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Eudora Welty and the Poetry of W. B. Yeats Before and After *The Golden Apples*

Carol Ann Johnston, Dickinson College

“Certainly the secret of being a poet, Irish or otherwise, lies in the summoning of energies of words.”

—Seamus Heaney, “Belfast.”

Qtd. in Welty’s Foreword for Ross Macdonald’s *Self-Portrait*, 177

“It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named.”

—Willa Cather, “The Novel Dêmeuble” 6

In an interview published in *Comment Magazine* in 1965, Eudora Welty said of W. B. Yeats: “I used to like the early poems when I was young, but now I love all the poems. I can see what he did continually with his gift. He made of himself a second poet out of the first” (“An Interview” 25). The scope of Welty’s engagement with Yeats’s work bears out this statement. She summons the energy of words in her early work, as Yeats does in his poetry, rebuilds thematically Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and “Leda and the Swan” in *The Golden Apples*, and dismantles his “Sailing to Byzantium” in her final volume of stories, *The Bride of the Innisfallen*. Much, rightly, has been made of Welty’s use of Yeats’s poetry in *The Golden Apples*. Indeed, thematically Yeats’s work is rich ground for discussion of Welty’s later stories.¹ However, Yeats scholars find his poems of the period of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” at least as—if not more—compelling in technical experimentation than in presentation of themes and plot.² Considering Welty’s work in the context of technical poetic achievement shows her interest in the materiality of language, a materiality epitomized by early Yeats, and underscores Welty’s use of the techniques of lyric poetry as tools to engage the body. I will discuss Welty’s early poetry in the context of Yeats’s technical work in his early poetry, and show how she transfers the elements of prosody from her poetry to one of her earliest stories, “Magic.”

I will then return to the thematic consideration of Yeats and Welty that has proven to be such a rich topic in discussions of *The Golden Apples*. The proximity of *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, Welty’s final volume of stories, to

The Golden Apples presents the possibility that Welty there mines further the rich ground she found in Yeats's poetry in the earlier collection, even though his poetry has rarely been included in the conversations about *The Bride of the Innisfallen*.³ I will argue that Yeats's late poem "Sailing to Byzantium" deeply informs the two European stories in *The Bride of the Innisfallen*: the title story and "Going to Naples." "Sailing to Byzantium" frames Welty's meditation on the Yeatsian masculine dichotomy of physical and artistic sensuality. For Welty, the dichotomy becomes one between the material sensuality embodied in the rhythm and sound of language and the female sensuality that masculine language cannot express.

In both *The Golden Apples* and *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, Welty goes beyond revising Yeats's masculine myths right up to the point of replacing masculine language altogether. The French theorist Luce Irigaray⁴ argues that female experience remains unrepresented in language and thus is in effect not experienced. Language is masculine and comprises masculine representations of female experience arising from the masculine imaginary. For three particular women in Welty's stories—Virgie Rainey in "The Wanderers," the American woman in "The Bride of the Innisfallen," and Gabriella in "Going to Naples"—female experience construed in the masculine imaginary using phallogentric economies appears to foretell the prospect of their morose aloneness without husbands.⁵ The almost rapturous language of the final paragraphs in each story, however, belies Welty's compliance with the masculine assumption of what happens when women are without husbands. I will argue that Welty does approach Irigaray's conception of the female imaginary, beginning with the language with which Virgie Rainey ends "The Wanderers," the final story in *The Golden Apples*. However, seeing *The Bride of the Innisfallen* through the lens of Yeats's concern with poetry and immortality shows that Welty ultimately does not create *l'Écriture Feminine* that is necessary to communicate the female imaginary.

I.

Early in her work, language is a primary concern and a medium of physical sensuality for Welty. Well before becoming the accomplished fiction writer of *The Golden Apples*, Welty wrote lyric poems that were published in the literary magazines at Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW) and at University of Wisconsin. Her poem "Incident," published in *The*

Spectator, the MSCW literary magazine, in May of 1927, maintains the subject ambiance of “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” The speaker explores a mystery in a “forest of dreams” (a line repeated at the end of each of the three quatrains) that she cannot unlock, no matter how many trees she tries with the silver key. Here’s the poem (with my scansion and emphasis):

I found a bright and, cur ious key ,	A
Made of twisted silver—	B
It hung on a nail in the high est tree	A
In the for est of dreams ,	C
I took it down with ea ger hands —	C
Thought it beautiful;	B
Fairies twist the keys of silver	B
In the for est of dreams .	C
Through a night of stars did I try the key ,	A
Tried it un ceasingly,	A
But nev er a tree -door its mag ic unlocked	D
In the for est of dreams .	C

This poem shows Welty’s earnest interest in rhythm and rhyme, those aspects of language most closely tied to physical sensation. The stanza form seems to be a modified ballad stanza, which traditionally consists of quatrains in alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter, rhyming either *abab* or *abcb*. Welty’s lines rhyme within the quatrains, and she carries over the A—“key,” B—“silver,” and C—“dreams” rhymes throughout the three stanzas; “key,” “silver,” and “dreams” form what the French call *rime riche*, words rhyming with themselves. Several other rhymes are asymmetrical slant rhymes—the assonance of “silver” and “beautiful,” for instance—leaving only one word as the outlier, in terms of rhyme, “unlocked.” Unlocking is the point of the quest that remains unfulfilled in the poem, so formally, this is a sound decision. Here, like the ballad, the quatrains consist of two lines of tetrameter; unlike the ballad, Welty’s tetrameter lines alternate with a second line of trimeter and a fourth of dimeter. The dimeter line is repeated in each stanza; it consists of two anapests: “In the **for**|est of **dreams**.” The anapestic foot—two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable—occurs at least once in lines one, three, and four

of the quatrains, but never in line two of any quatrain; line two consists of falling meter, either trochaic (an accented followed by an unaccented syllable) or dactylic (an accented followed by two unaccented syllables).

