originary promise of language (*yes*), that is, the very condition of possibility of language, is anterior to reason and to knowledge. Down there, low, too low, close to the earth, the humble “hedgehog,” Derrida's catachrestic figure for the poematic, is rolled up into a ball, self-stranded on the autoroute, with the ominous sound of a vehicle approaching to crush it—buried laughter, lucid despair, smoldering ashes.

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