Studies on W.B. YEATS
In this book, different perspectives on W. B. Yeats' poetry converge. These pages place him in relation to other poets such as MacNeice. They also take us from the first volumes, where the space of writing becomes the writing of space, to Responsibilities, a volume that reflects an intensity that Ezra Pound calls "new robustness", and then through the sexual, political and aesthetic themes of Michael Robartes and the Dancer. We then discuss the great poems of maturity with The Tower. This book also considers general topics, such as the importance of tradition for Yeats, his conception of the afterlife with the debt to India in particular, his attitude towards degeneration, his vision of the Apocalypse with the symbol of the spiral. Other studies focus on some major poems such as "The Circus Animals Desertion", which weaves together life and art, or "Lapis Lazuli" and the notion of "tragic joy".

Dans ce recueil convergent différents regards sur la poésie de W.B. Yeats. Ces pages le situent par rapport à d'autres poètes comme MacNeice. Elles nous promènent aussi des premiers volumes, où l'espace de l'écriture devient l'écriture de l'espace, à Responsibilities, volume qui témoigne d'une intensité qu'Ezra Pound qualifie de « robustesse nouvelle », puis à travers les thèmes sexuels, politiques et esthétiques de Michael Robartes and the Dancer. Nous abordons ensuite les grands poèmes de la maturité avec The Tower. Cet ouvrage envisage également des sujets généraux, comme l'importance de la tradition pour Yeats, sa conception de l'au-delà avec la dette envers l'Inde en particulier, son attitude face à la dégénérescence, sa vision de l'Apocalypse avec le symbole de la spirale. D'autres études se concentrent sur certains grands poèmes tels que « The Circus Animals Desertion », qui tisse ensemble la vie et l'art, ou « Lapis Lazuli » et la notion de « joie tragique ». 
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Avant-propos
Jacqueline Genet

Yeats et MacNeice
Adolphe Haberer

Regard sur l’écriture de l’espace et du temps dans la poésie de W.B. Yeats de la jeunesse à la maturité
Raymonde Alluin-Popot

An empty theatre?
Yeats as Minstrel in Responsibilities
Warwick Gould
I Beyond the fling of the dull ass’s hoof
II The Narrative Diptych
III The finished man among his enemies
IV The World Growing Plastic Again
V "Mythical Method" and Epic Misreading
VI Self-Portraiture and "The Tradition of Myself"
VII Lacrimae Rerum and the "Splendour of Imagination"

Michael Robartes and the Dancer
Helicon and ni Houlihan
Edna Longley

Yeats’s Maturity: The Poems of The Tower (1928)
A. Norman Jeffares

"Packed in ice"
Personal and traditional in the poetry of W.B. Yeats
Colin Meir

Yeats and the after-life
Kathleen Raine

Yeats and degeneration
Seamus Deane

The Yeatsean Apocalypse
Augustine Martin

Meeting Places of Life, Poetry and Theatre: 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'
Katharine Worth

Lapis Lazuli
Jacqueline Genet

Travaux de l’équipe anglo-irlandaise de l’Université de Caen et du Groupe de Recherches du C.N.R.S. (GO 929)
EN PRÉPARATION
Avant-propos

Jacqueline Genet

1 Ce volume rassemble les conférences prononcées lors du Colloque international sur Yeats qui s'est tenu à l'Université de Caen les 10 et 11 novembre 1989 et qui a été organisé par le Groupe de Recherches d'Etudes anglo-irlandaises du C.N.R.S. (GO 929) avec l'aide du Cultural Relation Committee de Dublin, du British Council et de l'Université de Caen. Wynne Hellegouarc'h a contribué à la mise au point définitive de cet ouvrage.
Yeats et MacNeice

Adolphe Haberer

Tout le problème, on s’en doute, réside dans le et : ce que je me propose de faire ici est d’essayer de dire la complexité et la nature du lien qui, selon moi, peut légitimement et utilement être établi entre ces deux poètes. L’ordre dans lequel je les introduis et qui donne, comme il se doit, la préséance à Yeats, n’est pas sans importance. "MacNeice et Yeats" ne laisserait pas entendre de la même manière que, selon le principe post hoc, ergo propter hoc, MacNeice, né quelque quarante-deux ans après Yeats, ne saurait apparemment être envisagé, par rapport à celui-ci, autrement qu’en termes de succession ou de filiation. Encore que, privés, l’un de ses initiales, l’autre de son prénom, cinquante ans après la mort de W.B. Yeats et plus de vingt-cinq ans après celle de Louis MacNeice, nos deux poètes peuvent paraître aujourd’hui faire partie d’une tradition où la chronologie n’a guère plus d’importance que les règles de l’étiquette.

Au début d’un chapitre intitulé “The Honour and Glory of Whaling”, le narrateur de Moby Dick prend la précaution de dire que “[t]here are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method”1. Il y a tant de choses diverses à dire à propos de Yeats et de MacNeice que j’ai l’intention, moi qui n’ai pas d’autre désir que celui de célébrer la gloire et l’honneur de la poésie, de suivre son exemple. Aussi, sans avoir à m’en expliquer, prendrai-je comme point de départ le changement de perspective critique dont MacNeice, naguère encore relégué au rang subalterne de simple membre de la génération d’Auden2, est aujourd’hui bénéficiaire, et ceci grâce aux efforts conjugués de tout un groupe de poètes et d’universitaires d’Irlande du Nord. Citant Derek Mahon, Edna Longley peut ainsi noter que "MacNeice’s reputation [...] has significantly 'come to rest' in Ulster"3, et l’on se souvient de l’effet produit par la publication, en 1986, du Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry dans lequel MacNeice se voit conférer par Paul Muldoon l’honneur de figurer, avec Patrick Kavanagh, au premier rang, et celui de fournir en outre l’extrait de Tendencies in Modern Poetry qui sert de prologue au livre4. De manière également très significative, c’est un poète d’Ulster, Michael Longley, qui a récemment été chargé de préparer la nouvelle édition des Selected Poems de MacNeice, laquelle remplace désormais celle qu’Auden, en sa qualité de chef de file du mouvement des années trente, avait signée au lendemain de la mort du poète4.
L’effet de ce changement de perspective et de ce récent renouveau contextuel est que ceux qui ont à cœur de défendre la cause de MacNeice comme poète d’Irlande se trouvent tout naturellement conduits à mesurer sa carrière et son œuvre à l’aune de celles de Yeats. Ainsi Michael Longley, pour dire l’admiration qu’il éprouve envers MacNeice, en vient au terme de son introduction à établir entre MacNeice et Yeats une sorte de parenté dans l’excellence :

To speak for myself, rereading MacNeice for this selection I have again been overwhelmed and exhilarated. What other twentieth-century poet writing in English explores with such persistence and brilliance all that being alive can mean? Perhaps only Yeats. Certainly, when MacNeice honours Yeats’s zest, he betrays a kinship. We can say of Louis MacNeice’s poetry too: ‘there is nearly always a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp.’

De la même façon, dans la récente étude qu’Edna Longley a consacrée à MacNeice, Yeats est la référence obligée que le lecteur est invité à ne jamais perdre de vue. "Like Yeats’s poetry", lit-on dans la préface, "MacNeice’s descends from the non-Wordsworthian branch of Romanticism". Les poèmes que MacNeice consacre à l’Irlande – et qu’il écrit à partir de ce qu’on a pu appeler "the spiritually hyphenated condition of anglo-irishness" – établissent, selon l’auteur, "an implicit dialogue with Yeats, whether by revising his landscapes or by redefining the Yeatsian ‘man of action’". Pour MacNeice comme pour Yeats, une Irlande soumise à un programme sectaire de gaélicisation trop systématique est une Irlande dans laquelle les anglo-irlandais de tradition protestante n’ont plus de place. L’Angleterre des années trente fut pour MacNeice l’occasion d’une expérience complémentaire, comme l’avait été pour Yeats l’Angleterre des années quatre-vingt-dix, et ce que MacNeice dit du rapport de Yeats au mouvement esthétique de la fin du siècle peut se dire de son propre rapport au mouvement des années trente : "[He] was at the same time of them and not of them: some of their doctrine persisted in his mind to the end but always he applied it his own way". Il y a chez MacNeice une "conscience de Yeats", et c’est lui qui, en fin de compte, malgré des différences évidentes, fait figure de principal héritier :

Despite his different brand of ‘Anglo-Irish’ hybridisation, his half-way house between the conditions of Anglo-Irishman and Ulster Protestant, MacNeice is the major Irish poet after Yeats who follows him in broad cultural orientation.

Je pourrais facilement, parvenu à ce point, ajouter de l’eau au moulin d’Edna Longley et dire que l’œuvre de Yeats et celle de MacNeice ont en effet beaucoup de traits communs et que certaines déclarations de l’un s’appliquent fort bien à l’autre. "A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness", par exemple, pourrait très bien se dire à propos de MacNeice et "A man must be loyal to his accidents – the accidents of age, origin and personality" ferait un excellent commentaire de la carrière de Yeats. Le témoignage d’E.R. Dodds pourrait en outre être invoqué pour rappeler que jusque dans leur manière d’être les deux poètes avaient quelque chose en commun. Voici ce qu’écrivit Dodds dans son autobiographie :

We have been told ad nauseam that Yeats wore a mask, and there is a sense in which this is plainly true. Yet in fact, with the possible exception of Louis MacNeice, Yeats is the only poet I have known or encountered who looked just like what he was, a poet – no mere rhymester, but a vates, a poet in the full, ancient, arrogant meaning of the term. He behaved like the consacrated priest of a mystery – the mystery of words, which alone are certain good.

E.R. Dodds, on le sait, a joué un rôle très important à plusieurs moments de la vie de MacNeice et, nommé literary executor à la mort de celui-ci, il s’est chargé de préparer
l'édition posthume des *Collected Poems* de MacNeice et celle d'un récit autobiographique inachevé, *The Strings Are False*. C'est dans ce dernier ouvrage que MacNeice raconte l'histoire de ce qui fut, autant que l'on sache, son unique rencontre avec Yeats. Elle eut lieu grâce à Dodds, et en compagnie de celui-ci, un jour de septembre 1934, à "Riversdale", près de Rathfarnham. Voici l'essentiel du récit de MacNeice :

Yeats in spite of his paunch was elegant in a smooth light suit and a just sufficiently crooked bow tie. His manner was hierophantic, even when he said: 'This afternoon I have been playing croquet with my daughter.' We were hoping he would talk poetry and gossip, but knowing that Dodds was a professor of Greek he confined the conversation to spiritualism and the phases of the moon, retailing much that he had already printed. [...]

He talked a great deal about the spirits to whom his wife, being a medium, had introduced him. 'Have you ever seen them?' Dodds asked (Dodds could never keep back such questions). Yeats was a little piqued. No, he said grudgingly, he had never actually seen them... but – with a flash of triumph – he had often *smelt* them. 19

7 Homme d'Ulster, profondément attaché à l'Irlande mais contraint, comme plus tard MacNeice, de choisir "the status of permanent émigré", Dodds connaissait Yeats de longue date. Il avait même, en 1915, été secrétaire du comité que Yeats avait fondé (et qu'il présidait) pour que soit conservée à Dublin la collection de peintures de Hugh Lane. C'est à lui que l'on doit une anecdote amusante dans laquelle se trouvent impliqués, deux ans après la rencontre de "Riversdale", Yeats et MacNeice. Au mois de novembre 1936, on donna à Londres, monté par Rupert Doone et le *Group Theatre*, deux représentations de l' *Agamemnon* d'Eschyle dans la traduction que MacNeice venait de publier. Dodds, tout récemment nommé *Regius Professor of Greek* à Oxford, fut mêlé de près à cette aventure :

Doone was determined at all costs to display his originality and he made a dreadful hasch of the *Agamemnon*, on which I was supposed to act as an adviser. 'Aeschylus', said Doone, 'was static, I am dynamic, so fuck all.' Some of his more eccentric 'Dooneries' were eliminated at rehearsals, like his proposal to have Cassandra, as Louis described it, 'gibbering unseen in a sort of portable bathing tent'. But on the first night of the show the Chorus were still dressed in dinner jackets, to demonstrate how 'contemporary' and 'relevant' Aeschylus was. Small wonder that the aged Yeats who was sitting in the stalls murmured to me at the interval, 'We are assisting, my dear Dodds, at the death of tragedy.' But he had the grace to add that the translation deserved a better producer. 23

8 En 1936, MacNeice était sorti de l'obscurité, notamment grâce à la publication de *Poems* (1935). Il faisait partie du tout Londres littéraire et son nom était désormais associé à ceux d'Auden, de Spender et de Day Lewis. Yeats en est le témoin et, dans 'Modern Poetry : A Broadcast' qu'il donne cette année-là, il compte MacNeice au nombre des "young influential poets of to-day" qui ont hérité des poètes de la grande guerre "their social passion, their sense of tragedy, their modernity". Dans l'introduction de l'Oxford Book of Modern Verse – "His great Ox Book", selon la formule de Gavin Ewart – publié la même année, MacNeice figure de la même façon parmi les jeunes poètes que Yeats déclare beaucoup admirer pour ce qu'il appelle "their intellectual passion", "their concentrated passion", "their social passion". MacNeice, qui est appelé par Yeats "MacNeice, the anti-communist" – ce qui peut être, à l'époque, considéré comme un compliment à double tranchant, même quand il est fait par un homme qui reconnaît quelques lignes plus bas : "More often I cannot tell whether the poet is communist or anti-communist" et bénéficie en outre d'un traitement distinctif quand Yeats mentionne à la fin "the concentration of philosophy and social passion of the school of Day Lewis and in MacNeice". Je note encore qu'avec huit pages de poèmes fort bien choisis, MacNeice se voit accordé par Yeats plus
de place dans son anthologie qu'Auden et Spender réunis. Peut-être peut-on signaler enfin, comme indice posthume de l'estime dans laquelle Yeats tenait MacNeice, le fait qu'en 1940 celui-ci eut le privilège de voir un nouveau recueil de ses poèmes accepté par Elizabeth Yeats et publié par The Cuala Press.

Si Yeats a su en son temps reconnaître la valeur des jeunes poètes des années trente, il est à noter que cette reconnaissance fut réciproque. Dans l'introduction du Faber Book of Modern Verse, l'autre grande anthologie de 1936, parlant comme à l'accoutumée au nom des poètes de sa génération, Michael Roberts déclare qu'il existe un rapport de ressemblance entre ceux-ci et Yeats :

Il is worth noting that in [Yeats's] images, approximations to ordinary speech rhythms, political implications and private references, and in his strictly poetic use of myth and legend, he has anticipated many of the devices of the younger men.

Tout se passe comme si, par delà la grande rupture moderniste, avec le retour en force de l'idéologie et de la poésie comme mode d'action, on assistait à des retrouvailles entre le poète de Responsibilities et les poètes de la génération de MacNeice dans le courant principal de la tradition poétique anglaise. Comme le notera MacNeice, "poets like Auden and Spender [...] returned to the old, arrogant principle – which was Yeats's too – that it is the poet's job to make sense of the world". Ou bien encore : "Like Yeats [the Auden school] opposed to the contemporary chaos a code of values, a belief in system, and – behind their utterances of warning – a belief in life, in the dignity, courage, and stamina of the human animal". Enfin, pour citer la formule la plus ramassée de MacNeice : "They stood with Yeats for system against chaos".