Like Yeats's poems of the period of "The Song of Wandering Aengus," Welty's poetry engages in serious metrical experimentation around the structure of the quatrain. For example, in his 1899 poem "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," Helen Vendler explains that Yeats "has departed from his earlier iambic habit in order to explore dactylic and anapestic feet" (92), with a yearning intensity carried by the dactyls and "the proud humility of the narrative ... translated by the poem's progress into the gentleness of a partially anapestic meter" (93). Here is the complete poem (with my scansion and emphasis):

Had I the| **heavens'** em| **broidered** | **cloths**
En**wrought**| with **gold**|en and **sil**|ver **light**
The **blue**| and the **dim**| and the **dark**| **cloths**
Of **night**| and **light**| and the **half**|-**light**,
I would **spread**| the **cloths**| **under**| your **feet**:
But **I**|, being **poor**|, have **on**|ly my **dreams**;
I have **spread**| my **dreams**| **under** |your **feet**;
Tread **sof**|tly **because**| you **tread** | on my **dreams**. (1-8)

The intense dactyls of the first line, Vendler argues, become the gentle anapests of the second quatrain. Welty offers a variation of this kind of metrical tension in her poem; the intensity of the second line of each quatrain—the twisted silver, the beauty, and the unceasing trying—gives way to the wistful double anapests of the "in the forest of dreams" in the fourth line of each quatrain. Yeats's poem experiments with internal rhyme liberally; Welty experiments less so, though "twist" and "forest" recur, along with "tree" and "unceasingly"—the kinds of asymmetrical rhymes that Yeats also experiments with in this period. *Rime riche* is a feature of Yeats's poem as well; Welty shares the rhyme "dream" with that poem. Welty's poem has the abstract longing present in Yeats's poems of this period, which in subject matter is neither terribly sophisticated nor interesting. Yet, in comparison with Yeats's work in prosody in these poems, Welty's poem attains a high level of competence and sophistication. She is working with the nuts and bolts of poetry, especially as it emphasizes the embodiment of language. Whether or not Welty knew Yeats's work of this period while she

was at MSCW, she would have been primed by virtue of her own poetry to admire it.

From the metrical and rhyming challenges Welty tackles in “Incident,” she moves to the linguistic challenge of sonic echo in “Shadows,” the poem which was published in April 1928 in the *Wisconsin Literary Magazine* (with my scansion and emphasis):⁶

Even |candle-|snuffers rust—|(snared in |candle-|smoke)
Inev|itably—
Irre|trievably—
Shadows are| smeared into |laughter,
Mountains |die,
Dreams are| smothered| in their sleep,
And beau|ty goes out| with the wind
Through the cracks| in the night.

Here Welty works again with anapests and dactyls as she did in “Incident.” The falling meter of the dactyls and trochees dominates the beginning of the poem, with the meter switching to a rising meter of iambs and anapests in the last two lines. Until this point, the poem is focused upon downward motion, snuffing candles, rusting snuffers, dying mountains, and smothered dreams. In the final lines, the wind kicks up, and beauty, like smoke, slips through the cracks, borne on the wind, the upward tick of the meter mimicking the wind in the night. Welty also experiments here with the technique of phonetic resemblance; the sounds of “sn” and “sm” carry through the poem—“Snuffers,” “snared,” “Smoke,” “Smeared,” “Smothered”—with the “s” sound dominating the poem overall, consistent with the hiss of a snuffed candle. This, too, is in keeping with Yeats’s technical experiments in poems of this period. Of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” Vendler says, “the way Yeats uses language in this poem suggests that he believes that language has powers of its own which are independent of the story it tells. It is not an accident, I think, that the first thing wand-ering Aengus does is to cut a **wand**, or that his **head** finds a **thread**” (107). This kind of activity prevails in Welty’s poem as well, though not with the intense word play that Vendler isolates in “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” In her 1957 poem “A Flock of Guinea Hens Seen from a Car,” Welty encapsulates “pear” in “appear,” mimicking this technique. In “Shadows,” “inevitably” and “irretrievably” share letters and sounds that are emphasized by each

word's appearing by itself in succession on single lines. The "n" of "inevitably" is echoed typographically by the "rr" of "irretrievably," and the letters of "evit" are rearranged with the addition of an "r" into "triev." The echo of "ably" in each word forms an asymmetrical rhyme. Assonance knits together several lines—the "snuff" and "rust" and "candle- candle-" of line one; "shad" and "laugh" of line 4; and "Dreams" and "sleep" of line 6. These experiments with language and prosody, more so than the subject of the dissolution of material things, provide the interest in the poem.

Such phonetic interests also emerge in the early story "Magic," published in *Manuscript* in the September-October issue of 1936. As with the poems, the story is negligibly plot driven, with the central action an uncertain sexual encounter in a cemetery. "Magic" derives much of its interest from what Heaney calls "summoning of the energies of words." The opening paragraph draws upon the technique of the sonic echo:

One foot curled around and hooked the other legging; his round boy's hip, curved like a hard green apple, swayed green-khaki against Capitol Street as he bent over and marked negligently on the lamp post with his dead cigarette. His elbows jutted with unconcealed intentness from the short sleeves of the Western Union shirt. He drew a circle and filled it with more and more spokes, and did not smile. He heard her stop and clear her throat, but he was not going to look up. (24)

The rhyme of "foot" / "hooked" / "look" ties the beginning and end of the paragraph together; the resonance of the vowels weaves in and out throughout the paragraph: "curled" / "curved," "apple" / "Capitol," "legging" / "negligently" / "dead," and "legging" / "green" / "green" / "street" thread the first sentence together, along with "round" falling out of "around." "Against" / "bent" rhymes with "intentness" of the next sentence, and "shirt" / "circle," and "her" / "heard" continue the pattern into the next sentences. These final two sentences rush to the end; they are comprised almost entirely of percussive monosyllabic words. This first paragraph of "Magic" brings to fruition what Welty's early poems portend; the sonic echo dyed into the fabric of the language gives the paragraph a subtle yet powerful pattern and visceral appeal.

