

the Spirit is a bone.—HEGEL


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BLACK RIDERS

The Visible Language of Modernism

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Introduction

Modernism and the Renaissance of
Printing, with Particular Reference to the
Writing of Yeats, Stein, and Dickinson

I go to see my noble and learned brother pretty well
every day, when he sits in the Inn. He don't notice me,
but I notice him. There's no great odds betwixt us. We
both grub on in a muddle.

—CHARLES DICKENS, *Bleak House*

NO PASSAGE in Yeats's work is more famous than the final stanza of "The Circus Animals' Desertion." The lines are with good reason read as a kind of aesthetic testament—Yeats's late reflections on the nature of poetry, particularly his own poetry.

These masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?¹

He answers that question with a series of memorable images, culminating in the final, celebrated "foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Of course no one mistakes the discursive meaning of the passage. Auden later appropriated Yeats's text in order to illustrate "what every artist knows[,] that the sources of his art are 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart,' its lusts, its hatreds, its envies."² That is the standard line of ethically thematized interpretation, most recently repeated in Daniel Albright's commentary on Yeats's figure of the rag and bone shop: "Yeats's most abject term for the *Anima Mundi*, the imagination's storehouse of images, now relocated in a private slum."³

Albright is correct to speak of a "slum" in relation to the line, because that image turns back to the earlier images in the stanza and emphasizes the "completeness" of this passage's own "masterful

image." "The Circus Animals' Desertion" closes, that is to say, in a sharply located scene: not merely in "a private slum," but in a certain kind of commercial shop on a certain kind of street. When Dickens took us to that place, in *Bleak House*, the "till" was kept not by a "raving slut" but by the grotesque, if equally unforgettable, Mr. Krook.

In all the commentary no one seems to have asked why Yeats chose to associate the "heart" of poetry with that *particular* image of commercial activity, the rag and bone shop. After all, other figures of foulness and the *Anima Mundi* were available to Yeats. What led him to draw this figure into his poem? Or perhaps I should not frame the problem in exactly that fashion, for it assumes too close a relation between poetic intention and poetic result. So: whatever was in Yeats's mind when he was writing this poem,⁴ what poetic consequence follows from choosing the rag and bone shop image?

All the commentary on the passage assumes the same answers to these questions. Like Krook's rag and bottle shop, Yeats's rag and bone shop is seen as an image of human life in its least exalted mood. Henry Mayhew has an extensive discussion "of the Street-Buyers of Rags, Broken Metal, Bottles, Glass, and Bones" in his *London Labour and the London Poor*.⁵ His description of the interior of the rag and bone shop anticipates Yeats's epithet "foul."

The stench in these shops is positively sickening. Here in a small apartment may be a pile of rags, a sack-full of bones, the many varieties of grease and "kitchen-stuff," corrupting an atmosphere which, even without such accompaniments, would be too close. . . . The inmates seem unconscious of this foulness. (II. 108)

This is the rag and bone shop of Yeats's commentators, and it clearly corresponds to important features in the poem. But it is not all that might or should be understood about the slum business that Yeats's text has summoned and recalled.

Once again Mayhew is helpful for giving a closer view of the rag and bone shop's commercial function. He supplies a great deal of information about the location and contents of such establishments, and he even sketches the structure of some of their commercial relations. We learn, for example, that these shops were serviced by itinerant refuse pickers, some of whom might be the proprietors of the shops themselves. More significantly, we also learn that the most

valuable and important material in the shops were the rags, for which the shop owner was prepared to pay significant prices—especially if the rags were of high quality (e.g., linen rags).

Rags were the most important material bought and sold in the rag and bone shop because they were, particularly in the nineteenth century, in very high demand. Bones were used for fertilizer; metal, bottles, and glass were recycled; and the rags were sold either to stationers or to the great paper merchants, who would reprocess them to make paper. In this context Yeats's "foul rag and bone shop" accumulates to itself a whole set of particular associations and relations that are highly significant for a text that has made this slum shop a foundational figure in a poetical manifesto.

When Yeats imagines the Jacob-ladder of poetry starting in a working class establishment that supplies material for papermaking, his mind is working as a nineteenth-century romantic mind. The immediate historical allusion is not to papermaking in general, but to printers and publishers who used a certain kind of paper (rag paper) and made a certain kind of book (fine-press printing). By the end of the nineteenth century, rag paper was almost never used by the regular printing trade. It was too expensive. Whereas before the Victorian period English printers used pure rag or rag-based paper,⁶ by the end of the century rag paper was used only for ornamental and deluxe books.⁷

The handcrafted books produced at the Cuala Press, for example, were all printed on rag paper,⁸ and so were the books turned out by Kelmscott and the other fine-printing houses which sprang up at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ These presses, it is important to remember, were specifically founded as part of an effort to return to an earlier, craft-based method of book production—an effort to step aside from the processes and products of the age of mechanical reproduction.