L'admiration que ces jeunes poètes éprouvaient envers Yeats, toutefois, n'allait pas sans réserve, notamment à propos de ce que son œuvre pouvait avoir d'ésotérique. Dans le 'Testament' qu'Auden et MacNeice écrivirent ensemble à l'occasion de leur voyage en Islande, par exemple, les deux amis laissent conjointement, non sans quelque ironie, "the phases of the moon / To Mr. Yeats to rock his bardic sleep". Malgré son côté quelque peu artificiel et forcé, d'ailleurs, c'est 'The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats', texte polémique dans lequel Auden assume successivement les rôles de "public prosecutor" et de "counsel for the defense", qui formule de la façon la plus explicite et la plus mémorable l'ambivalence des sentiments que Yeats pouvait inspirer aux jeunes poètes des années trente, alors que la très célèbre élégie 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' du même Auden manifeste un changement d'attitude radical de la part de celui qui, pour ceux-ci, avait fait longtemps figure de chef de file.

De tous les poètes de sa génération, toutefois, c'est sans conteste MacNeice, et non pas Auden, qui fut le lecteur de Yeats le plus attentif et le plus fidèle, le plus prolixe aussi. Il fut en outre un lecteur particulièrement bien avisé, si l'on en croit un spécialiste de la qualité de Richard Ellmann, lequel écrivait en 1967 : "MacNeice's book on Yeats is still as good an introduction to that poet as we have". MacNeice était-il, à cause de ses origines et de son histoire, mieux placé qu'un autre pour faire ce travail de pionnier dans l'examen d'une œuvre qui allait par la suite donner lieu à tant de gloses et d'exégèses ? Dans le chapitre introductif de The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, il note lui-même qu'une certaine distance est nécessaire car "familiarity breeds a certain obtuseness, whereas a certain amount of strangeness is stimulating to criticism". Et il ajoute alors :

I feel that in Yeats I have met a poet who is strange enough to excite my interest but is near enough to me myself to preclude my misrepresenting him too grossly.
13 Si MacNeice fut le premier à lui consacrer tout un livre, c’est sans doute parce que, mort au moment où allait finir "a low dishonest decade" et où allait commencer une guerre tant redoutée, Yeats est soudain venu occuper le centre d’une réflexion théorique sur la nature de la poésie et la question de la modernité, réflexion que MacNeice avait commencé à conduire pendant les quelques années qui, de 1935 à 1940, furent les plus mouvementées et les plus productives de sa carrière. The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, placé dans cette perspective, peut ainsi être envisagé comme le point d’aboutissement d’un travail critique et théorique commencé avec 'Poetry To-day' et poursuivi, pour s’en tenir au principal, avec 'Subject in Modern Poetry' et Modern Poetry. On peut même peut-être avancer que Yeats, autant que les circonstances de la guerre qui, comme l’écrit alors MacNeice, "are making such a strong assault on our sense of values", est celui qui a permis à ce travail d’aboutir.

14 Dans "Poetry To-day", écrit en 1935, la place faite à Yeats est fort mince et l’on sent la volonté qu’a MacNeice de marquer la distance qui sépare Yeats des poètes de la nouvelle génération : "[He] has, in his own way, kept up with the times", concède-t-il. "Technically he offers many parallels to the youngest English poets. [...] But when all is said, Yeats is esoteric". Deux ans plus tard, dans 'Subject in Modern Poetry', Yeats se voit accorder plus de place et d’importance. Des réserves peuvent bien sûr être formulées à propos du fait "that he sees the world through a series of eccentric home-made frames (theosophy, spiritualism, a mystical dialectic, aristocratic idealism)", il n’en demeure pas moins que "Yeats is a salutary influence on modern poetry just because he is not too literary", c’est-à-dire qu’il est mieux ancré dans la vie et dans le monde que ne le sont, par exemple, Eliot ou Pound. Dans Modern Poetry, publié en 1938, on sent trop le désir qu’a MacNeice de s’aligner sur Auden, Spender et Day Lewis, et de promouvoir l’idéal d’une poésie sociale engagée, pour qu’on s’étonne que Yeats y occupe une position somme toute marginale. Dans un passage caractéristique, MacNeice reconnaît que Yeats "is a poet who has a foot in both worlds", le monde de l’art et le monde des hommes, mais il en vient assez vite à conclure que "Yeats’s world-view is so esoteric that he can only escape from literature at odd moments".

15 Il n’est pas question d’analyser ici dans le détail The Poetry of W. B. Yeats. Commencé avant le départ de MacNeice pour l’Amérique, en janvier 1940, le livre fut en partie écrit en Irlande, terminé en Amérique, et publié en février 1941, peu de temps après le retour de MacNeice à Londres. Il fut tiré à 3.500 exemplaires et dédié par l’auteur "To E.R. Dodds, an Irishman, a poet, and a scholar, who knows more about it all than I do". L’intérêt du livre est au moins double car, en plus d’une présentation d’ensemble des aspects majeurs de l’œuvre poétique de Yeats – "the half-spurned estheticism, the Irishism, the deliberate belief, the sense of responsibility, the appetite for passionate experience, the laboriously invented diction", selon l’inventaire qu’en fait Ellmann – le lecteur est invité à suivre, affleurant par intermittence dans les apartés et les digressions, le cheminement d’une pensée inquiète qui, en ce temps de guerre où celle-ci paraît la plus menacée, tente de dire les raisons d’être de la poésie. Cherchant toujours à défendre l’idée que la poésie doit être impure parce qu’elle doit être articulée à la vie, MacNeice, à propos de Yeats, parvient à une position très nuancée dans laquelle l’admiration qu’il a pour les indéniables réussites poétiques, celles de la maturité et du vieil âge du poète, ne parvient pas à effacer la réticence qu’il éprouve devant ce qu’il appelle ailleurs, mais à la même époque, "[Yeats’s] constitutional inhumanity".
Il est intéressant de noter que, tout en se référant au même problème, Seamus Heaney et MacNeice en viennent à reconnaître à Yeats la même qualité d'intégrité. Dans "Yeats as an Example?", après avoir très joliment parlé de la poétique comme d'une sorte de "vitreous finish on the work itself that deflects all other truths except its own" (53), voici ce qu'écrit Heaney :

I admire the way that Yeats took on the world on his own terms, defined the areas where he would negotiate and where he would not; the way he never accepted the terms of another's argument but propounded his own. I assume that this peremptoriness, this apparent arrogance, is exemplary in an artist, that it is proper and even necessary for him to insist on his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference. This will often seem like irresponsibility or affectation, but from the artist's point of view it is an act of integrity [...]. (54)

Dans les dernières pages de la conclusion de son livre, MacNeice essaie, pour sa part, de démontrer que la valeur de l'œuvre ne dépend pas directement de l'idéologie et des croyances du poète. "As most poets do", écrit-il, "[Yeats] thrrove on theoretical half-truths". Et, dans le même paragraphe, il ajoute : "[W]hatever he may have thought himself, he was never merely a poet of passion [...]. He made himself a poet and, as a poet, he was essentially a maker" (55). Deux pages plus loin, MacNeice pose la question de la sincérité de Yeats, celle du cœur autant que celle de l'intellect. La réponse est habile :

Perhaps sometimes he did fake his passion but certainly not always. That he may have done so can be to some extent excused if we refer back his pseudo-passions to a 'passion for passion' just as we have referred his pseudo-beliefs to a "belief in belief". (56)

MacNeice se sent alors autorisé à dire que "Yeats, as a poet, is characterized by integrity" (57). Mais alors que Heaney, mettant l'accent sur ce que l'intégrité du poète implique de persévérance et d'assiduité dans le travail de l'écriture, déclare que Yeats est assurément "the ideal example for a poet approaching middle age" (58), MacNeice, incapable (malgré les efforts qu'il déploie) de séparer la poésie de l'idéologie, fait à la fin, au nom de l'idéologie, une sorte de déclaration d'indépendance poétique :

The spiritual lesson that my generation (a generation with a vastly different outlook) can learn from Yeats is to write according to our lights. His lights are not ours. Go thou and do otherwise. (59)

Reste l'ultime paragraphe de cette conclusion – c'est celui que cite Michael Longley – dans lequel MacNeice reconnaît que ce que Yeats peut avoir d'exemplaire, à la rigueur, touche à l'intensité et à la vérité de son désir. "He can serve us also, perhaps, as an example of zest", dit-il, et il souligne que dans la poésie de Yeats, "whether it is nostalgic, love-lorn, cynical, darkly prophetic, angry over politics, or embittered over old age, there is always a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp" (60). Malgré ses théories déterministes – "our predetermined place on the gyres of history" –, Yeats, au dire de MacNeice, laisse en dernière analyse une place au désir :

[His point is that it is worth it, that we who are on the gyres are lucky to be in at the deaths and births of history, and that, whoever is responsible, whoever is the author of the play, it is we who hold the centre of the stage" (61).

Citant alors les deux tercets de 'Leda and the Swan', MacNeice laisse là-dessus le dernier mot à la poésie.
Laisser le dernier mot à la poésie, c'est ce que je voudrais faire moi aussi avant le terme d'un parcours qui, jusqu'à présent, ressortit principalement à l'histoire littéraire. Parvenu à ce point, il faudrait peut-être, en toute rigueur, modifier le titre de cet article pour y faire figurer le lecteur. 'Yeats, MacNeice et nous', au lieu de 'Yeats et MacNeice' aurait en outre pour avantage, me semble-t-il, avec l'introduction d'un troisième terme et le déplacement du et, de marquer que désormais la chronologie n'est plus de mise et que le seul ordre qui compte est celui dans lequel les Collected Poems de Yeats et de MacNeice succèdent entre les mains et sous les yeux du lecteur. Ceci n'est pas toujours vrai, cependant, dans la mesure où les cas les plus simples d'intertextualité, ceux dans lesquels il ne s'agit que de repérer une référence, ne se rencontrent que dans un seul sens, Yeats n'ayant jamais eu, à ma connaissance, l'occasion (ou le temps) de faire dans un de ses poèmes allusion à l'œuvre ou à l'histoire de MacNeice.

De simples références ou allusions à Yeats, en revanche, on en trouve dans l'œuvre de MacNeice. J'en retiendrai trois exemples. Le premier est de caractère citationnel et se rencontre dans "Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate" où la Mort fait reproche aux deux bergers de cette pastorale des temps modernes d'oublier "the other and terrible beauty". Le deuxième exemple, pris dans le très célèbre 'Bagpipe Music', signifie le rejet cum grano salis des croyances mystiques de Yeats :

It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

Le troisième est tout simplement, au début de la section XVI d'Autumn Journal, l'énoncé narratif qui, par le truchement du nom de Maud Gonne et de l'allusion à un vers d'Easter 1916' ("Hearts with one purpose alone..."), place tout le discours de MacNeice sur l'Irlande contemporaine – discours de la mémoire, de la passion et du ressentiment – sous le patronage de Yeats :

So reading the memoirs of Maud Gonne,
Daughter of an English mother and a soldier father,
I note how a single purpose can be founded on
A jumble of opposites ...

Un autre niveau auquel peut fonctionner l'intertextualité est celui de la mise en jeu des codes d'écriture poétique. On a souvent remarqué, par exemple, que le lyrisme de MacNeice, comme celui de Yeats, se situe volontiers au point d'intersection des domaines publics et privés : "Louis was a great cherisher of friendships, polishing them in his memory like beads", écrit Dan Davin, et des rapprochements intéressants, faisant intervenir le code de l'élégie, peuvent être opérés entre le ton de 'All Souls' Night' et tel passage d'Eclogue from Iceland, entre 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' et "The Casualty (In Memoriam G.H.S)' ou bien encore, mutatis mutandis, entre 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' et certaines pages d'Autumn Sequel.

S'agissant encore des codes d'écriture, il me semble que la forme de poèmes comme 'Trilogy for X', 'Iceland' et 'Carol' reflète cette maîtrise du vers court que MacNeice note chez Yeats : Yeats [...] keeps his poem balanced in the middle of the page; it does not run off into the margins, écrit-il. L'effet intertextuel se repère, à la lecture d'un poème de ce type, au va-et-vient qui s'établit d'une œuvre à l'autre et met en relief la structure du texte. Du même ordre, et pouvant produire un effet de va-et-vient intertextuel comparable, est l'organisation particulière que présentent les poèmes à refrain, que l'on ait à l'esprit les 'Crazy Jane poems' ou 'The Pilgrim' de Yeats ou bien, de MacNeice,
'Autobiography', 'Slum Song' ou 'The Taxis'. Ce que MacNeice dit à ce propos dans son livre sur Yeats peut d'ailleurs se dire aussi de sa propre pratique :

Yeats's use of [the refrain] is often in two respects unusual. First the music of his refrain is often less obvious and smooth than that of the verses themselves [...]. Secondly, his refrains tend to have either an intellectual meaning which is subtle and concentrated, or a symbolist or nonsense meaning which hits the reader below the belt.

S'agissant toujours du code, je ne puis résister au désir de dire encore l'effet intertextuel que produit immanquablement pour moi la superposition de la rime concaténée, au début de "The Sunlight on the Garden",

We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold.

et de la même rime qui figure dans le non moins célèbre 'Easter 1916' de Yeats :

A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it.

Il ne peut plus être là question, pour moi, d'antériorité ni de chronologie, mais bien du surgissement de cet entre-deux médiateur dont l'effet est de rupture et de délogement au cours d'une lecture qui, le temps d'une réminiscence, se voit à proprement parler interdite.

J'ai gardé pour la fin trois exemples d'intertextualité qui me paraissent déborder le cadre de la simple allusion comme celui de la mise en jeu des codes d'écriture. Le premier est celui qui est produit par la lecture parallèle de 'A Prayer for my Daughter' et de 'Ode'. Que le premier de ces deux poèmes ait été écrit pour Anne Yeats, née en 1919, et le second pour Daniel MacNeice, né en 1934, marque déjà une analogie de situation paternelle. Sans pouvoir ici entrer dans le détail du fonctionnement de ces deux longs poèmes, je note qu'ils ont l'un et l'autre pour point de départ une référence à l'Atlantique (présent pour Yeats avec "the haystack – and roof-levelling wind, / Bred on the Atlantic"; absent pour MacNeice, "hanker[ing] after the Atlantic / With a frivolous nostalgia"), qu'ils utilisent la même syntaxe du désir ("May she" / "Let her" + infinitif, d'une part, "Let him" / "May he" + infinitif, de l'autre) et qu'ils conduisent l'un et l'autre, par des cheminement différents, à la résolution d'une même angoisse – les derniers mots du texte de MacNeice ("while the yellow waves are roaring") renvoyant à "the murderous innocence of the sea", au début du poème de Yeats, et aussi, me paraît-il, à la fin de 'On a Political Prisoner' :

While under its storm-beaten breast
Cried out the hollows of the sea.