The initial and lengthy exchange of dialogue in the story is constructed upon sonic echo as well:

“Whatchudoin’ up town?”
“Why, I come to meet you here.”
“Yeah, but whatchu been doin’?”
“We been up at shorthand.”
“What you laughin’ about?”
“Nothin.’ Not a thing.”
“Anything funny about me?”
“Aw! No!” (“Magic” 25–26)

This section of dialogue plays upon the rhythm and placement of “**Whatchu**.” The falling trochaic rhythm is echoed not only in the repetition of “Whatchu” and “What you,” but also in “doin,’” “We been,” “shorthand,” “laughin,’” “Nothin,’” “Anything,” and “funny.” The falling meter is broken by the uplift of “about me” and the emphatic “Aw! No!” that ends the section. Not purely an experimentation in falling meter, this section of dialogue seems to be a play upon the sound of “whatchu”; it floats around the passage, echoed by “meet you.” “We been” and “laughin’” echo in a similar fashion so that it seems the idiomatic “whatchu” sets the rule for the passage. In her foreword to Ross Macdonald’s *Self-Portrait*, Welty quotes his introduction to the trilogy *Archer in Jeopardy*: “The underlying theme of these three novels ... is the migration of a mind from one place and culture to another. Its purpose, like the dominant purpose of my young life, was to repossess my American birthplace by imaginative means.... In the end I possess my birthplace and am possessed by its language” (177; 2nd ellipsis in original). In the dialogue of “Magic,” Welty was possessed by the sound of the language of her birthplace and was in the process of trying to possess it as well, just as Macdonald says of his purpose in writing his early work. After quoting Macdonald in the foreword, Welty asserts that Macdonald’s idea is “a poet’s concept too” (177). She then instructively quotes the Irish poet Seamus Heaney:

In a recent essay, Seamus Heaney, who is also of two cultures, writes:

Certainly the secret of being a poet, Irish or otherwise, lies in the summoning of the energies of words. But my quest for definition, while it may lead backward, is conducted in the living speech of the landscape I was born into. If you like, I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading. (Foreword 177)

We could say as much for Welty, and scholars have done so in the various ways by discussing her reading from Virgil to Homer to Yeats and others and its intersection with the southern vernacular.⁷ As the quotation from Heaney underscores, Irish poetry holds an important place among the work she loves to read, and poetry, as I have discussed to this point, reveals itself in Welty not only thematically, but at the core of her language by way of rhythm and sound. William Jay Smith identifies Welty's poetic images as her counterpoise to the emotional reticence in *The Optimist's Daughter* (80); the rhythm and sound of her language in her early work brings the emotion invoked by language as physical sensation into her prose.

The physicality of language remains an undercurrent in Welty's later work as well. While her thematic and mythic revisions of Yeats in *The Golden Apples* approach the epic, Welty's musical ear for language also suggests that the piano student Cassie simply loves feeling the sound of early Yeats in her ears and in her mouth. This is Welty's love as well, as I have shown in her early poetry and prose, and as she describes in *One Writer's Beginnings*:

There comes the moment when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word "moon" came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a word. It had the roundness of a Concord grape Grandpa took off his vine and gave me to suck out of its skin and swallow whole, in Ohio. (847-48)

Of course, Welty ends this passage with assonant "o" sounds: "swallow," "whole," and "Ohio."

II.

As they advance in their work, Yeats and Welty tend to tamp down their open joy with the material elements of language. The later "Byzantium" poems engage Yeats's readers as much with their complicated formulae for sexual and artistic survival, and Welty as a reader is no exception. In the iconic passage from *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty identifies "the word for the nature of what [she had] come upon in reading Yeats,"—"passion" (925). Welty quotes from an unfinished story:

“And I happened to discover Yeats, reading through some of the stacks in the library. I read the early and then the later poems all in the same one afternoon, standing up, by the window ... I read ‘Sailing to Byzantium,’ standing up in the stacks, read it by the light of falling snow. It seemed to me that if I could stir, if I could move to take the next step, I could go out into the poem the way I could go out into that snow.... that I could move in it, live in it—that I could die in it, maybe. So after that I had to *learn* it,” he said. “And I told myself that I would. That I accepted the invitation.” (924-25; 1st ellipsis in original)

Welty goes on to say of this passage that the poem “that smote [her] first was ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’” (925), but the poem that smites in this story is “Sailing to Byzantium,” which hovers over several of the stories in *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, the final volume of Welty’s stories that follows *The Golden Apples*. Ruth Vande Kieft argues that these stories are “as close to pure lyricism as [Welty] has ever come” (138). While Vande Kieft compares the stories to themes in Keats’s “Odes,” I find it difficult not to associate them with Yeats, not only because they follow closely on the heels of *The Golden Apples*’ intense association with his poetry, but because I find it difficult not to hear in the title *The Bride of the Innisfallen* that of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” one of Yeats’s most linguistically resonate poems.⁸ Yet there is a compelling difference between Innisfree and Innisfallen. The American woman travelling from London to Ireland on the *Innisfallen* looks out with the heaviness of a troubled marriage—a marriage to her that is perhaps fallen, and from which she is breaking free—on the bride who appears on deck after the night’s passage. This connection portends a reading of the evolution of Weltian relationships in these stories, no longer as driven in the early works primarily by “articulat[ing] sweet sounds together,” but caught as well in the intensity of the spiritual and the physical crisis of “Sailing to Byzantium” (Yeats, “Adam’s Curse” 10).