Even before the founding of the Cuala Press, Yeats had conceived his work in this bibliographical tradition. Two of his most admired precursors, William Blake and William Morris, occupied key positions in that romantic tradition of printing based in the (ultimately medieval) arts and crafts processes of the handmade book. The Dun Emer Press was established in 1902 by Elizabeth Yeats at the urging of Emery Walker—the man who had been the immediate inspiration behind the founding of Morris's epochal Kelmscott Press.

Walker sent Elizabeth Yeats to London to study typography and book design at the Women's Printing Society, and when she returned to Ireland she, along with her sister Lily, began to produce the famous series of Dun Emer and Cuala Press books, the first of which was her brother's *In the Seven Woods* (1904).¹⁰ Walker was the press's typographical advisor and Yeats served as chief editor. The entire venture was consciously planned as an Irish continuation of the project first imagined and executed by Morris with his Kelmscott Press. As Robin Skelton remarks, the Yeats's press moved off from "Emery Walker's ideas on printing, and Morris's ideas on the place of the arts in society."¹¹

The final line of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" thus intersects with an extremely important historical tradition, so far as poetry is concerned. Yeats takes his place in that tradition via his involvement with the fine-press work of the Dun Emer and Cuala Presses, which played a crucial role in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century's massive act of bibliographical resistance to the way poetry was being materially produced. It is a familiar (and a romantic) history of historical change and defiance of historical change; and one strand of that history involves the evolution of papermaking in the industrial age.

Odd as it might at first glance seem, the rag and bone shop represents the "heart" of that secondary history. Yeats's poem exploits the shop's romantic possibilities—as Dickens's novel, earlier, did not. The difference between the entirely unromantic presentation of the shop in *Bleak House*, and Yeats's ironical and nostalgic approach, must be traced to the historical catastrophe which overtook such shops between the mid-Victorian period and 1890. Mayhew tells us that these shops could be found in abundance throughout the poorer districts of the cities and towns of Great Britain: one or even two shops might operate on any given street. They were there because they were needed by the stationers and printers. Indeed, book, periodical, and newspaper production increased so dramatically in the early nineteenth century that the demand for rags became acute, and supplies were constantly falling short. As a consequence, entrepreneurs were vigorously seeking ways to reduce the need for rags in papermaking.

At mid-century, when Mayhew was publishing his classic studies of working-class life, the rag and bone shop was still much in evi-

dence, even though important mechanical innovations in papermaking had already taken place in the first part of the century. But as yet no good substitute had been found for rags. This came after mid-century, especially in the 1860s and 1870s (in Great Britain), when paper made from processed wood pulp utterly transformed the printing industry.¹² Between that period and 1937, when Yeats wrote "The Circus Animals' Desertion," this commercial revolution had made the rag and bone shop scarce enough to become a romantic figure of a lost world.

The explosion of fine-press printing in the late nineteenth century came as a movement of resistance against this new current of commercial book production. Kelmscott, Doves, Eragny, Cuala: these were the kind of social and commercial organizations which remained in contact with the disappearing rag and bone shops. Their books needed the rag paper that had been traditionally supplied by the rags collected in those shops. In "The Circus Animals' Desertion," consequently, the rag and bone shop reappears as the sign of an original allegiance. Like Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, it is a nostalgic figure harking back to a particular form of social life that had come under threat of extinction from those powers that seemed so inimical to men like Blake, Ruskin, Morris—and Yeats.

It is, needless to say, a figure of particular importance to modernist poets. It calls our attention, once again, to the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic roots of modernism, whose principal means of production in its formative years was commonly through small press and finely printed books. From Yeats and Pound to Stein and Williams and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, fine-printing work, the small press, and the decorated book fashioned the bibliographical face of the modernist world. The foul rag and bone shop, paradoxically, is a peculiarly apt Yeatsian figure for the "heart" of that world.



Yeats's nostalgia in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" reflects—as the poem's two previous titles would have it—his "despair" "on the lack of a theme."¹³ This felt conceptual poverty was more than overbalanced, as we have seen, by the work's abundant memorial materials; and the latter would be reinforced when the poem finally appeared in Yeats's *Last Poems and Two Plays*. Published in June, 1939 by Cuala Press, the book had been conceived by Yeats in

December, 1938, a month before his death.¹⁴ The Cuala Press format is particularly important for this poem because the book supplies the text with a bibliographical environment that carries a general allusion to preindustrial social orders and artisanal bookwork.