'Neutrality', écrit par MacNeice en 1942, me fournit un deuxième cas particulier. Expansion de la métaphore initiale ("The neutral island facing the Atlantic, / The neutral island in the heart of man"), le deuxième quatraine se présente ainsi :

Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo,
A Knocknarea with for navel a cairn of stones,
You will find the shadow and sheen of a moleskin mountain
And a Utter of chronicles and bones.

L'allusion au pays et à la poésie de Yeats est claire. Elle est confirmée, trois vers plus loin, par "You will find such ducats of dreams and great doubloons of ceremony", mais je pense que le poème de MacNeice ne doit pas être simplement lu comme la mise en accusation d'une Irlande demeurée neutre "While to the west off [her] own shores the
mackerel / Are fat – on the flesh of [her] kin" et, a posteriori, comme la condamnation du repli que Yeats aurait effectué dans sa tour d'ivoire. La syntaxe du poème, à partir de l'injonction et de la métaphore contenues dans "Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo", fait que chacun en est à la fois le locuteur et le destinataire et que, s'agissant de MacNeice, c'est aussi au fond de son cœur à lui qu'est enfoui ce paysage de mort.

32 'Brother Fire', composé en 1942 dans le contexte des bombardements de Londres, "When our brother Fire was having his dog's day", est le dernier cas de mise en jeu de l'intertextualité que je souhaite examiner. Je laisse de côté Saint François d'Assise et son 'Cantique des créatures' et ne veux ici ne m'intéresser qu'à l'effet produit par la fin de la première strophe :
   Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away
   The beams of human life, the tops of topless towers.

33 Avec la "the tops of topless towers ", on reconnaît dans ces vers la référence faite à un passage célèbre du Faust de Marlowe :
   Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
   And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? 79

34 L'intertexte offre ici la médiation de la légende qui raconte, dans le temps de l'origine de l'histoire, la destruction d'une autre cité, celle dont le nom s'entend dans le dernier signifiant du poème de MacNeice ("'Destroy! Destroy!"), et fait surgir, immanquablement, "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead" 80. Yeats fait d'autre part retour pour créer une sorte de circulation intertextuelle quand on se souvient que la même référence à Marlowe, déjà faite dans 'When Helen Lived' 81, figure aussi dans 'Long-legged Fly' :
   That the topless towers be burnt
   And men recall that face,
   Move most gently if move you must
   In this lonely place.82

35 A qui appartient quoi dans cette circulation des signifiants et des références qui passe par MacNeice, Yeats et Marlowe comme par autant de relais ? La réponse que je voudrais apporter est que ce que les effets d'intertextualité font toujours apparaître avec plus ou moins de force et de clarté, c'est justement quelque chose qui n'appartient à personne en propre et que chacun a en partage – "All men's, no man's, thine, mine", selon la formule de MacNeice 83.

36 Il me paraît opportun, et juste, de prendre appui ici sur T.S. Eliot, l'autre grand poète par rapport à qui MacNeice n'a cessé de se repérer dans ses écrits critiques. Dans 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot définit ainsi ce qu'il appelle le sens historique :
   The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. 84

37 En conséquence, poursuit Eliot, "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone", et l'effet produit par la production d'une œuvre nouvelle est de modifier l'ensemble de cet ordre idéal que composent les œuvres du passé : "the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" 85. Ce que j'ai tenté de montrer, à propos de Yeats et de MacNeice, n'est pas différent : à un certain point, il faut affirmer
que la chronologie perd ses droits et que l'œuvre de MacNeice, à rebours de ce que l'histoire littéraire enseigne, peut inspirer l'œuvre de Yeats autant que l'œuvre de Yeats inspire celle de MacNeice.

Il ne s'agit pas, dans mon esprit, de dénier la valeur du travail qui peut se faire, dans le cadre de l'histoire littéraire, sur les idées et les contextes propres à chaque individu. Je souhaite seulement dire que la poésie met en jeu quelque chose d'autre, et qu'à un certain point la poésie, comme le dit encore Eliot, "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". Yeats lui-même dit-il autre chose dans 'A general Introduction for my Work' quand il met l'accent sur l'importance du code et déclare que "all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt"? Ne rejoint-il pas Eliot sur la question de la tradition quand, dans la même page, il s'exclame : "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing"?

Ce qui est derrière ce genre de discours, et qui provoque bien des réticences, c'est la part qu'il faut faire, en poésie, à l'altérité de l'inconscient. Et ce n'est pas parce qu'il n'y a pas de savoir de l'inconscient qu'on n'a pas le droit d'en parler et de reconnaître la part qui lui revient. L'intertextualité dont j'ai tenté de parler à propos de Yeats et de MacNeice ne peut pas être réduite à des notions d'érudition et d'influence littéraire : elle est à rapporter à la manière dont le langage travaille dans le for intérieur de l'inconscient, qu'il s'agisse du travail de la lecture ou de celui de l'écriture. "Style is almost unconscious", écrit Yeats. "I know what I have tried to do, little what I have done". Le lieu de l'intertextualité est bien pour chacun "the soul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" – lieu de l'oubli et de la réminiscence grâce auquel, comme le dit Frost, en poésie "the initial delight is in remembering something I didn't know I knew", lieu d'une vérité du sujet qui échappe au savoir et à propos de laquelle Yeats, parvenu au terme de sa vie, dit justement : "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it". Faire la part de l'intertextualité, c'est faire la part de l'Autre qui parle par intermittence, comme la Muse, et jamais sur commande. C'est, pour nous lecteurs, accepter d'être travaillés par la poésie et de se mettre à l'écoute du discours de l'Autre véhiculé par la culture. C'est, en d'autres termes, accepter la discipline qu'Eliot conseille à Stephen Spender :

You have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery. Of course the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given.

Ce n'est pas sans raison que Yeats et MacNeice ont été l'un et l'autre l'objet d'études critiques qui mettent l'accent principalement sur la dimension idéologique et contextuelle de leurs œuvres. Celles-ci s'y prêtent bien et l'hommage qu'Eliot rendit à Yeats en 1940 pourrait sans peine être appliqué à MacNeice :

There are some poets whose poetry can be considered more or less in isolation, for experience and delight. There are others whose poetry, though giving equally experience and delight, has a larger historical importance. Yeats was one of the latter: he was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them.

Après avoir, à propos de Yeats et de MacNeice, fait sa place à l'histoire littéraire et au contexte, je n'ai voulu, en fin de compte, que faire sa place aussi à ce qu'Eliot appelle ici "experience and delight", ce qui revient à désigner, comme je l'ai fait, le lecteur comme lieu où la poésie continue à avoir des effets. "[They] were silly like us; [their] gift survived
it all"44, pourrais-je dire en modifiant le texte d'Auden. Permettez que, donnant à mon tour le dernier mot à la poésie, je prenne la liberté d'imaginer Yeats et MacNeice réunis aujourd'hui dans le monde ombreux des poètes morts, dépouillés de leur enveloppe charnelle, de leurs désirs, de leurs passions et même de la poésie qu'ils nous ont laissée. Libérés enfin des chaînes du langage et de l'interminable "stitching and unstitching" de l'écriture45, ils ont rejoint ceux dont le chœur est décrit à la fin de 'Cuchulain Comforted' :

They sang, but had no human tunes or words,
Though all was done in common as before;
They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds46

Ou bien je les imagine rencontrant le fantôme de Grettir, héros des sagas d'Islande condamné à une longue errance. C'est à eux que j'entends celui-ci dire les mots d'une sagesse énigmatique qu'il avait naguère, dans 'Eclogue from Iceland', adressés à Craven et à Ryan, personnages derrière lesquels il était facile de reconnaître, à peine déguisés, les deux compères du voyage en Islande de l'été 1936, Auden et MacNeice :

Memory is words; we remember what others
Say and record of ourselves – stones with the runes.
Too many people – sandstorm over the words
Is your land also an island?47

NOTES

6. (6) Ibid., p. XXIII.
8. (8) Ibid. p. xii.
9. (9) Ibid., p. 27.
12. (12) Ibid., p. 28.
13. (13) Ibid., p. 28
17. (17) CPLM, voir ci-dessus, note 11.
29. (29) Ibid., xi. C'est moi qui souligne.
30. (30) Les poèmes de MacNeice retenus par Yeats sont *The Individualist Speaks*, 'Circe', 'Turf-stacks' et 'An Eclogue for Christmas'.
34. (34) *PWBY*, p. 191.
35. (35) Ibid., p. 121.
36. (36) Ibid., p. 191.
40. (40) Ibid., p. 27.
41. (41) *The English Auden*, p. 245.
42. (42) SLC, p. 10-44.
43. (43) Ibid., p. 57-74.
45. (45) *PWBY*, p. 17.
46. (46) SLC, p. 40.
47. (47) Ibid., p. 65-66.
Dodds, MacNeice écrit : "Yeats book is practically (truly this time) finished; it is v. much better than 'Modern Poetry' though still lousy (like 99 % of the world's literary criticism.)". Bodleian Library, MS Engl. Lett. c. 465.

50. (50) Ellmann, avant-propos à PWBY, p. 11.


52. (52) SLC, p. 116.


55. (55) PWBY, p. 194.

56. (56) Ibid., p. 196.

57. (57) Ibid., p. 196.


60. (60) Ibid., p. 197.

61. (61) Ibid., p. 197.


63. (63) Ibid., p. 97.

64. (64) Ibid., p. 131.


66. (66) W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems, London, Macmillan, 1950 [CPWBY], p. 256 et CPLM, p. 45 ("There was MacKenna...").

67. (67) CPWBY, p. 148 et 368 ; CPLM, p. 245 et 331.

68. (68) PWBY, p. 105.

69. (69) CPWBY, p. 290-296 et 360 ; CPLM, p. 183, 225 et 522.

70. (70) PWBY, p. 147.

71. (71) CPLM, p. 84. La rime "within it" / "minute" figure aussi dans 'Trilogy for X' (II, v. 8-9), CPLM, p. 89.

72. (72) CPWBY, p. 204.

73. (73) CPWBY, p. 211 et CPLM, p. 54.

74. (74) CPWBY, p. 207.


76. (76) Voir notamment "The host is riding from Knocknarea", CPWBY, p. 61 et "The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea", ibid., p. 90.

77. (77) C'est moi qui souligne. Voir l'importance de "custom" et de "ceremony" à la fin de 'A Prayer for my Daughter', CPWBY, p. 214.

78. (78) CPLM, p. 196.


81. (81) Ibid., p. 124.

82. (82) Ibid., p. 381. C'est moi qui souligne. "Quiet the dog", au début du poème de Yeats, n'est peut-être pas sans rapport avec "Give the dog a bone" dans 'Brother Fire'.

83. (83) CPLM, p. 313.


85. (85) Ibid., p. 15.

86. (86) Ibid., p. 21.

87. (87) W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 522. Dans l'introduction, qui date également de 1937, Yeats en vient à déclarer qu'il condamne "all that is not tradition". Même si pour lui la
tradition est attachée à un *contenu* ("subject-matter"), elle demeure néanmoins explicitement liée à l'ordre symbolique qui fonde la culture : "This subject-matter", écrit-il, "is something I have received from the generations, part of that compact with my fellow men made in my name before I was born." (*Ibid.*, p. viii).

89. (89) *CPWBY*, p. 392. MacNeice note, à propos de 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', qu'à la fin de sa vie Yeats "seems to admit the Freudian conditionings of Art" (*PWBY*, p. 115).
95. (95) 'Adam’s Curse'. *CPWBY*, p. 88.
97. (97) *CPLM*, p. 41.

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Regard sur l'écriture de l'espace et du temps dans la poésie de W.B. Yeats de la jeunesse à la maturité

Raymonde Alluin-Popot

1 De Crossways à The Wild Swans at Coole, l'espace de l'écriture devient l'écriture de l'espace. Une analyse des images structurantes révèle une évolution de la rêverie profonde qui se déploie progressivement des métaphores du refuge aux métaphores aériennes. L'évolution de cet espace intérieur, dynamisé par le vol onirique, est inséparable de l'évolution de l'espace verbal. L'espace intérieur et l'espace de l'écriture où il affleure et prend forme sont de plus en plus étroitement une seule et même réalité.

2 Pour observer avec précision comment s'élabore l'osmose de plus en plus subtile du sens et de la forme dans la poésie de Yeats, il faudrait analyser chaque étape de l'aventure intérieure qu'est chaque poème. L'on verrait alors que tout – champs lexicaux, métaphores, syntaxe, sons, prosodie – fait sens dans l'espace poétique yeatsien où règnent de plus en plus nettement l'économie verbale, une discipline, une efficacité et une intensité qu'Ezra Pound qualifia de "robustesse nouvelle" lors de la parution du recueil Responsibilities en 1914.

3 Pour rendre compte de l'ouverture progressive de l'espace que révèle l'étude des images structurantes – du lieu clos à l'immensité, du refuge à l'essor, du cercle à la spirale –, il faudrait suivre en détail toutes les métamorphoses qui peu à peu s'opèrent dans l'espace grammatical.

4 Baudelaire exprimait, en une belle métaphore, la résurrection, voire la transfiguration à l'œuvre dans la phrase suscitée par une perception exaltée par la drogue. La grammaire, "l'aride grammaire elle-même", disait-il, devient une sorte de sorcellerie évocatoire : les mots ressuscitent revêtus de chair et d'os, le substantif, dans sa majesté substantielle, l'adjectif, vêtement transparent qui l'habille et le colore comme un glacis, et le verbe, ange du mouvement, qui donne le branle à la phrase.¹
Cette dynamique impartie aux figures grammaticales n'est-elle pas le propre de toute création poétique ? La vérité "structure" du langage poétique, en effet, comme le souligne Genette,

(...) n’est pas d’être une forme particulière, définie par ses accidents spécifiques, mais plutôt un état, un degré de présence et d’intensité auquel peut être amené, pour ainsi dire, n’importe quel énoncé, à la seule condition que s’établisse autour de lui cette marge de silence qui l’isole au milieu (mais non à l’écart) du parler quotidien.

Il faudrait ainsi faire une analyse de la distribution de tous les éléments de la phrase, de leur mise en valeur par les procédés syntaxiques. Il faudrait étudier cette syntaxe elle-même en perpétuel développement, suivre les jeux de symétries et d’oppositions qui se révèlent au niveau de la grammaire comme ils se lisent dans les images et sont perçus dans les rythmes et les sonorités.

La présente étude se bornera à un regard, d’une part sur l’évolution de la structure d’ensemble des poèmes de la jeunesse à la maturité de Yeats, d’autre part sur les évolutions de l’"ange du mouvement", le verbe, dans l’espace grammatical. L’on tentera ainsi de montrer que l’espace créé par le texte coïncide avec les métaphores structurantes portées par ce texte, et que l’écriture du temps est, elle aussi, une clef qui permet de mieux appréhender la présence au monde progressive du poète.