“Sailing to Byzantium,” as the title indicates, takes place on a boat. “That was no country for old men” (1), the speaker says of the place he is leaving, and spends the poem imagining what form his spirit freed from his impotent body might take once he reaches the mythical city of Byzantium. The country the speaker leaves behind is characterized by “The young / In one another’s arms, birds in the trees ... / at their song” as well as by “The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas / Fish, flesh, or fowl,” where

all is “caught in that sensual music” (1–5, 7). The country, needless to say, is Ireland, and the speaker is in crisis because he cannot partake in the sensual. In “The Bride of the Innisfallen,” this is the country to which the train and boat travel from England. As with the stories of *The Golden Apples*, this story does not address the subject matter of “Sailing to Byzantium” in a straightforward or linear fashion. The speaker’s hoped-for destination in Yeats’s poem is to become an artist’s rendering of a bird, “set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium” (30–31). Fittingly then, the birds under discussion in Welty’s story, heading toward Ireland, are ill-disposed, not the happily singing bird of Byzantium; Welty’s birds have not found the replacement for physical needs that the speaker seeks in Yeats’s poem. In Welty’s hilarious send-up of Yeats’s poem, the man from Connemara, raising a particularly gifted bird, describes him as “destroyed by a mortal appetite for food you’d call it unlikely for a bird to desire at all” (“Bride” 607). He then explains “Pass by my house!... And look in the window, as you’ll likely do, and you’ll see the bird—stuffed. You’ll think he’s alive at first. Open beak! Talking up to the last, like you or I that have souls to be saved” (608). The speaker of “Sailing to Byzantium” asserts that he is saving his soul by leaving the sensuous land of Ireland and becoming a purer form, a hammered golden bird singing of “what is past, or passing, or to come,” though still existing in time, not as a timeless work of art (32). Welty’s stuffed bird, with beak open as if emitting sound, as if he had a soul to be saved, comments wryly and comically on the predicament of Yeats’s speaker. Staying behind in Ireland would have killed its spirit because it would have remained attached to a dying and impotent body (though doubtless one proclaiming until the end). Or, as the Welshman turns back and asks the man from Connemara, “And you give it as your opinion your prize bird died of longings for food from far away?” (“Bride” 618). In the story, Ireland is the sensuous, love-obsessed country that the speaker of “Sailing to Byzantium” cannot wait to leave. Even the trip toward Ireland on the train is dominated by the absent present conversation of the two lovers in the train car: “The lovers settled back into the cushions. They were the one subject nobody was going to discuss” (614).

The American woman in the story leaves her husband behind in England and finds in Ireland the sensuality that she is missing in her relationship. Welty describes brilliantly the sensual music of Ireland as felt by the American:

I see Cork's streets take off from the waterside and rise lifting their houses and towers like note above note on a page of music, with arpeggios running over it of green and galleries and belvederes, and the bright sun raining at the top. Out of the joy I hide for fear it is promiscuous, I may walk for ever at the fall of evening by the river, and find this river street by the red rock, this first, last house, that's perhaps a boarding house now, standing full-face to the tide, and look up to that window—that upper window, from which the mystery will never go. The curtains dyed so many times over are still pulled back and the window looks out open to the evening, the river, the hills, and the sea. ("Bride" 623-24)

Welty's love of the materiality of language remains in this passage—the word "arpeggios" embraces the "page," and the assonant sound "ou" runs through the first half of the passage—yet this passage also resonates thematically with the sentiment of "Sailing to Byzantium." This represents the American woman's joy at returning to the music of sensuality that, for whatever reasons, her marriage in England has taken away from her. She had become a version of what Yeats calls "a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" ("Sailing to Byzantium," 9-10); here in Cork her "Soul clap[s] its hands and sing[s]" (11).

Both "The Bride of the Innisfallen" and "Going to Naples" share this clapping of hands and an affinity with Yeats's poem: A little girl claps her hands on the deck of the *Innisfallen*; Poldy's and Aldo's laughs meet "like clapped hands over Gabriella's head" on the *Pomona* as it sails toward Naples ("Bride" 620, "Going" 715). The mosaics that Yeats used as an inspiration for those in the third stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium"—where the speaker asks that the "sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall" come "And be the singing-masters of [his] soul"—are in Ravenna (17-18, 20). Welty's *Pomona* sailing towards Italy, then, is in keeping with the construction of Yeats's poem.

III.

The textual frame that Yeats provides for the two European stories offers a setting—somewhat comic in "The Bride of the Innisfallen"—for Welty's explorations of sensuality, landscape, and independent women. The additional frame of Luce Irigaray's work on a female language as a necessary

condition for expressing the female imaginary illuminates Welty's attention to—and perhaps abandonment of—language in “Going to Naples.” Welty's thematic use of Yeats's poetry in *The Golden Apples* subverts the masculine myths perpetuated there. Welty is again at work on masculine myth in “Going to Naples,” and again, as in *The Golden Apples*, approaches myth through a Yeats poem—here “Sailing to Byzantium.”⁹ Yet, as I understand Irigaray, her goal is more than subversion (to turn under); engaging in masculine linguistic and logical systems—even to subvert them—merely perpetuates those systems. Irigaray writes,

It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of discourse while remaining within the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence. This is moreover the danger of every statement ... of every discussion *about* the question of woman. For to speak *of* or *about* woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition. (78)

Irigaray advocates not just “jamming the theoretical machinery itself,” but more than that, stepping completely out of the system of language, which is inherently masculine, into a new language altogether (78). This new language would both constitute and grow out of what Irigaray calls the female imaginary, completely separate from the masculine. “This language work would thus attempt to thwart any manipulation of discourse that would also leave discourse intact,” Irigaray explains. “Its function would thus be to *cast phallocentrism, phallocratism*, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine,” she concludes, “could no longer, all by itself, define, circumscribe, circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything” (80). For Irigaray, the purpose of creating a new language entails preventing language, which is masculine, from coining the female.