In all works issued by Dun Emer/Cuala Press, Yeats's rag and bone shop is plainly visible at the material level of production. Established, as we have noted, under the direct influence of Kelmscott Press, the medievalism of the latter appears in Dun Emer/Cuala's slightly antiqued graphic style. The Dun Emer/Cuala colophons, printed in red, echo the manner of Kelmscott (the first of the colophons, for *In the Seven Woods*, was executed under the specific direction of Kelmscott Press's Sidney Cockerell).¹⁵ As late arrivals to the Renaissance of Printing inaugurated in the nineteenth century, Dun Emer/Cuala Press books also exhibit their romanticism very directly. The small Pre-Raphaelite woodcuts that decorate the half titles, titles, and other pages indicate the conscious belatedness of these books, which are romantic at a second level—the way the poetic styles of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon or Winthrop Mackworth Praed or Thomas Lovell Beddoes were romantic at a second level in the 1820s (see fig. 1).

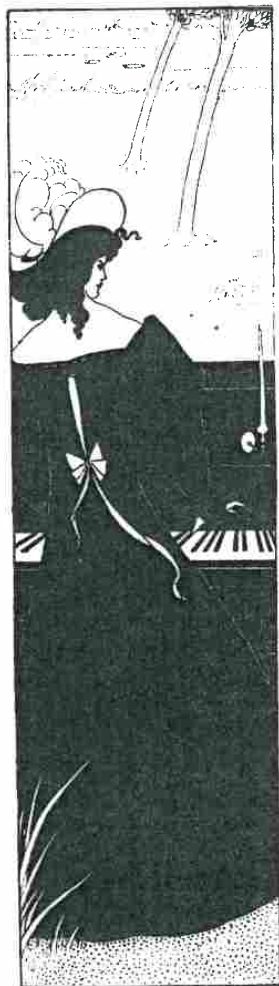
It is important to realize that these books might have looked very different, especially given Yeats's own history. They might, for example, have looked more like a Vale Press or a Bodley Head book. Yeats initially thought to work with Vale Press in the printing of his 1895 collected *Poems*,¹⁶ for example, and he was himself a Bodley Head author, much involved with publishers like John Lane and Elkin Mathews and with the writers, artists, and printers who comprised the Aesthetic movement of the 1890s. Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism stand behind that movement, of course, just as they had been exerting a deep influence on its correspondent breeze, the Celtic Revival. Yet the dominant style of the 1890s derives not from Morris and Kelmscott, but from writers like Wilde, artists like Beardsley, and printers like Walter Blaikie. The defining cultural texts of the period are probably not an integral work of imagination like (say) *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1892) or *The importance of being earnest* (1895)—so typical of the period as these works are—but the famous Bodley Head periodical *The Yellow Book* and Vale Press's *The Dial*. As works of “visible language,” both are utterly different from what Kelmscott produced or aspired to (see figs. 2 and 3).

LAST POEMS AND TWO PLAYS BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS.



THE CUALA PRESS
DUBLIN IRELAND
MCMXXXIX

1. W. B. Yeats, *Last Poems and Two Plays*, title page, Cuala Press Edition (1939).



The Yellow Book

An Illustrated Quarterly

Volume I April 1894

London: Elkin Mathews
& John Lane
Boston: Copeland &
Day

2. *The Yellow Book*, Vol. I, title page (1894).