En chemin, l’on envisagera brièvement certains textes qui semblent pouvoir être lus comme des métaphores de l’acte poétique.

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Un regard sur la forme globale des poèmes permet de constater, dans les premiers volumes, des architectures que l’on pourrait dire "circulaires". Tantôt c’est la répétition d’un même vers, voire de toute une strophe, comme dans 'The Stolen Child'. Tantôt le dernier vers de la première strophe est repris, avec une variante, au dernier vers de la strophe finale, comme c’est le cas pour 'The Ballad of Moll Magee'. Ou encore, la répétition fidèle du même vers enclot chaque strophe : ainsi dans 'The Two Trees', l’appel angoissé qui forme l’alpha et l’oméga de la seconde strophe

Gaze no more in the bitter glass

répond à l’invitation qui commence et finit la première strophe

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.

Ailleurs, la rime du vers final fait écho à la rime du premier vers, et ce même vers final reprend le dernier vers de la première strophe, comme dans 'O do not Love too Long'. Ailleurs encore, des répétitions à l’intérieur du même vers suggèrent un mouvement cyclique

Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers gay (...)

Ou bien, dans un texte intitulé ‘The Cloak, the Boat and the Shoes’, une structure cyclique est entretenu par la reprise du substantif sorrow à la rime d’un vers sur deux.

Il n’est pas rare non plus que le poème se coule dans une seule phrase aux multiples structures répétitives. Alors, une gamme de parallélismes, dans des phrases reliées par une même coordination, mime un mouvement d’éternel retour qui dit, par la syntaxe même, le désir qu’a le poète de trouver une harmonie intérieure hors du temps, dans une nature aux rythmes cycliques rassurants:
Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill (...)
And God stands winding His lonely horn,
And time and the world are ever in flight;
And love is less kind than the grey twilight,
And hope is less dear than the dew of the morn'.

14 L'architecture de 'The Secret Rose' justifierait, à elle seule, une analyse approfondie : le lieu poétique où s'inscrivent de multiples visions ouvertes sur des immensités d'espaces et de temps – reliées à des mythes et légendes celtiques, au Christianisme et à l'occultisme –, ce lieu poétique d'où surgissent des visions présentées par une série de structures répétitives, est lui-même entièrement inclus dans une structure circulaire. En effet, le premier vers

Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose,

est repris au dernier vers, avec l'ajout d'un point d'interrogation. Certes, ce changement de ponctuation est signifiant car il donne à la fin du poème la dimension du doute – encore que celui-ci soit atténué par l'adverbe surely – mais il reste qu'avec la répétition de ce vers où prévaient des allitérations feutrées et des voyelles longues, l'incantation à la Rose et la rêverie visionnaire sont encloses dans la subtile quiétude d'un espace stylistiquement refermé sur lui-même, espace d'où naît l'image même de la rose aux pétales fermés.

16 Il semble bien que grâce à ces structures circulaires, l'espace poétique se constitue en un cercle magique. L'on pense au triple cercle évoqué à la fin de 'Kubla Khan'... L'on pense aussi à la tonnelle, "the bower", métaphore obsédante de la poésie de Keats. N'est-ce pas le texte lui-même qui est l'espace rassurant, le lieu du désir ?

17 Le verbe-roi des premiers recueils de poèmes de Yeats est to weave, plus particulièrement le participe passé woven qui suggère les entrelacs serrés où vivent les rêves, le lieu protégé du refuge intérieur, en même temps que le labyrinthe secret de l'imagination.

18 Dans les premiers recueils de Yeats, l'image devient souvent cercle. C'est le nid de la frondaison bercée par le vent ; ce sont les voûtes d'arbres, ce sont les étoiles qui se penchant "pour réconforter le berger triste". Ce sont les crépuscules et les ombres. C'est la nuit – royaume de "l'intimité de l'Être" – la nuit, temps des préparations et des gestations, obscurité où s'élaboré le devenir et d'où naîtra la clarté. Ce sont la lune et l'eau, composant un espace qui semble être celui de l'inconscient, du rêve et des fantasmes, des zones nocturnes et passives de l'être.

19 L'eau est partout présente. C'est l'eau féminine, sensuelle et crépusculaire, lieu de la mort douce. C'est la vague-berceau, la vague-vaisseau. Si le "voyage sur l'eau (...) est toujours l'Odyssée de l'âme", comme le suggère Jacqueline Genêt, ce voyage n'est-il pas ici la représentation symbolique du désir de retour au monde clos, maternel, aquatique, d'avant la naissance, et ne manifeste-t-il pas la peur des tensions, des déchirements inhérents au monde de la finitude humaine ?

20 Voyage et île sont fréquemment associés. L'île "oubliée par le temps" est, bien sûr, le Tir-ná-nOg des Celtes. Elle est aussi le sanctuaire de l'artiste, en particulier des Esthètes de la fin du siècle. Elle est aussi l'objet de la quête spirituelle.

21 Si l'île, jardin et berceau, est, comme la vague, le lieu clos et protégé que sans doute la psychanalyse identifierait aisément, n'est-elle pas aussi l'image même du texte-refuge, de l'espace stylistiquement clos sur lui-même, espace sacré, inviolable, à l'intérieur duquel se libère l'imagination, en marge du monde ?
Ce lieu est non seulement suggéré par les images visuelles, il est créé par les harmonies suscitées par les allitérations, les assonances et les rimes, par tous les jeux consonantiques et vocaliques, par les rythmes. Ainsi, le poème 'The White Birds' fait plus que suggérer le rythme régulier de la vague : en effet, le texte crée un univers de sons susceptibles de composer, à l’intérieur de son espace, l’harmonie amoureuse dont rêve le poète :

I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,  
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more; (...)  
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea?

De même, dans 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', le bonheur d’une vie dans la paix du refuge et la présence du berceau aquatique sont rendus perceptibles grâce aux modulations souples du rythme iambique associées à des assonances alternées de voyelles claires et de voyelles sombres, à des allitérations parmi lesquelles dominent consonnes liquides et fricatives ; voyelles et consonnes se font écho d’un vers à l’autre, d’une strophe à l’autre, et les jeux subtiles du l et du w – ce w très justement appelé aujourd’hui une "glissée" – créent, d’une rive à l’autre du poème, un symbolisme sonore dont l’effet est très semblable à l’effet de langoureux vertige que produisent la vue et l’écoute des vagues :

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

La plupart des poèmes de cette époque sont ainsi des berceaux de sons, des valses lentes de voyelles longues, de diphtongues qui prolongent la rêverie, de liquides qui sans cesse atténuent la vigueur des occlusives ; miroirs d’allitérations et d’assonances, réseaux touffus et souples de sons et de rythmes qui, avec les images, créent un monde en flottement, en demi-teintes, un monde protégé, circulaire, une île-texte.

Pourtant, dès le second recueil, The Rose (1893), une dynamisation de l’espace est déjà perceptible dans un poème que l’on peut lire, me semble-t-il, comme le premier texte-métaphore de l’exploration poétique. L’Arbre de Vie évoqué dans la première strophe de 'The Two Trees'9, est un arbre-nid où se déplace le cercle des Amours qui donne naissance à une spirale : "the Loves (...) gyring, spiring to and fro". Cette strophe est, à tous les niveaux du langage, une représentation d’harmonie, de plénitude, de sérénité, de continuité, d’unité. Les images de l’arbre-devenir, de l’arbre-synthèse, ne sont-elles pas une métaphore de l’imagination créatrice elle-même qui, dans un espace vertical et dynamisé, réalise par le verbe, en une rêverie compensatoire, le bonheur et l’union avec Maud Gonne à qui ce poème s’adresse ? À l’inverse, le miroir déformant de la seconde strophe – proposé par les démons de la réalité extérieure – renvoie des images plurielles de désordre, de tourment, de stérilité, de mouvements violents, discontinus. Un arbre de destruction et de mort, brisé et figé dans un espace horizontal, remplace l’Arbre de Vie. Au fil de cette seconde strophe, il semble que ce soit la conscience lucide, la pensée rationnelle et réductrice – "miroir amer" – qui détruisse les images d’harmonie créées, dans le temps de l’écriture, par la rêverie de l’Arbre de Vie. Mais le magicien du Verbe qu’est déjà le poète tente d’exorciser, de conjurer par le langage, la réalité dramatique que lui révèle sa lucidité inquiète, en affirmant que ce n’est là qu’une image déformée, pervertie, refléchie par un miroir trompeur. Dans l’espace du texte, en effet, au-delà de la structure circulaire de chaque strophe, s’élabore une structure en miroir déformant : images antinomiques, images en chiasmes, sonorités qui se font écho dans des termes opposés par le sens, distorsions dans les rimes de la deuxième strophe, etc... font que, de diverses façons, les figures stylistiques représentent le double aspect – positif et négatif –
d'une même réalité, tantôt Arbre de Vie, tantôt arbre de mort. Ce texte semble être non seulement l'expression métaphorique de l'imagination créatrice et de la pensée rationnelle, mais aussi la première formulation nette des antinomies fondamentales que Yeats allait tenter de réconcilier, durant toute sa vie et son œuvre, pour atteindre à l'Unité d'être''.

26 En fait, dès 1899, avec The Wind among the Reeds, la structure de l'espace poétique est souvent travaillée par un dynamisme né des contrastes et des tensions que révèle, par ailleurs, une étude des images. Malgré les architectures circulaires d'ensemble que présentent encore certains poèmes, l'on observe que l'élan, le mouvement, voire la brisure, s'inscrivent nettement dans l'espace syntaxique où continuent pourtant à "se rassembler" et "se tisser" les rêves dans les métaphores du refuge, encore très évidentes. Mais les répétitions servent moins à dire la nostalgie et le désir de fuite dans l'univers protégé d'un ailleurs que le cri d'angoisse et l'effort du poète pour dominer cette angoisse :

Be you still, be you still, trembling heart;
Remember the wisdom out of the old days:
Him who trembles before the flame and the flood,
And the winds that blow through the starry ways,
Let the starry winds and the flame and the flood
Cover over and hide, for he has no part
With the lonely majestic multitudes\textsuperscript{10}.

27 La reprise de certains termes ("flame, flood, winds") à l'intérieur de l'espace de ce texte semble confirmer que le langage répétitif tend à la création d'une certaine stabilité, et surtout qu'il reflète le désir qu'a le poète de maîtriser ses craintes en leur donnant corps dans la régularité des rythmes et des reprises sonores et lexicales. Vision étonnante et paradoxale que cette vision onirique de celui qui aspire, ici encore, à la protection d'un refuge qui ressemble beaucoup à une tombe – les verbes recouvrir et cacher sont révélateurs – mais pour qui cette tombe serait composée des éléments du cosmos : l'air, le feu et l'eau unis à la terre. La phrase finale qui, au niveau sémantique, affirme la non-appartenance du poète à cette multitude cosmique est, en fait, par le relief stylistique donné à l'image, une ouverture de l'espace poétique vers cette immensité. Retour au refuge et pulsion de mort ne sont-ils pas, de cette façon, souhaités en même temps que niés par l'élan vers l'espace et la pulsion de vie ? Le lieu poétique est le lieu où se disent les tensions, à l'insu même du poète.

28 Nombre de textes du recueil The Wind among the Reeds ont ainsi pour mot de la fin, un mot qui suggère une ouverture sur les espaces, même si ces espaces appartiennent encore parfois au rêve de fuite, comme c'est le cas pour le poème qui ouvre le recueil. L'un des textes se termine par l'évocation de "solitaires et altiers mystères", un autre par une image double d'espace et de fin du monde :

Till all the valleys of the world have been withered away\textsuperscript{11}.

29 Un autre élargit sans ambigüïté la fin du poème vers les infinis de la nuit et du jour :

(... and pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun\textsuperscript{12}.

30 Dans ce recueil, les propositions indépendantes et coordonnées brèves se font de plus en plus nombreuses. La précision vigoureuse de la phrase et la dynamique du rythme tendent à prendre le relais des circonvolutions de la syntaxe qui, dans les premiers
volumes, créaient un rythme de langueur. Le texte précédemment cité, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', illustre bien cette évolution :

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

Dans *The Wind among the Reeds* s'élaborent aussi la dialectique des contraires et l'élan vers l'union de ces contraires. Aux insatisfactions diffuses et au désir d'un ailleurs – manifestes dans les premiers recueils – succèdent des émotions plus clairement définies qui s'inscrivent souvent en couples antinomiques dans l'espace des textes : espoir et découragement, gaieté et tristesse, "vent de l'amour et de la haine"... La rêverie passive fait place aux images de dispersion, aux cris et aux fureurs. Les verbes de mouvement s'imposent : "to toss, to whirl, to unbind, to rush, to shake, to unfold, to pour down, to plunge"... Les horizons de l'espace sont rassemblés en quelques lignes, comme dans le beau texte qui commence par

I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake13.

Les chevaux et le feu parcourent l'espace poétique, images de l'impétuosité du désir avoué, de la vitalité libérée, et de la puissance créatrice de l'esprit. Tous les textes de ce recueil disent des tensions : tension entre une sensualité qui ose à présent s'affirmer et une aspiration à l'idéal ; tension entre sa passion toujours vivace pour Maud Gonne et son attachement d'alors pour celle qu'il nommait Diana Vernon ; tension entre le désir et la douleur d'aimer, entre l'exaltation et la souffrance.

Le rêveur d'eau et d'île de naguère devient le rêveur aérien, d'espaces infinis, de vents qui traversent les mers ou frappent aux portes du ciel, de vents créateurs et destructeurs. Rêverie érotique et rêverie cosmique se confondent souvent, mais les images du refuge n'ont pas disparu. Ainsi, il arrive qu'elles s'unissent à la vision cosmique pour composer d'étranges et puissantes évocations, comme dans le texte 'The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers' :

Great Powers of falling wave and wind and windy fire,
With your harmonious choir
Encircle her I love and sing her into peace,
That my old care may cease;
Unfold your flaming wings and cover out of sight
The nets of day and night "14.

La chevelure de la femme aimée peut être à la fois tonnelle et déroulement cosmique :

But know your hair was bound and wound
About the stars and moon and sun15.

La tentation du refuge, encore présente, est constamment combattue par l'imagination active ; ainsi, dans 'The Unappeasable Host'16, l'image des berceaux d'or ciselé est immédiatement suivie par deux visions complémentaires de mouvements vigoureux dans des espaces immenses : une chevauchée et le vol de l'aigle.

Le poète devient aussi rêveur de feu et de soleil, bien que le soleil soit encore, le plus souvent, stylistiquement uni à la lune. Les forces de vie, l'élan de l'intellect que symbolise la lumière solaire ne dominent pas encore les forces de la nuit. L'on voit plutôt, dans cette
double image, la recherche d'une union entre les forces nocturnes et fécondes de l'inconscient, de l'imagination, et les forces diurnes et fécondantes de la lumière, de la lucidité de l'esprit.