For much of *The Golden Apples* Welty engages in subverting the masculine in Yeats, though in the final story, “The Wanderers,” the language that the narrator gives to Virgie Rainey in the final scene moves beyond subversion. In “June Recital,” subversion of Yeats's poem occurs when the German piano teacher, Miss Eckhart, takes on the mantle of Yeats's “Wandering Aengus.” The narrator of Yeats's poem strikes out “with a fire in [his] head”

to find a “glimmering girl” who has emerged from a “little silvery trout,” an allegory for both male artistic and sexual pursuit (2, 13, 8). Yet in battling the masculine definition of an artist, Miss Eckhart fares poorly; she has “a fire in [her] head”—the kind with smoke, not that of metaphorical passion—as she sets her piano studio and hair ablaze, and subsequently is put in a mental institution (“June” 390, 392). Her singular artistic engagement does not sit well with the town of Morgana, nor can she herself find the psychological strength to endure the fallout from her identity. It is left to her student Virgie Rainey to embody a revision of Yeats’s gendered narrative. Virgie takes on the male privilege of initiating sex—the other kind of fire in the head—with the sailor in the abandoned house upstairs, while Miss Eckhart sets fire to the studio downstairs. In her piano playing, Virgie finds a way to bare her artistic passion, rivaling Miss Eckhart’s. Yet, when Miss Eckhart plays a piece “as if it were Beethoven” for Virgie, Cassie, and Jinny Love during a storm, her rare moment of passion in playing music is “some brilliant thing too splendid for Miss Eckhart” (363, 364). However, Virgie will not become a musician; the sonata that Miss Eckhart plays is from a “place where Virgie, even, had never been and was not likely ever to go” (364). We find Virgie after her mother’s funeral in “The Wanderers” without emotional encumbrance, with “the world beating in [her] ears,” engaging in an activity beyond Miss Eckhart’s endeavors, approaching the realm of Irigaray’s female imaginary, hearing “through falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon’s crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan” (556). Though we do not see Virgie or any other female character in the role of the Yeatsian archetypal male artist, here Virgie discovers what Rebecca Mark argues that Miss Eckhart lacks. When asked what she is playing during the storm, Miss Eckhart replies, “I couldn’t say ... I have forgotten” (366). Mark writes that Miss Eckhart has “forgotten how to create a language that will enable her to remain conscious of her artistic ability” (78). This fantastical language that Virgie embodies at the end of *The Golden Apples* is such a language that begins to articulate, and thus to actualize, a successful emerging female self, and represents the beginning of inventing a new language, the female imaginary, to replace the masculine represented in “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”

The situation of women’s lassitude in the face of male artistic and social power sparks Welty’s revisionist and ultimately inventionist instinct in *The Golden Apples* as she addresses Yeats’s “Song of Wandering Aengus.”

Returning to *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, I see a dichotomy of another sort in “Sailing to Byzantium” hovering over “Going to Naples,” the final story in the collection, and Welty, too, engages its confining mythology. One aspect of the dichotomy is comprised of the “old people, old enough to be going home to die” (“Going” 684). The story offers several compelling reflections upon age that resonate with “Sailing to Byzantium.” The other, a paean to young love, is centered upon and ultimately undercut by Mrs. Serto’s youngest daughter, the shrieking Gabriella, and the mysterious Aldo Scampo, whose “complete story was not yet known” (685). When Gabriella tussles with Aldo and issues a playful scream, a group of old men observes from the deck:

Looking, dreaming, down at Gabriella, they felt something of an old, pure loneliness come back to them—like a bird sent out over the waters long ago.... Only the long of memory, the brave and experienced of heart, could bear such a stirring, an awakening—first to have listened to that screaming, and in a flash to remember what it was. (690)

This confrontation of the old with the companion bookend of young love and sensuality evokes the emotional palette of the speaker in “Sailing to Byzantium,” where “The young / In one another’s arms.... Caught in that sensual music” cause him to flee, as well as make his country “no country for old men” (1-2, 7, 1). Yeats’s speaker is not one of the “brave” of Welty’s story whose souls are “lifted” at the sight of young lovers; he cannot “bear such a stirring.” This association of longing, souls, and birds with the elderly in Welty’s story signifies the speaker’s condition as he leaves the land of sensuality and sets out “over the waters” in “Sailing to Byzantium.”

Yet Aldo Scampo serves as an antidote to the traveler longing for transformation that Yeats describes in the poem. Aldo occupies a liminal space in the story; while Mrs. Serto associates him with the young available men, “his story is not ... known” (“Bride” 685). The narrator emphasizes Aldo’s place apart from the passengers: “he rattled around in a cabin to himself” (685). He is first described as a lone bird “all by himself, as though the breezes had just set him down” (684). Seeming to emerge from this liminality, Aldo initiates a relationship with Gabriella, but Welty makes this seem all wrong: “Aldo’s and Gabriella’s hands suddenly interlocked, and their arms were as immobilized as wings that failed” (869). Aldo, “still in

the character of an airy bird,... pecked with his little beak that place on the back of the neck where women no longer feel" (689). Being with Gabriella congeals Aldo's essential identity—indeed, the relationship between them at this juncture metaphorically fails. Aldo falls outside of the sensual world, the sensuality that would be represented by his relationship with Gabriella and that is mourned by the old men on the ship and by Yeats's speaker. Welty's bird images—and they dominate the story—intimate that Aldo embodies already the singing bird with which Yeats concludes "Sailing to Byzantium," in "such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enameling" (27–28). He does not fit into the dichotomy of either ravenous young lover or desiccated old man.