THE BOOK

OF THE

RHYMERS' CLUB



LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS
AT THE SIGN OF THE BODLEY HEAD
IN VIGO STREET
1892

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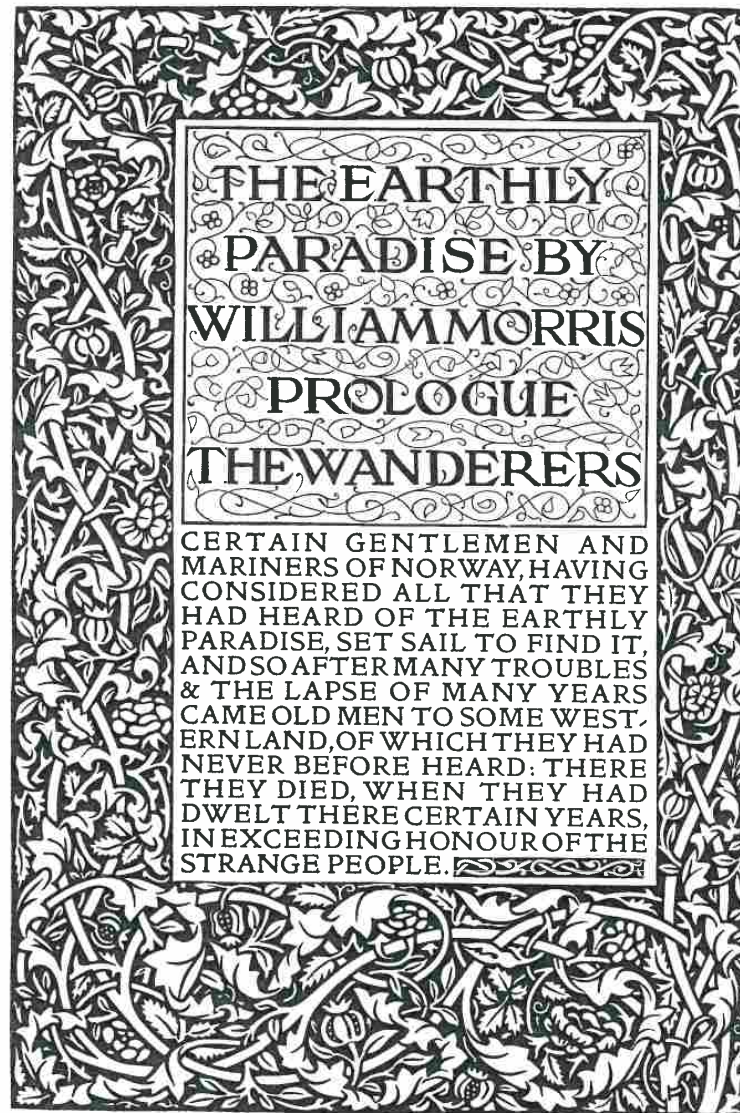
3. *The Book of the Rhymers' Club*, title page (1892).

Readers who follow their texts primarily with an inner eye tend to see all “fine press” or “privately printed” books as more or less equivalent productions—varying perhaps only in their technical artistic achievements. To the extent that such bookmaking foregrounds the importance of writing’s signifiers, the work exhibits uniformities and coherences. Different presses, however, generate distinctive sets of textual signifiers, and Yeats was well aware of the differences from the beginning of his career. Two of the most significant presses of the 1890s—Kelmscott and Bodley Head—carry unique and definite paratextual messages. Both share the view that meaning invests a work at the level of its physical appearance and linguistic signifiers, but each has in mind a different range of signifieds. Though both styles exhibit a kind of (as it were) poetic nominalism, the medievalism of Kelmscott does not correspond to the crisp aura of contemporaneity constructed by Bodley Head books (see figs. 4 and 5).

In this context we can more easily measure the significance of the bibliographical style of Dun Emer/Cuala Press books. The colophons are decisive.

HERE END THE GREEN HELMET
AND OTHER POEMS BY WILLIAM
BUTLER YEATS. PRINTED AND
PUBLISHED BY ELIZABETH COR-
BET YEATS AT THE CUALA PRESS,
CHURCHTOWN, DUNDRUM, IN
THE COUNTY OF DUBLIN, IRE-
LAND. FINISHED ON THE LAST
DAY OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE
YEAR NINETEEN HUNDRED AND
TEN.

Squared off and printed in red, this colophon declares that the (Celtic) writing in the book is no mere conceptual undertaking. It has been made a deliberate and even a performative feature of a text whose every material part has been acquired, conceived, and executed in a “Celtic” world. As already noted, it is a colophon whose style was taken directly from the Kelmscott Press manner. The same style is evident in the first book issued by Dun Emer Press, *In the Seven Woods* (1903). The opening poem has its title printed in red and its text in black, a distinct recollection of Kelmscott work; and the



4. William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, “Prologue. The Wanderers,”

[10]

CARMELITE NUNS OF THE PERPETUAL
ADORATION

CALM, sad, secure; behind high convent walls;
These watch the sacred lamp, these watch and pray:
And it is one with them, when evening falls;
And one with them, the cold return of day.

These heed not time: their nights and days they make
Into a long, returning rosary;
Whereon their lives are threaded for Christ's sake:
Meekness and vigilance and chastity.

A vowed patrol, in silent companies,
Life long they keep before the living Christ:
In the dim church, their prayers and penances,
Are fragrant incense to the Sacrificed.

Outside, the world is wild and passionate;
Man's weary laughter, and his sick despair
Entreat at their impenetrable gate:
They heed no voices in their dream of prayer.

5. Ernest Dowson, "Carmelite Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration," from *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* (1892).

IN THE SEVEN WOODS: BEING POEMS
CHIEFLY OF THE IRISH HEROIC AGE.

IN THE SEVEN WOODS

I have heard the pigeons of the Seven Woods
Make their faint thunder, and the garden bees
Hum in the lime tree flowers; and put away
The unavailing outcries and the old bitterness
That empty the heart. I have forgot awhile
Tara uprooted, and new commonness
Upon the throne and crying about the streets
And hanging its paper flowers from post to post,
Because it is alone of all things happy.
I am contented for I know that Quiet
Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart
Among pigeons and bees, while that Great Archer,
Who but awaits His hour to shoot, still hangs
A cloudy quiver over Parc-na-Lee.