Il est significatif que les derniers vers de 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'17, ouverts sur des infinis d'espace et de temps, conjuguent les images de la lune et du soleil. Or, ce poème – inspiré par le thème traditionnel du pêcheur et de l'ondine – me semble pouvoir être lu comme une métaphore de l'acte d'écriture et de la quête poétique.

S'il est vrai, comme l'affirme Gilbert Durand, que le lieu où se dirige le narrateur, saisi d'un "feu dans la tête", est un espace doublement sacré : c'est un bois, et de surcroît un bois de noisetiers – le noisetier est, dans l'Irlande celtique, l'arbre de la sagesse -. Les gestes précis du narrateur-pêcheur, son attente à l'aube, puis la métamorphose de la truite argentée en une radieuse jeune fille qui soudain se dissout dans la lumière grandissante, puis l'inlassable quête entreprise par celui qui a eu cette expérience et cette vision : toutes les images qui structurent le poème sont susceptibles, me semble-t-il, d'être lues de façon totalement métaphorique.

Le "feu dans la tête" serait alors le tumulte passionné qui s'empare du poète lorsque se manifeste le désir d'écrire. Les gestes précis du pêcheur, évoqués en images simples, en sonorités claires, dans un rythme nerveux et rapide – chaque vers se terminant par un monosyllabe nettement mis en relief – ne suggèrent-ils pas précisément les figures stylistiques du texte en train de s'élaborer ? Le poisson argenté n'est-il pas, de même, la représentation de la réalité vivante accrochée fermement à la ligne du langage ? Le poête-pêcheur opère, par ce langage, l'émergence des profondeurs du réel. Auprès du feu allumé – symbole de l'imagination créatrice libérée – le réel (le poisson) subit une métamorphose et devient l'éblouissante jeune fille : n'est-ce pas alors l'image même de la métaphore, présence à la fois concrète et évanescente, image révélée qui, sitôt apparue, sitôt inscrite dans l'espace du texte, s'échappe, laissant le poète-pêcheur ébloui par sa fugitive présence ? La métaphore poétique est métamorphose de la réalité en lumineuse image verbale. Aengus, "masque" du poète, – dieu celtique de la jeunesse, de l'amour, de la lumière et de la poésie – Aengus, le narrateur de cette aventure, pris aux sortilèges de la métaphore, va désormais trouver l'énergie de parcourir l'espace, jusqu'à la fin des temps, guidé par le désir et l'espoir d'une nouvelle rencontre avec la femme – ondine, avec la métaphore.

Le poème de Yeats – comme 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' de Keats – dit le processus même de la création poétique : l'attente, la révélation et la disparition de ce que l'on nommait jadis l'"inspiration". Les images et les rythmes des deux textes représentent l'acte et la quête de l'écriture poétique. Mais, à l'inverse du poème de Keats, le poème de Yeats, à partir de l'espace clos du bois et de l'esprit, s'ouvre avec optimisme et vigueur sur des espaces illimités, au lieu de se refermer sur un lieu circulaire.

Une étude de "The Secret Rosé"19 – poème publié la même année que "The Song of Wandering Aengus" – montrerait que ce texte, par contre, est enclos dans une structure circulaire figurant la rose aux pétales fermés. Mais à l'intérieur de ce cercle sont inclus des espaces infinis, marins et terrestres, ainsi que tous les aspects du temps : mythique, légendaire, historique ; passé, présent de l'attente et avenir. De multiples évocations de la quête structurent le texte, l'objet ultime de la quête étant la Rose, image de perfection et d'absolu, image-graal. Cette Rose Secrète n'est-elle pas le symbole même de ce qu'est le
symbole ? Ce poème n'est-il pas une exploration du symbole ? Le symbole, en effet, image apparentemment simple et paisible, est une force dynamique qui, peu à peu, s'ouvre sur une multiplicité de possibles. Il est un carrefour de significations. Il est l'image – microcosme qui recèle des perspectives cosmiques, comme dans les pétales de la Rose Secrète sont encloses des expériences multiples, unifiées par le thème de la quête, mais susceptibles d'être soumises à une lecture plurielle.

Dans ces deux textes que l'on pourrait qualifier de métatextes, la recherche poétique, l'écriture de poésie, s'affirment comme une quête inlassable, comme le cheminement éternel d'Aengus l'Errant. L'objet de cette quête trouve, dans le même recueil, une autre formulation métaphorique que Yeats mettra plus tard en relief dans 'Sailing to Byzantium' et 'Byzantium' : l'objet d'or. Dès The Wind among the Reeds, en effet, Yeats aspire à être celui qui transmue l'informe du quotidien, les imperfections de ce monde, en un objet permanent, lumineux, inaltérable :

The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told;
I hunger to build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart,
With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like a casket of gold
For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart 20.

Les images de cette cassette d'or, ainsi que des "berceaux d'or ciselé" – dans un texte du même recueil – et des pommes d'or du jardin des Hespérides, images associées à la rêverie des quatre éléments du cosmos, ne suggèrent-elles pas le texte lui-même, objet de la quête de l'alchimiste du langage ?

Le texte poétique est, dès la fin des années 90, le lieu où se dit le besoin d'ordre, de cohérence, de synthèse, que Yeats n'allait cesser d'approfondir. L'espace du texte est encore parfois un refuge apaisant, mais il devient le plus souvent un espace ouvert. C'est maintenant un espace créé par une structure syntaxique de plus en plus compacte, ferme, dynamique, brutale même dans sa simplicité.

Ainsi s'inscrivent sur la même page du recueil In the Seven Woods des vers que nous pourrions croire venus des premiers volumes :

The honey-pale moon lay low on the sleepy hill (...)
I know of the leafy paths that the witches take
Who come with their crowns of pearl and their spindles of wool,
And their secret smile, out of the depths of the lake;21

après un poème incisif et concis comme 'Never Give all the Heart' où se conjuguent enjambements et ruptures de rythme pour suggérer le sentiment de brisure et la violence d'une expression lucide et amère de l'amour blessé. Ici, la reprise de certains termes-clés dans le dernier vers ne suggère plus la structure circulaire rassurante que nous évoquions, mais elle souligne au contraire, par un jeu d'échos discrets accompagnés de changements lexicaux et grammaticaux signifiants, la prise de conscience du douloureux décalage entre l'élan d'amour et sa faillite

Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women (...)
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight (...)
For he gave all his heart and lost22.

Avant de publier In the Seven Woods en 1904, Yeats était devenu auteur de théâtre et les contraintes de cette forme d'écriture exigeante devaient l'aider, selon son expression, à alléger sa poésie de son "fardeau de rêves". A partir de cet ensemble de poèmes Yeats
s’oriente, selon ses propres termes, vers l’”incarnation” et s’éloigne de la
”transfiguration”23. Le rêveur d’amour est devenu un amoureux passionné et tourmenté.
Le rêveur d’une Irlande de mythes, de légendes et d’îles-refuges devient un homme à
l’écoute des réalités de son pays. La rêverie compensatoire existe encore (comme dans
”The Withering of the Boughs”), mais elle est parcourue par des accents de détresse et par
la conscience des déchirements inhérents à la vie.

Dans l’espace poétique de The Green Helmet, le feu est éclair, lumière aveuglante, élément
qui dévore. L’espace est traversé d’images qui disent le dessèchement, la stérilité, le froid,
la solitude.

La syntaxe est, dans ce recueil de 1910, énergique, tumultueuse, agressive même. Le
champ sémantique est partagé entre l’amour et la haine, la tristesse, le réalisme et la
violence. La douce quiétude de l’île, jadis créée par le texte, est à jamais bouleversée. Le
dialogue, l’apostrophe vigoureuse investissent l’espace de l’écriture. Des enjambements
audacieux donnent à certains termes négatifs un relief saisissant. Les phrases
interrogatives se multiplient, surtout au dernier vers de maint poème, et ces
interrogations n’ont rien de rhétorique. Les phrases deviennent les vagues déferlantes de
la détresse, de la révolte aussi, même lorsque le titre annonce la réconciliation :

(... you went from me, and I could find
Nothing to make a song about but kings,
Helmets and swords, and half-forgotten things
That were like memories of you.24)

En une syntaxe multiforme alternent des propositions subordonnées – tentatives
d’explications, de justifications de l’homme lucide analysant une situation d’échec
sentimental – et quelques propositions indépendantes, souvent sous forme de
propositions à l’impératif, où le poète à nouveau se voudrait magicien capable de
transformer, par le langage, son rêve en réalité :

But, dear, cling close to me; since you were gone.
My barren thoughts have chilled me to the bone.

Dans cet espace poétique dominé par la violence du désarroi et par l’amertume, la texture
phonique exprime le déchirement par les accents violents de nombreuses occlusives ; les
monosyllabes disent les contradictions des émotions et des pensées qui se bousculent, en
même temps que ces monosyllabes s’efforcent, par leur concision même et leur vigueur,
de cerner et, de ce faisant, de dompter les tensions qui existent dans l’espace intérieur du
poète. Il arrive que le martèlement de la prise de conscience prenne forme en une
succession de monosyllabes accentués dont certains commencent par le choc d’une
occlusive sourde :

Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye;
That’s all we shall know for truth
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth,
I look at you, and I sigh.

The Green Helmet, recueil dominé par la tension, est ainsi, malgré sa brièveté – onze pages
– une transition importante vers les motifs et les variétés d’expressions du recueil suivant
consacré aux Responsibilities et surtout, il prouve combien le langage, par toutes les
ressources de sa syntaxe et de son symbolisme sonore, réalise – au sens fort du terme – la
substance même du vécu, dans l’aire de conflit qu’est devenu le texte.
Notre propos n'est pas ici d'analyser l'importance thématique de cette charnière que marque, en 1914, la publication de Responsibilities. Aux bouleversements personnels qui, depuis longtemps déjà, ont fait travailler des forces dynamiques dans l'espace poétique, s'ajoutent les bouleversements qui agitent l'Irlande et que Yeats ressentait déjà lorsqu'il composait les textes réunis dans The Green Helmet. Avec Responsibilities, la thématique et le langage vont être inflexibles de façon irréversible vers une lucidité et une vigueur souvent bouleversantes. Yeats citait alors la phrase de Blake : "L'Éternité est amoureuse des productions du temps", et disait ainsi la nécessité d'assumer ce monde dont les imperfections et les conflits sont le reflet nécessaire – bien que déformé – d'une perfection vers laquelle nous tendons et qui toujours nous échappe.

Les déchirements personnels ont obligé le poète à accepter une cruelle réalité, à s'éloigner du refuge dans l'imaginaire où son rêve prenait corps verbal. Il s'achemine vers la maturité, prend désormais pleinement conscience de ses responsabilités personnelles et sociales, de ses responsabilités de citoyen et d'artiste. L'espace poétique a des dimensions élargies, en particulier vers une appréciation des problèmes sociaux et politiques qui tourmentent alors l'Irlande, ainsi que vers les conflits essentiels que peut vivre tout homme.

Les tournures interrogatives ouvrent fréquemment l'espace de la phrase sur les multiples perspectives du doute et de l'inquiétude. Dans 'September 1913', c'est l'inquiétude à l'égard du présent de l'Irlande :

- Was it for this the wild geese spread
- The grey wing upon every tide;
- For this that all that blood was shed,
- For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
- And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
- All that delirium of the brave?
- Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
- It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Avec 'The Three Beggars', c'est une interrogation sur un problème humain général :

- Do men who least desire get most,
- Or get the most who most desire?

Dans 'The Cold Heaven', la souffrance personnelle prend la forme d'une angoisse existentielle :

- (...) Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
- Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
- Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
- By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

"The Cold Heaven"39, cri de l'être solitaire, cri de souffrance de l'amoureux déçu, poème de portée métaphysique, entraîne le lecteur vers des interrogations sur la vie et la mort et l'incite à plusieurs interprétations possibles, en compagnie des plus grands critiques de Yeats. Je serais, pour ma part, tentée de voir dans ce texte dense, au style épuré, aux images bouleversantes, une nouvelle métaphore de l'écriture de poésie. Le poème n'est-il pas, en effet, la mise en images de l'angoisse et du vertige du créateur lorsque le saisit l'impulsion d'exprimer ce qui semble inexprimable ? Le texte s'ouvre sur une perception brutale :

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven.

Le bouleversement de celui qui "voit" s'exprime par l'image conjuguée de la glace et du feu. L'excitation poétique provoquée par la vue de ce ciel d'hiver est si totale, si violente,
qu'elle ne parvient pas à se formuler en termes positifs, à se concentrer sur ce moment présent, à cerner l'immédiateté du réel. Seules des images de bouleversement, de désarroi, de lumière fulgurante peuvent dire le vertige ressenti par l'être tout entier – physique et spirituel – lorsqu'il "voit". Voir et donner à voir : telles sont bien les fonctions du poète. L'événement que traduisent les images de 'The Cold Heaven' est de l'ordre de la "révélation" : le ciel glacé apparaît soudain au poète, comme une vision première et lumineuse, mais, dans sa troublante simplicité, il est scellé. Pour tenter de le desseller par l'écriture, le poète connaît une angoisse que le texte ici restitue. Le ciel d'hiver n'est-il pas, alors, une image exemplaire du "secret" que recèle tout spectacle du monde et que l'art peut espérer déceler ? L'image finale du vide, de l'absence vécue par l'âme "nue", le sentiment d'une culpabilité injustifiée, ne disent-ils pas le désarroi du créateur, confronté à ce réel qu'il s'efforce de cerner par les mots ? La faill e ressentie entre l'intensité de la vision et les mots pour formuler les émotions que suscite cette vision, est comblée par l'écriture qui dit précisément cette faill e. L'imagination est désormais cette énergie visionnaire qui anime celui qui "voit" le monde, celui qui, dans la souffrance, tente de reconstruire, l'espace d'un texte, la réalité vécue.

61 'The Cold Heaven' me semble être un poème qui consacre la naissance de Yeats à l'écriture non plus comme refuge, mais comme mode de confrontation de l'être avec le monde, à l'écriture comme moyen de l'exploration conjuguée du monde et de l'être, comme appréhension de l'être – dans sa nudité existentielle – par l'appréhension du monde.

Les images structurantes des premiers recueils sont maintenant riches de connotations nouvelles. C'est la "mer froide et désolée", le rugissement des vagues. Ce sera, dans 'A Prayer for my Daughter', quelques années plus tard, "The murderous innocence of the sea". Le plus souvent, la mer est associée au souffle vivifiant de l'air marin.

63 Dans l'espace poétique apparaissent la pierre et le rocher, images de permanence : ainsi, les deux premières strophes du poème 'The Hour Before Dawn' ne contiennent pas moins de sept références à cet élément... La pierre, image de stabilité, est aussi un symbole de l'existence statique, figée. Elle deviendra une image importante dans l'expression de l'attitude ambivalente de Yeats à l'égard des événements de Pâques 1916.