Though not constituted for a sensual relationship of this sort, Aldo pursues Gabriella in one especially charged scene. They walk to the front of the ship through a "long passage ... that was too narrow for Mrs. Serto and Gabriella" but "seemed made for Gabriella and Aldo" ("Bride" 693). Once they arrive on deck, Gabriella blindfolds Aldo with the hem of her skirt; Aldo "wheeled himself around ... and caught her by the ankle and threw her.... Her fall, like a single clap of thunder, was followed by that burst of expectancy in the air that can almost be heard too" (694). In this charged moment, they lie on the deck together and Aldo "began to thump on the calf of Gabriella's leg—1, 2, 3, 4—while she lay as before" (694); he repeats this rhythm, perhaps counting out a measure of music. Aldo straight away falls asleep, while Gabriella feels "caught in an element as languorous as it was strange, like a mermaid who has been netted into a fisherman's boat, only to find that the fisherman is dreaming" (695). Mermaids have a contradictory mythological identity, one somewhat more positive than the other in terms of representing women. In Gabriella's image, the mermaid is the mythical figure trapped by a man who must remain married to him until she finds the object—such as a mirror or hat—stolen from her and then is free to return to the sea. However, in the more negative image, mermaids are conflated with sirens that entice fishermen to their deaths by attracting them with their singing, then drowning them at the bottom of the ocean (Fenkl). Welty perhaps intends this image split to be between genders, with Gabriella and Aldo each fearing the worst outcome for them in relation to the mermaid myth. Aldo is, in fact, dreaming as he sleeps and cries out "No!" as if to stop what is happening in his dream, whether it be drowning by a mermaid or falling into a relationship with Gabriella. After he cries out, "In two minutes he was up shooting with the sailors,"

picking off seagulls flying around the ship, violently distancing himself for the moment from his association with birds, and his liminal identity (696). Yet this distancing does not last.

The end of the story bears out Aldo's being outside the sensual world celebrated and mourned in Yeats. We are left in the story with impersonal goodbyes belying the intensity of Aldo and Gabriella's interactions on the ship. When Nonna asks whether Aldo is a Romeo or a pilgrim, Aldo "stares" at Gabriella "rudely," asking, "And what did *you* ever think I was?" as if she dared think of him as a Romeo ("Bride" 720). He is neither lover nor religious devotee, but rather a *musicista* on his way to Rome to study the cello (720). He finds his fulfillment in the singular practice of a musical instrument, not in Gabriella. Upon hearing that he plays the cello, Nonna suggests an alternative: "My mother is telling you, Mr. Scampo," Mrs. Serto translates, "the human voice alone is divine.... Not the screeching of cats" (721). Disparaging as cats' "screeching" the sound of the cello bow drawn across catgut strings, Nonna instead requests that he take up singing. The divinity of singing resonates with "Sailing to Byzantium." The first new identity that the speaker hopes for in Yeats's poem entails engaging "singing-masters" for his soul: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing" (9-11). The speaker asks that the sages represented by the mosaic, whom he can engage through the religious practice of meditating upon the icons, consume his body in "God's holy fire" and "gather [him] / Into the artifice of eternity" so that they might be his "singing-masters" (17, 23-24, 20). Yet the speaker ultimately rejects this option of joining a male choir in heaven as "what we might call in the larger Freudian sense, a homosocial and sublimated resolution to the speaker's exclusion—by reason of impotence—from the country of heterosexual intercourse. There are no women in the heaven of the sages" (Vendler 34). In this Yeatsian context, Nonna's suggestion to Aldo may be a subtle insinuation about his sexuality, about what lies behind his walking away from his flirtatious relationship with Gabriella.

Aldo does turn away from physical sensuality. He leaves the ship existing outside of the category set by Yeats's poem—young, though already settled in a metaphoric construction reached by Yeats's speaker at the conclusion of the poem, who as a hammered gold and enamel bird is "set upon a golden bough to sing ... / Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (30, 32). The bird's song here is a stand-in for sensuality, but does not replace it. Further, the bird's song exists in time, not in eternity. "Sailing to

Byzantium” represents the idea that sensuality beyond the body paradoxically needs to exist in the world of temporality. “Art,” Vendler argues in relation to Yeats’s poem, “is a momentary alternative to sensuality, but not a vehicle of transcendence” (35). Yeats sees his collected works, Vendler argues, as the artifice of song that the bird sings, which will survive the deterioration of the body. The poems record the past, speak to the present, and prophesy the future. Thus having rejected the transcendence of the homosocial heavenly choir, Yeats chooses something similar to the song of the sensual young, insofar that it exists in time. We can see in Aldo’s cello study a similar choice at the moment, of art over the body; music, after all, is the art most reliant upon keeping time.