August, 1902.

THE OLD AGE OF QUEEN MAEVE

Maeve the great queen was pacing to and fro,
Between the walls covered with beaten bronze,
In her high house at Cruachan; the long hearth,
Flickering with ash and hazel, but half showed
Where the tired horse-boys lay upon the rushes,
Or on the benches underneath the walls,
In comfortable sleep; all living slept

b

6. W. B. Yeats, *In the Seven Woods*, opening text page, Dun Emer Press edition (1903).

If a Kelmscott approach dominated the graphic conception of Dun Emer/Cuala Press books—and it did—the Bodley Head style remains discernible in them. Both styles were obviously associated, in different historical ways, with the Celtic Revival; and while Yeats sought out Cockerell and Walker for advice about book design and production, the basic typographical style (as opposed to the general graphic design) of Dun Emer/Cuala books is closer to Bodley Head than it is to Kelmscott. That is to say, the books from the Yeats's press are not closely printed in faces that recall medieval manuscripts and tight fifteenth-century printing styles. The Dun Emer/Cuala typeface is a modern Caslon, and the lines of text are generously leaded to deliver—in contrast to Kelmscott books—an easily read page.

Unlike Morris before him, or Pound later, Yeats did not use his bibliographical models and forebears to fashion new artistic effects out of the material features of his Dun Emer/Cuala Press books. The latter are, in this respect, derivative works, as one sees from the relatively insignificant place they hold, as books, in either the history of printing or the history of literature (in contrast, for example, to the books of Blake, Dickens, Morris, Lear, Whitman, Pound or—as has yet to be properly recognized—Emily Dickinson). If Dun Emer/Cuala Press books were not technically innovative, however, they were well designed and quite successful. Cuala Press continued to publish for many years. This effectiveness arose out of the Yeats's clarity of purpose in founding the press. Commenting on the failure in 1907 of the Irish nationalist quarterly magazine *Shanachie*, Yeats criticized the work's lack of conceptual focus: "I don't believe it is possible to make a good magazine without making up your mind who it is for whom you are making it and keeping to that idea throughout" (*Letters*, 474). For Yeats, the same principle would have to cover a publishing imprint.

From the outset Dun Emer/Cuala kept its audience and purposes sharply in mind. These were quite different from the goals, for example, of Sir Charles Gavin Duffy's "New Irish Library," which Duffy launched in 1892 as a continuation of his earlier (and immensely successful) "Library of Ireland" books published in cheap formats in the 1840s as part of the Young Ireland movement. Duffy's ideas were too directly political and egalitarian for Yeats, whose dif-

ferent views were clearly set down in his 1895 anthology *A Book of Irish Verse*:

This book differs also from some of its kind [i.e., the New Irish Library books], in being intended only a little for English readers, and not at all for Irish peasants, but almost wholly for the small beginning of that educated and national public, which is our greatest need and perhaps our vainest hope. (xxvii)

The Dun Emer/Cuala Press venture emerged from these ideas, as Yeats declared in various prefaces to the books printed at his sister's press.¹⁷

As it happened, the bifurcated allegiance coded bibliographically in the Dun Emer/Cuala Press book—to the medievalism of Kelmscott Press, on one hand, and to the contemporaneity of Bodley Head on the other—appears once again in Yeats's editorial and publishing goals. Working so closely in the 1890s with John Lane and Elkin Mathews, Yeats gained first-hand experience of how successful a small-press publishing venture could be if one carefully gauged and targeted the audience.¹⁸ This is what Bodley Head did. An altogether less shrewd or commercially efficient operation, Kelmscott Press nonetheless seems to have convinced Yeats, among other things, that the kind of audience he wanted might be secured in Ireland. As a romantic socialist, Morris (famously) lamented that his work mainly catered to "the swinish luxury of the rich."¹⁹ He pursued it nonetheless to the end, in the (sharp) teeth of the contradiction he clearly understood. As a romantic nationalist, Yeats saw no need for lament on this score. Lady Gregory was exactly the kind of reader and patron he wanted.

For most of his career Yeats evolved an interesting three-level procedure for transmitting his works. After first printing in a periodical or anthology, he would then gather some poems for publication in two distinct book formats: the private press Dun Emer/Cuala format, and the commercial Macmillan format. The Macmillan collections augmented or otherwise changed the poems first issued in the Dun Emer/Cuala Press books. From a purely rhetorical point of view, this method of production secured an extremely wide and various audience for his work. Having established his modernity in the 1890s, Yeats then settled into an effective publishing pattern. This

began with the founding of Dun Emer Press in 1903. His transmission practices were designed to keep his poetry in continuous contact with bourgeois, (aristocratic) provincial, and avant-garde audiences, and he was careful to maintain and extend his European and American connections as well.