Comme en contrepoint de cette force statique, les textes de Responsibilities sont parcourus par le vent, symbole de liberté. Le vent s'unit à la lumière – dans 'Paudeen' – et c'est là un double signe de l'élan vital, de l'essor de l'être. L'espace s'élargit vers tous les horizons du monde diurne. La dynamique de l'essor accompagne la lucidité grandissante du poète et sa fonction de médiateur, toutes deux plus précisément symbolisées par l'image de l'oiseau : mouettes, courlis, aigle. Les oiseaux solaires vont régner sur l'espace du recueil suivant, The Wild Swans at Coole : ce sont les cygnes, le phénix, l'épervier auquel s'identifie le poète dans le texte intitulé 'The Hawk'. L'épervier est image de la liberté, de la puissance, de l'audace et du désir de maîtriser l'espace.

65 L'énergie spirituelle qui domine ce recueil est également associée aux images de l'aube. L'aube est élan vers l'avenir, promesse de la lumière du soleil, mais elle représente aussi une ouverture sur l'inconnu du jour à affronter, sur les possibles ignorés. Elle est alors inquiétante ; elle est cette réalité "froide et passionnée" que suggère la fin du poème The Fisherman ; elle est l'inévitable et parfois cruelle clarté sur le réel, qui oblige le poète à distinguer ce réel de l'imaginaire, alors que le crépuscule, jadis, opérait l'apaisante fusion du réel et de l'imaginaire. L'aube ne devient-elle pas ainsi le symbole de toute réalité,
puisque toute réalité est antinomique ? N'est-elle pas aussi l'image même de la dualité qui habite alors le poète, porté par l'élan vers la lumière, vers la confrontation courageuse avec le réel, et pourtant angoissé par ce face à face ? La rêverie de l'aube se conjugue, bien sûr, avec le dynamisme de l'ascension vers la lumière solaire, vers le principe actif qu'elle représente, vers la connaissance intellectuelle dont elle est le signe.

Dans ce recueil où s'élabore une vaste symbolique, où s'exprime la recherche de l'équilibre entre les contraires, clarté lunaire et lumière du soleil se partagent l'espace poétique. L'espace nocturne de l'inconscient, des pulsions, de l'imagination – espace subjectif, passif et lunaire – et l'espace diurne de la clairvoyance, de la compréhension – espace objectif, actif et solaire – sont désormais en interaction féconde.

L'économie lexicale, la fermeté d'une syntaxe épurée, la densité des images, toute une subtile alchimie du langage – déjà très évidentes dans un poème comme 'The Cold Heaven' – font du volume The Wild Swans at Coole le premier grand volume de la maturité poétique de Yeats et de sa maturité d'homme. Chaque vers ou presque introduit une image nouvelle, un thème nouveau de méditation, au fil d'une structure rythmique d'une grande souplesse et d'une grande variété. La phrase est dépouillée de l'adjectif inutile, de la pesanteur polysyllabique, des réseaux d'assonances et d'allitérations qui, jadis, suscitaient une sorte d'engloutissement dans un espace phonique et syntaxique berceur et circulaire. Cette phrase, désormais allégée, se fait élan toujours renouvelé. L'espace du texte accueille les rythmes les plus divers ; il vibre de toute la gamme des sons, des plus doux aux plus tendus, et joue de leur symbolisme. Ainsi, dans la sobriété du poème qui ouvre le recueil, tous les éléments de la phrase composent une rare harmonie :

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.\(^{35}\)

Si l'espace grammatical trouve maintenant son point d'ancrage essentiel dans la phrase affirmative, si la parole du poète dit les paysages vus, les faits constatés, les décisions prises, les méditations suscitées par le spectacle du monde environnant, néanmoins, le doute et l'inquiétude demeurent et, avec eux, la quête existentielle. L'interrogation ne disparaîtra jamais, comme en témoigneront, dans le recueil suivant, les questions de Yeats face aux événements de Pâques 1916 et, dans l'un des derniers poèmes, la question de l'Homme à l'Echo :

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place?\(^{36}\)

***

Si l'on tente maintenant de suivre les évolutions de l"ange du mouvement" dans l'espace grammatical des premiers recueils, en particulier le jeu des modes et des temps, clef essentielle de la structure mentale, l'on observe des récurrences qui semblent significantes. Le mode impératif apparaît ici très souvent, soit que le jeune poète s'adresse aux lecteurs, ses frères en nostalgie, et leur indique le chemin de la quête verbale :
Go gather by the humming sea
Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,
And to its lips thy story tell (...)\textsuperscript{37}

soit que le personnage mis en scène ou implicite essaie d’influencer les éléments ou d’imposer sa volonté à d’autres êtres :

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.\textsuperscript{38}

Plus insistantes encore sont les apostrophes à la Rose, dans le recueil qui porte son nom :

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways (...)\textsuperscript{39}

et les multiples répétitions de cet impératif au fil du poème disent combien la parole se veut moyen de persuasion, injonction, voire formule magique par laquelle le désir se ferait réalité.

Lorsqu’avec The Wind among the Reeds, la thématique de la passion envahit l’espace du langage, les verbes à l’impératif sont lourds des accents de la tristesse

Out-worn heart, in a time out-worn,
Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;
Laugh, heart, again in the grey twilight,
Sigh, heart, again in the dew of the morn.\textsuperscript{40}

ou chargés d’émotion amoureuse

Half close your eyelids, loosen your hair,
And dream about the great and their pride, (...)\textsuperscript{41}

L’impératif devient alors pleinement le temps du magique, grâce auquel l’enchanteur de mots qu’est le poète essaie, semble-t-il, de dominer le réel par la force du verbe ou plutôt crée, par la puissance du langage, son propre réel conforme à ses désirs et à ses rêves à l’intérieur de l’espace poétique.

La présence obsédante du souhait qui tente de devenir réalité se manifeste aussi par un usage abondant du "passé modal" qui, sous des formes verbales variées est, par excellence, le temps de l’irréel. Certes, la présence de ces modaux signifie que la réalisation du désir est projetée dans l’irréel, mais ne peut-on pas suggérer que l’acte même de "dire" ce désir, à l’aide de ces formes verbales, implique que se produit une sorte de "création" de la réalité désirée, dans le temps de l’écriture ? Ainsi,

I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!

s’écrie Yeats dans un poème – 'The White Birds' – où prend corps verbal son rêve d’union avec Maud Gonne. La vision suscitée par le temps de l’irréel entraîne ici une cohorte d’images, de rythmes et de sons qui tous, par leur douceur nostalgique, "évoquent", au sens premier de "font apparaître par la magie", ce qui est imaginaire. La rêverie se termine, comme elle avait commencé, par le temps du souhait :

Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!\textsuperscript{42}

La vision de la vague-berceau qui emporterait le couple vers les îles-refuges ainsi que le temps de l’irréel encerclent le présent de l’indicatif qui porte ici les autres images. Ce présent est d’ailleurs souvent connoté négativement par le sens même des verbes ou des substantifs qui l’accompagnent :

\begin{verbatim}
\end{verbatim}
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it can fade and flee;
(...)
A weariness cornes from those dreamers, dew-dabbled, the lily and rose;

79 Par contre, le temps de l’imagination exaltée est, lui, associé à des signifiés positifs :
(...), Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;\(^{41}\)

80 Si le temps de l’irréel est la marque évidente du refuge dans l’espace imaginaire, la présence du prêtérit (temps de la réalité abolie, temps du souvenir aussi et de la nostalgie de ce qui n’est plus) est également nette dans les premiers recueils. Ce temps du passé mort va souvent de pair avec les suggestions de scènes mythiques ou légendaires que Yeats aime alors à retrouver, ou avec des rêveries nostalgiques d’Amour perdu – rêveries qui, dans \textit{Crossways}, relèvent de l’aspiration et non de la réalité vécue. Ce temps du passé est souvent associé à la troisième personne du singulier et, surtout dans les deux premiers recueils, il semble ainsi renforcer les divers modes utilisés pour "déguiser" le locuteur. L’usage de la troisième personne unie au temps du souvenir, la double distanciation ainsi créée, ne sont-ils pas une ébauche de la technique du "masque" que Yeats allait, par la suite, savamment élaborer ?\(^{81}\)

81 Ailleurs, prêtérit et plus-que-parfait, associés à l’évocation voilée de l’image mythique d’Hélène de Troie, laissent percevoir la souffrance personnelle du poète pour qui Hélène est, dès à présent, l’image de Maud, ainsi magnifiée et dramatisée, mais cruellement "absente".\(^{82}\)

82 Temps de l’irréel et temps du passé révolu apparaissent donc comme les temps du refuge grâce auxquels le rêveur évite d’affronter la réalité présente. Le réel va pourtant peu à peu s’implanter dans l’espace poétique, sous la forme du présent de l’indicatif, temps de la perception vécue et de la pensée qui s’élabora.

83 Le présent simple apparaît, certes, dès la première page de \textit{Crossways} pour dire certaines certitudes :

(...), Words alone are certain good (...)
Dream, dream, for this is also sooth.\(^{44}\)

84 Mais le poète n’utilise guère pour lui-même ce présent simple à la première personne, alors qu’il l’utilise volontiers pour les personnages qu’il met en scène, tel ce vieillard qui soupire :

\begin{quote}
Although I shelter from the rain  
Under a broken tree,  
My chair was nearest to the fire  
In every company  
That talked of love or politics,  
\textit{Ere} Time transfigured me. (...)  
I spit into the face of Time  
That has transfigured me.\(^{45}\)
\end{quote}

85 Il est fréquent que dans le recueil \textit{The Rose} l’affirmation générale – qui très normalement se formule par le présent simple – serve de masque pour la parole du poète, qui maintenant dit la blessure d’amour vécu et non plus la vague nostalgie de l’amoureux de l’Amour.

86 Le ‘je’ a pleinement droit de cité dans le recueil \textit{The Rose}, mais il reste souvent associé à d’autres temps que le présent ; aussi, le présent à la première personne sur lequel se termine "The Lake Isle of Innisfree' n'en est-il que plus remarquable. La rêverie n'est plus,
ici, proposée par un temps de l’irréel, mais par une expression du futur où se manifeste la volonté :

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, (...)  
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow (...)

et l’imagination liée au moment de l’écriture est portée par le présent simple :

There midnight’s all a glimmer (...)  

C’est là un présent qui souligne une réalité de l’imaginaire, vécu dans l’espace du texte, une perception dans l’espace intérieur :

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
(...) I hear it in the deep heart’s core.  

Quant au présent progressif, cette forme du présent ouverte vers l’avenir, ce présent que l’on pourrait dire en action, il est le plus souvent associé, dans les premiers recueils, aux éléments d’ordinaire considérés comme inanimés – aux éléments qui composent les paysages vus ou rêvés.

Dans ces recueils, la forme en “-ing” est partout. Le monde extérieur est ainsi animé, dynamisé, alors que l’être humain est parfois défini par des formes passives, comme s’il subissait et que le monde autour de lui agissait.

Avec The Wind among the Reeds, le présent progressif commence à être appliqué aux êtres naturellement animés, renforçant les verbes de mouvement, d’action et de violence qui investissent l’espace du texte. Mais c’est par le présent simple que le poète, le plus souvent, fait entendre sa voix. Ainsi, il dit avec simplicité dans le texte ‘A Poet to his Beloved’ :

I bring you my passionate rhyme.  

Ce même présent simple affirme d’amères certitudes :

Time drops in decay  
Like a candle burnt out.  

Les formes du futur ne font encore que de timides apparitions, souvent portées par des interrogations, comme à la fin de ‘The Secret Rose’.

L’impératif, lui, est loin de disparaître de ce recueil qu’envahit la passion, et une impressionnante invocation, ‘The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers’, est presque exclusivement ancrée dans ce temps du magique :

Great Powers of falling wave and wind and windy fire,  
With your harmonious choir  
Encircle her I love and sing her into peace, (...)  
Unfold your flaming wings and cover out of sight  
The nets of day and night.

L’image du cercle est bien là, et celle du refuge apaisant, et ce désir du poète que soient abolis le jour et la nuit – donc le temps – dans un immense nid cosmique qui bercerait la femme aimée.

Malgré l’affirmation de plus en plus nette du présent et, avec lui, de la réalité, ce temps du magique n’est pas mort pour Yeats, et même dans le recueil The Wild Swans at Coole il réapparaîtra en de brefs poèmes poignants par les images et les thèmes esquissés, comme ces quatre vers de ‘The Balloon of the Mind’ :

Hands, do what you’re bid:  
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.50

97 Quant aux temps de l’irréel, ils portent, de façon évidente dans The Wind among the Reeds, et de manière plus subtile et nuancée dans les recueils suivants, la violence du souhait. Il suffit de lire les huit vers superbes dont le titre suggère encore, par la troisième personne, une discrète distanciation du poète : 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' :

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
   Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of the night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
   But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
   I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.51

98 Les temps de l’irréel sont encore vivaces, mais la rêverie de passion ose maintenant s’avouer dans l’élan abrupt du présent simple associé au "je" sans masque. Ainsi le poète dit à sa bien-aimée :

   I bring you with reverent hands
The book of my numberless dreams.52

99 L’ancrage dans ce présent simple qui fixe la donnée d’existence qu’il décrit, continuera de plus en plus nettement dans les recueils suivants, sans pourtant jamais oblitérer les temps de l’imaginaire ni le temps du passé révolu. Au contraire, ces pôles du temps vont désormais être souvent associés pour exprimer les doutes sur le passé et surtout les regrets de ce qui n’a pu être réalisé, comme à la fin de l’émouvant poème 'Words' :

   I might have thrown poor words away
And been content to live.53

100 Avec les poèmes de désarroi et de douleur qui composent The Green Helmet, les regrets, les mises en question du passé, les prises de conscience encore incertaines s’expriment en une gamme étendue de formes d’irréel du passé :

   Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways, (...) Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?54

101 Les temps de l’irréel présent et passé n’ont plus ici leur fonction de temps du magique, mais ils sont associés aux interrogations. Ils sont, pour l’homme qui souffre, des tentatives de compréhension et de justification de l’échec de sa relation avec Maud Gonne, tandis que ces questions permettent aussi d’introduire des phrases affirmatives au présent et au prétérit simples grâce auxquelles le poète parfait l’image de son "Hélène" :

   (...) with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
   With beauty like a tightened bow, (...)55

102 et grâce auxquelles il domine peut-être un peu mieux souffrance et amertume. L’écriture de l’irréel du passé n’est-elle pas ici un moyen de faire vivre verbalement certaines réalités que l’on sait à jamais accomplies ?

103 Mais, comme en contrepoint de cette tristesse suscitée par la conscience de ce qui jamais plus ne pourra être, une autre dimension temporelle se dessine fermement avec l’utilisation réitérée du "present perfect", ce temps qui tantôt peut marquer le passé
indéterminé, et tantôt – comme c'est souvent le cas ici – le passé qui garde des liens avec le présent ou qui a des prolongements perceptibles dans le présent. C'est par ce temps que le poète indique les conséquences cruelles de son amour blessé :

(...) since you were gone,
My barren thoughts have chilled me to the bone.  

C'est par ce temps aussi que le poète dit sa volonté d'intégrer le passé au présent et, peut-être, le besoin de se rassurer, car la perception des liens entre le passé et le présent, l'affirmation de la trame continue de la vie et des événements n'est-elle pas un contrepoint nécessaire au regret de ce qui n'a pu être ou de ce qui n'est plus ?