Aldo, however, is not an artist in the sense proposed by Yeats or Welty. Aldo and Yeats become vehicles whereby Welty muses upon the dichotomy of physical and artistic sensuality, youth and aging.¹⁰ Gabriella, too, is a part of this musing. Gabriella is a large girl, an exaggeration of the pulchritudinous sensuality lost in “Sailing to Byzantium.” As indicated by her anxiety with her relationship to Aldo expressed by the mermaid entrapped in marriage, Gabriella is leery of the coupling mania that obsesses her mother. When Aldo does not appear at Gala Night, leaving Gabriella “deserted, unadvised, unprompted, and unrestrained,” she “went dancing around this unlikely floor as lightly as an angel” (“Going” 705). Those watching her dance saw her “turning around faster inside than out,” and felt that “For an unmarried girl, it was danger. Some radiant pin through the body had set her spinning like that tonight, and given her the power ... to be happy all by herself” (706). Dangerous, perhaps, but for Gabriella, liberating. As Marris argues, Gabriella’s discovery that she contains the key to her own happiness parallels that of the American woman in “The Bride of the Innisfallen” who finds happiness after leaving her husband in England and going alone to Ireland (Marris 210), where she enters “without protection into the lovely room full of strangers” (CS 518).¹¹ These stories, then, like that of Virgie Rainey, indicate Welty’s maturity, her finding an artistic language outside of the Yeatsian male archetype of “Song of Wandering Aengus” that depends upon an elusive female muse and outside of the choice of the masculine sensual or the homosocial presented in “Sailing to Byzantium.”

“Going to Naples” ends with a query about a bird’s song, with Mrs. Serto “beseeching, ‘is the Nightingale with us yet?’” (722). As a literary symbol, the nightingale has a rich and contradictory history, much as does the

mermaid (see “Nightingale”). It has been the bird of night and mourning that originates in the Greek story of the two sisters Procne and Philomela, as told by Ovid centuries later. Procne’s husband Tereus rapes her sister Philomela and rips out her tongue so that she cannot tell the story. Yet “her tongueless mouth did want the utterance of the fact,” so she weaves the tale into her loom as a message to her sister (Ovid 6.733). Procne rescues Philomela, and they kill Tereus and Procne’s son, presenting him as a meal to Tereus. Fleeing Tereus, one sister turns into a nightingale and the other into a swallow. In this myth, the nightingale Philomela forever sings the mournful song of rape and the loss of a child. Presumably, this is not the myth of the nightingale that Mrs. Serto invokes. Mrs. Serto’s nightingale is that of spring and love as in, for example, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where “She all night long her amorous descant sung” to the sleeping Adam and Eve (4.603). The significance of the nightingale seems to be split, a second dichotomous myth; both meanings reinforce hegemonic roles of women as victims and as subservient. Perhaps the most desirable reading of the nightingale for Gabriella, and for Welty, is its representation of the poet. In *Paradise Lost*,¹² Milton compares himself as poet to the nightingale, a comparison that Keats echoes in “Ode to a Nightingale.”¹³ This could be one way Welty answers Yeats’s ultimate removal of the poet from the natural world, the sensual world, making him a singing bird of gold. Gabriella here begins to see Naples: “The yellow leaves of the plane trees came down before their feet; and just beyond the gate the black country horse that would draw the buggy shivered and tossed his mane, which fell like one long silver wave as the first of the bells in the still-hidden heart of Naples began to strike the hour” (722). One can be an artist going to the heart of the sensual and temporal world, this passage intimates, beyond the confines of sex and gender.

Welty’s interest in Yeats and myth in *The Bride of the Innisfallen* parallels her interest in *The Golden Apples* in revising or subverting the masculine myths that he creates in his poetry. In *The Bride of the Innisfallen* as well, she confronts masculine representations of women as mermaids or nightingales, as powerless subservient victims. In returning to Irigaray’s call for the female imaginary, we can see in this kind of activity Welty’s recognition of what Irigaray later explains as the way that masculine language entraps female experience in its own discourse.¹⁴ In part Welty’s stories do address female desire. However, Welty’s other, stronger compulsion here is with the nature of language. Once Welty begins to identify female desire apart

from male representations of female desire, and from representations of sensuality in general, her interest falls squarely upon finding a language with which to represent that desire, a desire that is bound up in sexual and artistic passion, as with “Wandering Aengus” and “Sailing to Byzantium.” This new language is Irigaray’s goal when she discusses the female imaginary; one of the most salient critiques of Irigaray entails her reticence especially in her earlier work about what such a language might look like (See, for example, Jones 379–80). Irigaray asserts that she wants women to sort that out for themselves. I see then, two potential conclusions for what Welty crafts with Virgie Rainey’s language that ends “The Wanderers,” with the American woman’s description of Cork at the end of “The Bride of the Innisfallen,” and with Gabriella’s observation of Naples that I quote above. One, that Welty, too, leaves us to imagine—and to create—this new language. All three of these characters are at the threshold of inhabiting new lives for themselves, and Welty indicates that new lives will require new language. The other possibility for Welty’s approach to new language may be that the emotional reticence that readers have discussed in relationship to *The Bride of the Innisfallen* is simply Welty’s response to the burden of creating a language that is unencumbered by masculine embodiments of the female (See, for example, Weston 51). Indeed her reticence in her best genre for the most part after this collection may have some relationship to these difficulties.

In the later stories “The Wanderers,” “The Bride of the Innisfallen,” and “Going to Naples,” we see an intersection of reading and southern speech that Welty begins to make into her own vernacular. Welty, like Yeats, begins to fashion a “second poet” out of those early sonic explorations; in her later stories, sound, speech, and sensuality become a concretized, powerfully textual movement towards the feminine imaginary. For Welty, however, the relationship of prosody to pleasure may remain too powerful a pull for her to consider relinquishing this kind of language; she appropriates Yeats’s mythical worldview in order to alter received views of place and gender. Yet, more so than appropriation, Welty’s love of absorption of language into the body instinctively informs her work. Welty’s anecdote about discovering language, about feeling the word “moon” as if it were a grape in her mouth results in the care with which she attends to Yeats’s prosody, transforming it into her early poetry and transferring it to her prose. This kind of poetry focused upon sound—this kind of language—exists to give the body pleasure.¹⁵ The repetitive shapes that repetitive sounds require of

the mouth, the vibration of certain consonants in the chest, rhythmical breathing, and the musical enticement to the ear all enjoin us to experience poetry beyond meaning. Gabriella's primary means of communicating in "Going to Naples," after all, is the pure sound of her shriek. One of Welty's earliest stories, "A Piece of News," finds a drenched Ruby Fisher lying down on newspaper in front of a fire, imprinting words onto her skin, if not absorbing them into her body (16). For Welty, gender and prosody are securely joined. Irigaray's salient point about female pleasure is that, unlike men, women experience sexual pleasure throughout their bodies (23). Here, then, is Welty's conundrum: to refashion the language from which she experiences pleasure from her earliest memory, and which is the foundation of her writing, in order to convey female pleasure as women experience it, apart from the masculine imaginary. Ultimately she may love the materiality and physicality of language too much to reform it.