Yeats had, in this respect, clearly overgone the lead of William Morris, whose expensive Kelmscott books were typically issued in trade formats as well. Yeats's more elaborate method of dissemination shows how much he had learned from his association with Bodley Head. Lane and Mathews had developed procedures for defining specific audiences along other than simple economic lines. Morris's two-level method of publication was a pure economic convenience. Though by no means indifferent to economic concerns, Lane and Mathews were trying to imagine their audience(s) along cultural and ideological lines. Yeats's comment on the failure of *Shanachie* testifies to his understanding of these matters.

The peculiar style—and effectiveness—of Yeats's method of disseminating his work appears if we contrast it (for example) with the way an aesthetic writer like Dowson put his work into circulation, or with Gertrude Stein's early publication history (up to 1933), or even with Pound. As I shall later be discussing in detail the important case of Pound, let me comment briefly on the other two. Dowson, like Lionel Johnson and most of the 1890s aesthetes, reached print through the specialized organs of the "Yellow Nineties," and they did not make practical efforts to find an audience beyond that sphere. Yeats did. Furthermore, the writing scene in Great Britain had altered drastically with the turn of the century. Morris was dead, Bodley Head had suffered a divorce, and the trial of Oscar Wilde had seriously weakened the cultural influence of the Aesthetic movement and its artistic experiments. When Dun Emer began publishing in 1903, its cultural politics were provincial and conservative in ways that Kelmscott and Bodley Head had never been.

The situation in the United States ran a more or less parallel course. Close publishing connections were maintained between, for example, Bodley Head and the adventurous new American firm of Copeland and Day; Thomas Mosher kept alive the spirit of Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism, and the larger publishers also worked in concert with each other. When Pound arrived on the London scene in 1908, his American imagination was still fired with Pre-Raphae-

tism and Aestheticism. Those inheritances supplied Pound and many other early modernists with the "determination to discover new modes of poetic expression."²⁰

In 1910 a writer's allegiance to poetic experiment and innovation had to display some clear line of connection to the recent traditions that had inaugurated such work. Part of Pound's success in England must be traced to his Pre-Raphaelite commitments. Pound helped to bring forth a new avant-garde by marrying what we now call "modernism" to the writing of the late nineteenth century. Gertrude Stein, however—a far more innovative writer than Pound or perhaps anyone else writing in English during the first two decades of this century—remained for years a marginal and self-published author. Paradoxically, she never imagined that her work was meant for anything but a wide and even a popular audience.²¹

That paradox locates part of her problem. As an experimentalist she saw her work printed by avant-garde magazines and small presses. But for all the fame she achieved in Paris in the 1920s, her writing was difficult to locate or characterize (except through parody). As a consequence, even in the context of early modernism her work seemed (and still seems) *sui generis*, and its oddness is reflected in its printing history. Until her move into self-publication, her books do not have the kind of publication continuities we can trace so easily in Yeats or Pound or Eliot.

As a modernist writer, Stein occupied the margin of the margins. This position is clear from the outset. *Three Lives* (1909) went in search of a publisher for over a year before it was accepted by Grafton, a vanity press that only agreed to take the book if Stein paid for its costs. *Tender Buttons* (1914) was published in New York by Donald Evans's Claire Marie Press, which lasted a year. Evans's press distinctly cultivated an 1890s Aesthetic mode, as its titles—six seem to have been issued—indicate. They include Evans's own *Sonnets from the Patagonian: The Street of Little Hotels*, Allen Norton's *Saloon Sonnets: with Sunday Flutings*, and Mitchell S. Buck's *Syrinx: Pastels of Hellas*. Stein did not move in Evans's circle, however, nor does *Tender Buttons* display remarkable connections with the other works bearing the Claire Marie imprint. A Wildean character, Evans was the central figure of an upscale bohemian group that included not Stein but Wallace Stevens. Stevens's Parnassian manner recalls his early involvement with Evans and his friends, whose French con-

nection was quite strong; and although Stein would become so famous in the expatriate American scene in Paris of the 1920s, she had little in common with the *symboliste* mode cultivated by Evans's circle.²²