NOTES

¹ Yaeger argues, for example, that "throughout *The Golden Apples* Eudora Welty makes extensive use of 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' as well as of 'Leda and the Swan.' Paradoxically, she finds these texts useful because of their masculine bias; they provide tropes of the imagination that must be redefined to include women as well as men" (143).

² "Because the thematic material in the early poems is frequently thin or repetitive (even to readers familiar with the poet's esoteric interests)," Vendler argues, "we can best understand Yeats's poetic originality in some of these poems as of a technical, more than an imaginative, order" (90). Vendler further argues that these Yeats poems represent a series of "magical techniques" based upon "technical investigations into the possibilities of rhyme, meter, stanza form, and lexical and phonetic resemblance" (90). My reading of Yeats's poems throughout this essay is indebted to Vendler's work in *Our Secret Discipline* and elsewhere.

³ Weston, discussing the role of linguistic play and textual framing as counterpoints to the "emotional reticence" of Welty's fiction, offers almost an aside on Yeats. The protagonist in "The Bride of the Innisfallen," she notes, "like Virgie in *The Golden Apples*, constitutes a variant of the Yeatsian male wanderer, the Aengus who seeks for the 'glimmering girl'" (51). I do not disagree with Weston, but I see in the stories a more developed textual frame supplied by later Yeats.

⁴ Though Irigaray was born in Belgium, she is typically included in discussions with French feminists Cixious, Wittig, and Kristeva.

⁵ Reading the stories against the "same-old-same-old of masculine recuperation" represented by critics Michael Kreyling and Noel Polk, Trouard argues that these readings result from the masculine imaginary. Considering that these stories constitute Welty's

sustained engagement with place outside of the South, Trouard argues that this new space “is akin to the realm identified by Luce Irigaray as ‘the exteriority,’ the ‘space’ known as the [female] imaginary” (673). In these stories, Trouard argues, Welty “has demarcated the ‘elsewhere,’ a fluid and marginal zone of female pleasure” (676). I am indebted in this essay to Trouard’s association of Irigaray with *The Bride of the Innisfallen*.

⁶ Waldron reports that Welty “told a friend that she had discovered Yeats one morning right after the library opened [at Wisconsin] and was still there reading his poetry when the library closed” (38).

⁷ Discussion of Welty’s reading has framed her work since its earliest publication; in her introduction to *A Curtain of Green*, Porter writes:

Nearly all the Southern writers I knew were early, omnivorous, insatiable readers, and Miss Welty runs reassuringly true to this pattern. She had at arm’s reach the typical collection of books which existed as a matter of course in a certain kind of Southern family, so that she had read the ancient Greek and Roman poetry, history and fable, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, the eighteenth-century English and the nineteenth-century French novelists, with a dash of Tolstoy and Dostoievsky [sic], before she realized what she was reading. (152)

⁸ Here is “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” in full:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

⁹ Especially in “Going to Naples,” Trouard finds “both strategy and opportunity, a joyful *Baedeker* for subversion” of the masculine that wants “to keep on speaking the same language together ... to reproduce the same history ... the same old stories all over again” (Trouard 676; Irigaray 205 qtd. in Trouard 677). As I will argue, I see Welty going beyond subversion in “Going to Naples.”

¹⁰ Perhaps Aldo figures into Welty’s dilemma concerning John Robinson, who, as Marrs notes, seemed to be sending Welty mixed signals about the nature of their relationship, and who ultimately spends his life in Italy with his partner Enzo Rocchigiani. See Marrs, especially 202–03.

¹¹ I quote from the version printed in *The Collected Stories*. The version in *Stories, Essays, & Memoir* from the 1955 *The Bride of the Innisfallen* omits “without protection.”

¹² PL 3.38–40. Welty’s mother loved *Paradise Lost* and had a notebook detailing its intricacies. Laurel finds such a notebook in *The Optimist’s Daughter*: of her mother, Laurel says “It was her *keeping* her diagrams of *Paradise Lost* and Milton’s Universe that was so like her, pigeonholing them here as though she’d be likely to find them useful again” (976–77).

¹³ The Keatsian representation of the nightingale, however, loses Milton’s elegant restraint.

¹⁴ Trouard argues that in the stories of *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, “As [women] approach and even arrive at the elsewhere, the female imaginary, they can and do evade capture by male economies of desire” (687).

¹⁵ The early poetry of Auden shares this focus upon sound with early Yeats; see, for example, his 1930 poem “The Wanderer”:

Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle.
Upon what man it fall
In spring, day-wishing flowers appearing,
Avalanche sliding, white snow from rock-face,
That he should leave his house,
No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint by women;
But ever that man goes
Through place-keepers, through forest trees,
A stranger to strangers over undried sea,
Houses for fishes, suffocating water,
Or Lonely on fell as chat,
By pot-holed becks
A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird. (1–13)

Without this interest in sound, quite above meaning, writers simply will not become poets.

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