In the last phase of her career, when *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) gave her access to the most reputable commercial publishers, her importance as a writer was once again evaded, this time by the academy. The period began with Stein issuing the Plain Editions of her works in 1931 in the fond hope and even expectation that the venture would prove a commercial success. She also knew that she had little choice, given her odd position in the "modernist" cultural scene. Although her work would be accepted by one or another of the avant-garde magazines of the 1920s, she had difficulty gaining any printed presence beyond them. Even when a key figure like Robert McAlmon was brought to sponsor one of her works, problems seemed inevitably to arise. McAlmon's Contact Edition of *The Making of Americans* (1925) proved a disaster in nearly every way. Neither Pound nor Eliot, for example, liked (or perhaps understood) her writing. In 1927 Eliot would denounce it as a threatening form of cultural barbarity.²³ Of course there were other more adventurous souls—Carl Van Vechten, Robert Carlton Brown—who did grasp what she was doing, as we shall see. Because they were (and would become, for the academy) marginal figures themselves, Stein remained culturally isolated. Not until she allowed herself to be transformed into a kind of circus animal, in the 1930s, would her writing find acceptance in regular publishing venues. Yet her popularity would at that point prove an obstacle in its own right. As the academy accepted the task of constructing the monument of modernism, Stein's writing was soon lost to sight. It seemed now to have fallen through a hole at the cultural center.

The publication history of Stein's work, so different from that of Yeats, is nonetheless equally and analogously instructive. The innovative conventions of printing and publishing established in the late nineteenth-century's Renaissance of Printing were taken up and extended by the modernists. Unlike the writing of Yeats and Pound, however, Stein's made its way through the modernist scene only with great difficulty. The Renaissance of Printing had encouraged writers to explore the expressive possibilities of language's necessary material conditions. These conditions were both broadly institutional (the publishing scene) and immediately physical (book design). The first

forms of modernism—and Stein's are among the freest of those forms—depend upon the writerly exploitation of the spatial field of the printed page and codex form. More than this, the Renaissance of Printing also encouraged freedom and innovation in the publishing and distribution of texts—moves that, as we have seen, might ultimately be managed for the creation and consolidation of an audience of readers.

Stein's experimentalism was therefore licensed by the cultural scene in which she moved. That her work should have proved so problematic in that scene—which Yeats and Pound and Eliot negotiated with relative ease—signals the historical limits within which modernist experimentalism operated. Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1933), perhaps the most neglected work of English-language modernism, would be inconceivable without the late-Victorian Renaissance of Printing, just as Pound's *Cantos* and Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion" are inconceivable outside the same context.

❖ "Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* . . . inconceivable without the late-Victorian Renaissance of Printing?" What can you possibly mean? Stein's poem wasn't even printed in her lifetime.²⁴ Besides, it doesn't call for typographical manipulations or expressive page design. It's straightforward free verse in five sections. Nor is there anything particularly remarkable about its parts. They're divided into stanzas of varying lengths, and the sections have 15, 19, 21, 24, and 83 stanzas respectively. Period.

What else could one expect? None of Stein's works are especially interesting or important for their graphic elements or "visible language."

❖ Don't misread the aesthetic significance of the Renaissance of Printing. Brecht's epic theater and Stein's writing are both part of its legacy. Self-conscious text production like that of Kelmscott and Bodley Head put a frame around romantic writing (as Brecht threw a frame around realistic drama) and thereby brought important constructivist and reflexive elements to the scene of textuality. As a consequence, the (stylistic) conventions of romanticism were sharply modified. Writing lost both its fate and its faith in personal geography—that affective dialogue of spontaneous overflow, on one hand, with internal colloquy and recollection on the other. In a self-consciously constructed book, the romantic scene discloses itself as a rhetorical display: not the dialogue of the mind with itself, but the theatrical presentation of such a dialogue.

As you say, Stein did not utilize the physical presence of the book in any

procedures for bringing the reader's attention back to the text's literal surfaces and immediate moments. Her technical adventure was to find linguistic equivalents for the bibliographical innovations that were being developed and explored by others.

The very title of *Stanzas in Meditation* involves a play of syntax pointing to "Stanzas" as the true "subject" of the work. Stein's "Stanzas" are little rooms of words of a continuous conversation ("I could go on with this" [83]; "I will begin again yesterday" [127]).

Stanza XXIX

A stanza should be thought
And if which can they do
Very well for very well
And very well for you. (116)

This is not a "poetry of meditation" such as one follows in Herbert or Wordsworth. Stein's text is imagined as having a life of its own—indeed, as having many lives of its own (each life momentarily "named" with a number and located as a stanza in a continuous process of writing).

Stanza XVII

Not only this one now (58)

Stein's texts prevent (spatial) distinctions between (manifest) surface and (concealed) significance, or (temporal) distinctions between past and present, memory and experience. The writing unfolds a continuous scene of multiplying transformations.

- ✱ But the little rooms are airless, unpeopled—like in Swinburne. Trace texts, nonreferential.
- ✱ One would do better to call them referentially "open." The pronouns dramatize the character of the writing. Stein allows these ultimate linguistic shifters complete freedom. As a consequence, the nominal level of the texts is not determined "with reference to things," with reference to anything beyond the writing itself. In this sense one could describe the writing as "nonreferential." But the texts do not forbid one to supply "references"—on the contrary, in fact. Nonetheless the writing at every point emphasizes the fluid, arbitrary, and (in a philosophical sense) insubstantial nature of all references. As Stevens might say, they occur as they occur. The beauty of the writing is precisely a celebration—Stein's customary word is "pleasure"—of what is charming and evanescent.

In place of the substantiality of empirical phenomena, this writing proposes the substantiality of language. Stein's "language," however, is neither structure nor system; it is immediate usage, equal to nothing but itself. As we read we discern, in the reflective phases of our textual experience, the play of various abstract forms of language—semantic forms and syntactic forms, morphemes and phonemes. Punctuation is minimized to license the imagination of multiple forms, as many as possible. In Stein the system of language displays itself as a theater of verbal and literal figures. Because the emphasis upon immediacy is so strong, the texts seem nervous and alive. Stanzas in meditation indeed: thought as a process of thinking, thinking as a function of language, and language as the horizon within which human life goes on.

Had Milton been of our century, he might have called it not "darkness" but "language visible."



What the circulating library and the three-decker format did for nineteenth-century fiction, the Renaissance of Printing accomplished for twentieth-century writing, especially poetry. It supplied artists with a new horizon of bibliographical and institutional possibilities, and these brought with them many linguistic innovations as well. Some of the graphic experiments are dramatic—like "Bob" Brown's visual poems or the texts he collected in *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* (1931). Djuna Barnes's haunting first volume, *Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), is a close marriage of her poetry and drawings. Even more intricate and effective is Laura Riding's pitiless satire of modernity *The Life of the Dead* (1933), a late collaborative work. John Aldridge's drawings are deeply woven into the writing of this poem—as deeply as the graphic features of Pound's first two book installments of the *Cantos* (1925, 1928).

More traditional writers (like Yeats and Stevens, for example) would exploit their new linguistic resources in relatively mild or derivative ways. This historical fact must not be taken to imply (as such) any value judgment on that work, only to describe its position with respect to the new linguistic materials. Most modernist writers did not break fresh ground but simply worked within the imaginative possibilities that had been opened for them. Riding's work, for example, is closely associated with the Seizen Press, the imprint she and Robert Graves created, principally as an outlet for her writing.

Functional as the material features of *The Life of the Dead* are (it was published by Arthur Barker Ltd.), Riding's Seizen Press books are just cleanly printed. Their language is not at all remarkably "visible." Yet even that plain printing style seems significant in its discretion, for it reflects Riding's growing preoccupation with linguistic clarity and simplicity.

The more romantic sorts of effect that Yeats achieved with his Dun Emer/Cuala Press formats have numerous analogues in modernist writing. Stevens, for example, liked to work with good printers, and certain of his books—*Ideas of Order* figures prominently here—cast the poems into significant material forms. The first edition was hand set at the Alcestis Press in an edition of 135 copies. Twenty copies are printed on Duca di Modena paper and the rest on Strathmore Permanent. In each case the paper is an arresting matte white, which throws the crisp dark print into sharp relief and gives the page an incised effect. The latter is dramatically enhanced by the typeface, named Inkunabula in the colophon, which imitates the uncial forms of early medieval manuscripts (see fig. 7). In Stevens's book it suggests an antique idea of order resisting all the "old chaos of the sun" and its transient inertias. The book design creates for the work as a whole a significant typographical environment, which then lies in wait, as it were, for peculiarly appropriate textual moments—as in the last lines of "The Reader":

The sombre pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven.

The final line of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is analogous to this passage from Stevens. In each case we observe a special effect opportunistically seized. Both writers understood the importance of setting poems in a bibliographical field that would be able to enhance textual value in unpremeditated ways. There are graces available to writing when it gives its entire faith over to the greater resources of Language. Certain artists, however—Blake and Morris among them—are more active agents in those fields of grace. Blake's illuminated texts created, or revealed, forgotten possibilities of linguistic signification. The second coming of his work took place among the Pre-Raphaelites, whose devotion to materialities of expression sped the progress of the Renaissance of Printing.

THE READER

All night I sat reading a book,
Sat reading as if in a book
Of sombre pages.

It was autumn and falling stars
Covered the shrivelled forms
Crouched in the moonlight.

No lamp was burning as I read,
A voice was mumbling "Everything
Falls back to coldness,

Even the musky muscadines,
The melons, the vermilion pears
Of the leafless garden."

The sombre pages bore no print
Except the trace of burning stars
In the frosty heaven.

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7. Page from "To the Reader" in the first (Alcestis Press) edition of Wallace Stevens's *Ideas of Order* (1935); Inkunabula typeface.