Avec la prise de conscience des Responsibilities, toutes les dimensions du temps investissent l'écriture. Cette tendance se confirme avec The Wild Swans at Coole. Une étude détaillée des multiples émergences du présent permettrait de suggérer ses implications sur le plan psychologique, voire philosophique. Ce temps règne dans le recueil en tant que présent, temps de la perception et de la parole ; en tant que futur, puisque l'expression du futur en anglais est une modulation à partir d'auxiliaires au présent ; en tant que "present perfect" aussi. Le présent souligne constamment la prise de conscience aiguë – apparemment subite – du vieillissement, et surtout le dur éveil de Yeats à la vieillesse du cœur :

(...) O heart, we are old;
The living beauty is for younger men;
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.  

Le présent s'oppose parfois violemment à l'irréel du passé :

O who could have foretold
That the heart grows old?  

Il semble que par l'usage intensif du présent simple, le poète fixe le vécu, l'événement, dans une permanence intangible, dans l'éternité de l'instant d'écriture, et qu'il assume ainsi sa finitude. Simultanément, le verbe "être" envahit le recueil. Il affirme la présence du monde, des éléments qui le composent, des êtres qui le peuplent. Ce faisant, le poète se situe par rapport aux objets du monde : il est le regard qui perçoit et le sujet qui organise et domine mentalement le monde extérieur.

Le présent alterne encore, néanmoins, avec de nombreuses expressions de l'irréel – ici, de l'irréel du passé. Cet irréel a ainsi des accents pathétiques de cruelle non-réalité, de souhait à jamais irréalisable :

O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.  

On retrouverait cet irréel du passé dans maint poème, et ses accents de mélancolie sont parfois soulignés par la répétition poignante de la forme verbale :

(...) I might have lived,
And you know well how great the longing has been, (...) 
I might have used the one substantial right
My trade allows (...).

L'analyse des temps de l'important poème porté par l'image symbolique du Pêcheur, révèlerait une utilisation magistrale des formes de l'irréel associées au passé :

All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped 'twould be
To write for my own race
And the reality.⁶¹

S'il est vrai que le désir rêvé à partir du présent cède souvent le pas au souvenir du désir rêvé dans le passé et à jamais irréalisé, irréalisable, il arrive aussi qu'une surcharge très inhabituelle du temps de l'irrél donne à un souhait présent des résonances presque insupportables, tant sont intenses et le rêve de fuite qu'implique la forme verbale et l'impossibilité de réaliser ce rêve...

Would I could cast a sail on the water (...) 
Comme je souhaiterais pouvoir hisser une voile sur la mer (...) ⁶²

Pour tenter de cerner le champ de conscience révélé par l'utilisation des formes verbales dans The Wild Swans at Coole, il faudrait suivre aussi les jeux multiples du parfait – présent perfect – et du plus-que-parfait, nombreux dans le recueil. Si le "present perfect", intégrant le passé au présent, dit le besoin d'affirmer la continuité de l'existence, l'autre temps fait de cette continuité un moment du passé et porte ainsi la nostalgie des réalités disparues. Certes, le prétérit n'a pas perdu droit de cité dans ce recueil, mais à l'exception de quelques poèmes où il reste le temps du récit et de la distanciation, il est maintenant pleinement le temps du passé aboli, du passé dont la mort est constatée et assumée avec lucidité, mais souvent dans la tristesse.

Il faudrait suivre aussi les modulations du futur. L'on remarquerait que ses apparitions sont rares mais d'une grande densité. La violence du futur antérieur, par exemple, est troublante ; avec cette forme, projet et passé se conjuguent, comme dans la phrase finale du poème "The Fisherman" :

And cried, "Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn".⁶³

D'autres futurs ont une intensité violente :

Vague memories, nothing but memories,
But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.⁶⁴

Ce futur aux résonances bibliques, ce futur prophétique, cette forme qui indique clairement l'ordre établi, est-elle ici l'expression d'une certitude profonde de la part de Yeats que le souvenir de Maud Gonne bouleverse encore ? Ou bien n'est-ce pas plutôt qu'en choisissant cette forme verbale porteuse de promesse solennelle, le poète tente de dominer sa désespérance, qu'il veut croire en un renouveau possible dans l'au-delà du temps vécu sur terre et qu'il parvient ainsi à transcender ses regrets par la réalité verbale qui prend forme dans la phrase ? Ce futur énergique aurait alors une fonction analogue à la fonction qu'avaient les modaux dans les premiers recueils... Il devient peut-être ici un autre temps du magique qui permet de donner corps au souhait par le pouvoir des mots.

Passé, présent et futur tissent, dans tout le recueil, des réseaux complexes qui traduisent les profondeurs du moi où se conjuguent toutes les dimensions du temps, dans la réviviscence du passé, la puissance de l'imagination, la force des regrets ou des espoirs impossibles. Certains textes comme "The Fisherman" ou 'Her Praise', par les jeux complexes des passés, des futurs et des irréels du passé, par la réunion de ces multiples aspects du temps sur quelques lignes, ne témoignent-ils pas d'un désir profond du poète de rassembler ce temps épars, de le concentrer dans un instant présent d'écriture et ainsi de mieux accepter, de maîtriser peut-être, cette fuite du temps vers la mort humaine ?
Ce désir de permanence se manifeste aussi par la présence des nombreux substantifs, souvent simples, parfois composés. La tendance à "nominaliser" n'est-elle pas, en effet, un signe de la volonté de posséder le monde en énumérant ses composantes ? C'est comme si le regard du poète caressait les objets du monde, les faisait siens, un à un, et que simultanément sa parole les incluait pour toujours dans l'espace du texte :

For all things the delighted eye now sees
Were loved by him: the old storm-broken trees
That cast their shadows upon road and bridge;
The tower set on the stream's edge;
The ford where drinking cattle make a stir
Nightly, (...)\textsuperscript{65}

Les prépositions jouent également un rôle de plus en plus précis dans l'évocation de cette présence du monde. Elles restituent clairement aux éléments de l'espace leurs places réciproques, et en soulignent la cohérence. L'on est loin de la surabondance des "autour, au milieu de, parmi..." qui, dans les premiers recueils, disaient l'encerclement du refuge désiré, de même que la présence de "sous" – fréquemment accompagné de "caché" – indiquait le souhait de protection. L'on est loin aussi d'une forme de dispersion dans l'espace suggérée par maint texte du recueil \textit{The Wind among the Reeds}. Les prépositions marquant l'approche ou l'éloignement du mouvement et la traversée brutale de l'espace accentuaient alors le dynamisme parfois agressif des verbes.

Dans le recueil \textit{The Wild Swans at Coole}, la grammaire restitue à l'espace extérieur son équilibre et ses perspectives par rapport au sujet qui regarde. Les textes révèlent les multiples facettes d'une relation de maturité du poète au monde, relation qu'un long itinéraire de sentiments et de pensée a développée. Les épreuves initiatiques de la passion vécue dans le déchirement, conjuguées aux déceptions et aux révoltes du nationaliste épris d'idéal, ont sans doute été des facteurs déterminants dans cette naissance de l'être au monde et à lui-même.

La première strophe, lente et limpide évocation des éléments du décor, crée un climat d'attente : le paysage est là, comme scellé dans la simplicité du présent. Les cygnes sont intégrés au paysage "inanimé". Dès la seconde strophe, avec l'entrée en scène du narrateur et les références temporelles liées à la réviviscence du passé, le paysage s'anime, une dynamique est libérée, en relation avec la vision soudaine des cygnes
prenant leur essor, dans ce temps du passé que leur présence évoque maintenant. Une équation s'établit entre l'envol des cygnes et l'élan de l'imagination : comme les oiseaux de lumière qui relient le monde aquatique à l'espace aérien, l'imagination a une fonction médiatrice entre le visible et l'invisible. Dans la troisième strophe s'affirme la distance irréparable entre passé et présent, mais passé et présent sont unis dans l'espace du texte. La majestueuse sobriété de la strophe suivante dit une plénitude : l'image du couple de cygnes, fidèles et triomphants, défi au temps qui passe et qui altère les plus violentes passions humaines. L'image d'équilibre et d'harmonie qu'offrent les cygnes n'apparaît-elle pas comme la métaphore de cette plénitude d'être que donne au poète la création du texte, dans l'adéquation de l'émotion et des mots qui l'expriment ? L'image immuable des cygnes ne représente-t-elle pas aussi la permanence créée par l'écriture ? Lorsque, dans la strophe finale, s'inscrit l'image du ciel déserté, n'est-ce pas la fuite de l'imagination créatrice, dans le présent de l'écriture ?

Dans l'espace du texte, les mots ont peut-être descellé la réalité profonde que symbolisent les cygnes sauvages : ils sont l'expression lumineuse de l'essor de l'imagination qui, dans l'espace et le temps de l'écriture, fait surgir le passé à jamais perdu dans le temps de la vie. Ils sont aussi le présent perçu et l'avenir qui échappe au regard de l'homme. Ils sont la permanence que le poète saisit et crée par l'art verbal.

Si ce texte peut, lui aussi, être lu comme un poème qui explore son propre mode d'expression, ne peut-on également suggérer que l'image des cygnes est une épiphanie de l'objet de la quête poétique ? Les cygnes – qui sont lumière, beauté, vigueur, permanence, amour – seraient alors le symbole de l'objet du désir du créateur, en d'autres termes, de l'œuvre qui se crée. L'image des cygnes est peut-être la métaphore du poème lui-même. Dans cette image, en effet, se cristallise la quête poétique de Yeats. Quête de soi, car la vue des cygnes rend possible l'expression de la subjectivité du poète. Quête de l'Amour, car la passion s'immortalise en eux. Quête du monde, car ils ont l'existence éternellement recommencée des éléments du monde. Quête de l'invisible, car s'ils appartiennent à cette terre et à cette eau, aujourd'hui, ils vivront aussi dans un autre espace, là-bas, demain... Les cygnes sauvages sont peut-être une métaphore de la poésie : présence lumineuse et mystérieuse absence...

NOTES

2. (2) Ibid., p. 150.
3. (3) Les citations et références qui précèdent sont extraites de W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems, London, Macmillan :
The Stolen Child', p. 20-21.
The Ballad of Moll Magee', p. 25-27.
The Two Trees', p. 54-55.
'O do not love too long', p. 93.
The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes', p. 10.
'Into the Twilight', p. 65-66.
4. (4) W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 77-78.
8. (8) C.P., The Lake Isle of Innisfree', p. 44.
10. (10) C.P., To His Heart, Bidding it Have no Fear', p. 71.
15. (15) C.P., 'He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead', p. 81.

The Danaan children laugh, in cradles of wrought gold,
And clap their hands together, and half close their eyes,
For they will ride the North when the ger-eagle flies.
With heavy whitening wings, and a heart fallen cold (...)
22. (22) C.P., 'Never Give All the Heart', p. 87.
27. (27) C.P., 'September 1913', p. 120-121.
39. (39) C.P., 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time', p. 35.
40. (40) C.P., 'Into the Twilight', p. 65.
41. (41) C.P., 'He Thinks of Those who have Spoken Evil of his Beloved', p. 75.
43. (43) Pour cette citation et la précédente, Ibid., p. 47.
46. (46) C.P., 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', p. 44.
47. (47) C.P., 'A Poet to His Beloved', p. 70.
49. (49) C.P., 'The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers', p. 80.
50. (50) C.P., 'The Balloon of the Mind', p. 175.
52. (52) C.P., 'A Poet to His Beloved', p. 70.
56. (56) C.P., 'Reconciliation', p. 102.
57. (57) C.P., 'The Living Beauty', p. 156.
64. (64) C.P., 'Broken Dreams', p. 173.

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An empty theatre?
Yeats as Minstrel in Responsibilities

Warwick Gould

Yeats's individual volumes are always a part of a "moving image" of himself: the self they present, or as I would prefer to put it, the hero they create, is always a reappraisal. We might expect, and frequently do find, in the later updatings of each volume, new versions of a self he had always to think of as in some way a "permanent self", a great deal of rewriting and rearrangement. "Whatever changes I have made" said Yeats in a note to Early Poems and Stories (1925), "are but an attempt to express better what I thought and felt when I was a very young man".

What is striking therefore about Responsibilities, is that there is so little change in its volume-order and disposition between 1914, when the volume was first published on his sisters' press and 1931-32, when he placed the volume into the planned Edition de Luxe of his work. It remained an image with which he was very largely satisfied.

My initial text therefore is Responsibilities: Poems and a Play, published by the Cuala Press on May 25, 1914. The play is the new version of The Hour Glass, privately printed by the Cuala Press earlier that year, and first appearing in Florence in The Mask in April 1913. As a morality play in 1903 it had even "converted a music-hall singer and kept him going to Mass for six weeks", a triumph which had at first "faintly pleased" Yeats, "so little responsibility" does one feel for that mythological world. But when the poet saw friends in the theatre he felt ashamed: the "wise man [of the play] humbled himself to the fool and received salvation as his reward" whatever Yeats tried to suggest in the dialogue, such was the image presented in the play's final tableau. Rewritten with the "elaboration of verse" the new version made the philosopher "accept God's will": Yeats had by this manoeuvre "so changed the fable that it is not false to [his] own thoughts of the world". The placing of the new version of The Hour Glass before the closing rhymes clearly indicates that Yeats wished the play to be included within the volume's overall sequence. It would be possible on another occasion, to push this point further: but the point belongs to comment on the play. It was Yeats's regular practice to include plays with current volumes of poems, sometimes as part of their sequence, sometimes not. Equally it was his regular practice to remove such plays at a subsequent
date. This paper, therefore, does not further discuss the placement of *The Hour Glass* in this volume.

*The Hour Glass* in its new version was but one of many of the contents which had appeared before: various sequences had appeared in the 1912 American trade edition of *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* and in *Poems written in Discouragement*. Various other poems were collected from periodicals and from *A Selection from the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, and from the choice private printing of *Nine Poems*. Although *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* was "only" a Cuala Press volume, with trade publication two years away, it marked a brilliant integration of all these disparate materials into an overall volume order which is in fact a sequence, one which retained that remarkable stability, despite a few later attempts on Yeats's part to tinker with it. My method is therefore a very simple one: I propose to examine some aspects of the order and interrelation of some of the poems which make up this stable sequence.

**I Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof**

The overall organising trope of the book, as so often with Yeats, is *theatrum mundi* but in this case the player on the stage is in an all but empty theatre, a stage in eternity.

*Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain*

*Somewhere in ear-shot for the story's end.*

Further the figure at the centre is not a poor player who struts and frets his hour, but a minstrel. His stage is a cosmic stage, his audience, or what remains of it, consists of his surmise[d] companions, departed ancestors, dead poets, mythical heroes, the ghost of Parnell, the wild geese, hermits, beggarmen and visionary magi. His link with these figures is via *that reed-throated whisperer*, addressed as a muse in the valedictory lines of the book. The company, such as it is, is at least preferable to the audience one finds in any ordinary theatre, or theatre of endeavour, such as the Abbey Theatre, or the Ireland of his day. Yeats's contempt is the mirror of that contemporary audience's apparent contempt for him, and he establishes this oppositional stance by means of his emphatic allusion to Ben Jonson's 'An Ode to Himself in the closing rhymes. Jonson had written

*And since our dainty age*

*Cannot endure reproof,*

*Make not thyself a page*

*To that strumpet, the stage,*

*But sing high and aloof,*

*Safe from the wolf's black jaw, and the dull ass's hoof*.

Yeats's theatre, then is theatre's anti-self, his *theatrum mundi* is an inner world as well as a cosmic trope and a later-to-be-realized and staged ambition. The source of the poet's inspiration, his power, and his responsibilities is dream, addressed in the first words of the first epigraph of the book, an aphorism probably invented, in a device imitated from the chapter-epigraphs in Walter Scott's novels. Scott similarly invoked "Old Plays" as the source for what were in fact his own words.

*In dreams begins responsibility.*

*OLDPLAY*

*How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams.*

*KHOUNG-FOU-TSEU*.
Ancestor worship, of culture heroes in the manner of Confucius' *Analects* takes place via their dynamic presence as spirits in dreams. In addressing his own "old fathers" Yeats appears to apologise

> Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
> Although I have come close on forty-nine,
> I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
> Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

There is no hint of the middle-aged robustness of *King Lear*'s Kent who, when asked "How old art thou?" replies

> Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing, nor so old to dote on her for any thing. I have years on my back forty-eight.

rather, in Yeats's case there is also an urge to be older – "close on forty-nine" – to be freed from any responsibility to reproduce, perhaps, which is congruent with the suggestion I am making that "nothing but a book" is as much a boast as an apology. After all, the same old fathers, or one of the Yeats side of the family, spoke "the only eulogy that turn[ed Yeats's] head: 'We have ideas and no passions, but by marriage with a Pollexfen we have given a tongue to the sea cliffs'."

From the epigraphs we move to the opening rhymes, and from those rhymes to "The Grey Rock". In its opening address it calls up the dead poets of The Rhymers' Club, in a frame tale which underlines the performed quality of *Responsibilities*.

> Poets with whom I learned my trade,
> Companions of the Cheshire Cheese,
> Here's an old story I've remade,
> Imagining 'twould better please
> Your ears than stories now in fashion...
> When cups went round at close of day –
> Is not that how good stories run –?

What is immediately noticed is that epigraph, opening and closing rhymes, and frame-tale level of 'The Grey Rock' are all in italics. In fact, there are many other verses and refrains right through to the closing rhymes in italics. It seems not only that the device of italics signals a frame to the collection, or an outer frame to a narrative poem, but also a consistent level of supernatural references. The old fathers, dead poets, the beggars in 'Beggar to Beggar Cried', even the old crane of Gort whose tale frames that of King Guaire and 'The Three Beggars', exists on the italic level of the outer frame of the book.

In fact, on closer examination of the 1914 edition, the typographical schema can be seen to be even more elaborate. For the opening and closing rhymes of the volume are printed in rubric and italic, marking out an entire frame of reference to which the (black) italic of the two epigraphs relates.

This use of typography and ink colours to frame collections and to designate frame tales or levels of personal reference in narrative poems was not new to *Responsibilities*. It was a development of a method first used in *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age*. In that collection, rubric was used for the title of the sequence and for the personal level of 'Baile and Aillinn'. It seems likely that the device was used because the Cuala Press at the time had no fount of italic types. The rubric is used inconsistently where italic might otherwise have been used. But there is no doubt that this was his first experiment with the typographical signification of frame-tales, and I shall return to the subject of *In the Seven Woods* later.
II The Narrative Diptych

For the moment, let me return to 'The Grey Rock' and to 'The Two Kings', the poem which should follow it, but which in the Collected Poems (1933 and later) is printed in the "Narrative and Dramatic" section, tucked discreetly at the back of the book. In the former poem I have suggested that italic is used to indicate the first level of narrative. In the book's theatre, this typography indicates the story is addressed to the immortal audience, the dead poets. Its implicit perspective is the immortal perspective of Aoife, betrayed by a faithless mortal to whom she has given her protection and who prefers "one crowded hour of glorious" death (as it were) to immortality.

Yeats's position on this material is clear, and he expects his audience of dead poets to share his perspective "The moral's your because it's mine" he warns them. While they had shown bravery in keeping "the Muses' sterner laws" and facing their ends "[u]nrepenting", they had nevertheless given no "loud service to a cause". Just as Maud Gonne is characterised as...

... a woman none could please,
Because she dreamed when but a child
Of men and women made like these;

so the poets are expected to be on the immortal side, as it were, and to sympathise with the cry of Aoife

Why must the lasting love what passes,
Why are the gods by men betrayed?

and with that of the minstrel who tells the tale, which is also the tale of himself

I have kept my faith, though faith was tried.
To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot.
And the world's altered since you died,
And I am in no good repute
With the loud host before the sea,
That think sword-strokes were better meant
Than lover's music – let that be,
So that the wandering foot's content.

In the original collection, and in fact in all publications of Responsibilities until 1933, "The Grey Rock' was followed by "The Two Kings'. In that year, Yeats acceded to a request from his publisher, Harold Macmillan, to put the narrative poems in a section at the back of that popular one volume collection, which Yeats had suggested to Macmillan, as a way of keeping his name before the public while an edition de luxe was held over during the Depression.

The anachronical, two-part arrangement of "Lyrical" and "Narrative and Dramatic" sections was designed expressly to encourage new buyers, who would initially encounter Yeats's short, well-loved lyrics. With the preferable chronological arrangement which recorded the poet's "permanent self or image of his life in his work awaiting its moment, Yeats was "delighted" by the suggestion of a popular arrangement, but it is now known to have been subsidiary to his preferred conception, in which 'The Two Kings' remained steadfastly in its place in Responsibilities. I shall therefore consider its placement here.

In 'The Two Kings' there is no personal frame of reference, but there are two levels to the narrative. Yeats had been a master of narrative enclosure ever since writing 'The
Wanderings of Oisin' in which the story of Oisin's adventures (from one of his sources) is enfolded within the colloquy of Oisin and Patrick (from his other source). In 'The Two Kings' the first story concerns King Eochaid, returning to Tara from a royal tour, who is unable to administer the coup de grace to a miraculous white stag. In the second story, Etain his wife is courted by her faery husband from a former life, Midhir, using the ruse of a mysterious illness which has fallen upon Eochaid's brother Ardan. Etain agrees to requite Ardan's hopeless passion for her, which it appears is killing him. When she goes to meet him in secret, she is confronted by Midhir, who has been elaborately wooing her through the sickly Ardan. The two stories have one supernatural occurrence in common: both Eochaid and Etain find themselves, at the moment of their respective supernatural encounters, pressed against a beech-tree. When the two stories are considered together, we can see that these are two different accounts of the same supernatural encounter: each is confronting the shapechanging god Midhir in a different way. Eochaid forces the god-as-stag against a beech-bole and draws his knife when

... On the instant
  It vanished like a shadow, and a cry
  So mournful that it seemed the cry of one
  Who had lost some unimaginable treasure
  Wandered between the blue and the green leaf
  And climbed into the air, crumbling away,
  Till all had seemed a shadow or a vision
  But for the trodden mire, the pool of blood,
  The disembowelled horse

22 At the same moment, in, as it were, another part of the forest, Etain is confronting Midhir, her immortal husband. As Etain later tells Eochaid, who has intuitively known that the answer to his supernatural encounter will be found when he returns to his wife, she had answered Midhir's wooing by saying

... I am King Eochaid's wife
  And with him have found every happiness
  Women can find

23 While Midhir has replied

... With a most masterful voice,
  That made the body seem as it were a string
  Under a bow, he cried, "What happiness
  Can lovers have that know their happiness
  Must end at the dumb stone? But where we build
  Our sudden palaces in the still air
  Pleasure itself can bring no weariness,
  Nor can time waste the cheek, nor is there foot
  That has grown weary of the wandering dance,
  Nor an unlaughing mouth, but mine that mourns,
  Among those mouths that sing their sweethearts' praise,
  Your empty bed."

24 Etain replies

... "How should I love," I answered,
  "Were it not that when the dawn has lit my bed
  And shown my husband sleeping there, I have sighed,
  'Your strength and nobleness will pass away'?
  Or how should love be worth its pains were it not
  That when he has fallen asleep within my arms,
  Being wearied out, I love in man the child?"
What can they know of love that do not know
She builds her nest upon a narrow ledge
Above a windy precipice?"40.

Midhir's appeal for her to come now and share his "useless happiness" rather than wait until her death reunites her with him anyway offers her her clinching argument in favour of mortal, rather than immortal love

"Never will I believe there is any change
Can blot out of my memory this life
Sweetened by death, but if I could believe,
That were a double hunger in my lips
For what is doubly brief."
And now the shape
My hands were pressed to vanished suddenly.
I staggered, but a beech-tree stayed my fall'
And clinging to it I could hear the cocks
Crow upon Tara."41.

The first story is wholly invented by Yeats to enclose just this one of many narratives from the Irish myths of Etain and Midhir42. Its point of contact with the story it encloses is the theme of 'The Grey Rock' viewed, as it were, from another perspective. A faithless immortal wife is faithful to her mortal husband for the duration of her mortal span, but this action (unlike that of Dubhlaing O'Hartagan in the earlier poem) is endorsed by the enclosing narrative. King Eochaid even thanks his wife for offering to sleep with his brother to cure his mysterious illness43, while thanking her for not sleeping with her faery husband

... King Eochaid bowed his head
And thanked her for her kindness to his brother,
For that she promised, and for that refused44.

Mortal life and its loyalties are thus shown by the two poems to be the antithesis of immortal life. The idea obsessed Yeats in all of his folkloric researches during the late nineties. "There is a war on between the living and the dead, and the Irish stories keep harping on it", he wrote in The Celtic Twilight45, and it is one of the paradoxical lessons in The Hour Glass

There are two living countries, one visible
and one invisible, and when it is summer there, it
is winter here, and when it is November with us,
it is lambing-time there46.

My suggestion is that it is inside, as it were, the antinomy of the complementary heroic narratives that the poet dwells, and he dwells uncomfortably. His stage is lit by their contrasting spotlights, he is trapped in their double focus. For the minstrel in the ghostly theatre, immortal and mortal responsibilities are antithetical. Yet he is mortal – and torn: the book or children, the wandering foot or the loud host. In Etain's words, he builds his nest

... upon a narrow ledge
Above a windy precipice.

Or, as Yeats himself put it in Per Arnica Silentia Lunae, "The poet... lives amid the whirlwinds that beset [the] threshold47. He is a creature of the margins, like his beggars, hermits and water-birds, and his lyrics, which follow, live in a crossfire and conflicting loyalties.
III The finished man among his enemies

30 If as I suggest, we should look upon this book as a performance in which the minstrel dramatises himself against the intolerable forces expressed in his stories and the contents of his memory, then we should not forget that its phantasmagoria of ancestors, dead poets, mythic heroes and visionary spectres are, as much as are the Dublin Lockout, the Hugh Lane Gallery controversy, and that over The Playboy of the Western World, the elements of another narrative, that of the poet's invented self, his hero who is, and is not, W.B. Yeats. Frank Kermode reminds us that human beings demand narrative to make sense of their lives46. It is this search for concords which connect Yeats's own times and his larger – eternal – concerns which characterises him; Yeats always functions in an order of being outside that of the history of his own times48. The interlinking of narrative and lyric in Responsibilities shows Yeats's attempt to situate himself as a hero, and his discouragements, within that larger theatre, that theatrum mundi.

31 In it, we can see that the man Yeats, the "bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast"50 has become what the theatrical lingo of his day called a responsible. A responsible was an actor who could be depended upon to play any part at short notice, as Jerome K. Jerome reminds us51. The finished man, (complete, not exhausted), was a responsible because he had invented enough masks – enough selves – to play the many parts required of him.

32 In a crude sense to be prepared for responsibility means to be prepared to "take the blame" (though not "out of all sense and reason"52, but it also means rather more than that. It is "intimately related to the theological issue of salvation, the allocation of divine rewards and punishments"53. In Yeats's case the inner certainty that he could now respond (responsively and responsibly) to crises personal and public, had its price: to be a responsible in the theatre of public life might mean becoming irresponsible to "sterner laws" and duties. In the grand antinomies of the volume's title, it might be more responsible for the poet to be irresponsible in the world's eyes. John Unterecker once proposed a complete taxonomy of the various responsibilities of this volume54, but it seems clear that it is preferable to see the supernatural responsibilities as personal or social irresponsibilities, the personal or social responsibilities as supernaturally irresponsible. The poet was the combat between an ideal self and a public man. What I have tried to show of his role as a minstrel, and of the consciously "performance-orientated" context in which the poems interact, makes it possible and necessary to reread the personal lyrics (and the many political and personal annotations already suggested for them, and their influences, autobiographical, poetic and intellectual, such as Hoby's translation of Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier55) in the light of a considerable simplification.

33 Yeats’s poems – his progeny – depended on maintaining clearly the lines of contact with dream, with myth, with irresponsibility. If words were to "obey his call", he had a supervening responsibility to irresponsibility itself. This is expressed in the book's affinity with that peculiarly Irish wildness which T.R. Henn has defined so exactly in the context of the beggarman poems of Responsibilities, with their connotations of King Lear's "poor, bare, fork'd animal"56. There was more enterprise in walking naked, with unhoused ghosts in 'The Cold Heaven' with hermits, beggars, dead poets, drunken gods and heroes, barnacle geese and a proud, wayward squirrel appointed by no government. Even the "wild geese" of Irish political exile troop with those the world's forgot57. Such
celebrations laud that irresponsibility which is ineluctably linked to the sources of his inspiration.  

Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bread to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

34 The closing poems express the poet's own "curious astringent joy" with the unflinching bleakness of his lot: lyrics which begin in discouragement and include taking the blame "out of all sense and reason" leave him nevertheless "[r]iddled with light".

35 A ghost from Herodotus, sent out naked on the roads, he seems in a bleaker purgatory than the ghost of Parnell in 'To a Shade'. Yet he has consolations: the exercise of praising friends, such as Lady Gregory who partnered with him with Mind and delighted mind; Olivia Shakespear who

Had strength that could unbind
What none can understand,
What none can have and thrive,
Youth's dreamy load... .

36 and Maud Gonne, the memory of whom could cause him to "shake from head to foot"; and the rather more palpable consolation to match the "surmise[d] companions", the "sterner conscience" and "friendlier home" at Coole.

37 There are two features of the patterning of the latter parts of the volume to note: Yeats continues to mix what he called "story poems" with personal lyrics. The irresponsibilities of "the bad hour before the dawn" or 'The Three Hermits' and 'The Three Beggars' are registered in narratives. The last named poems also remind one that a feature of the volume's pattern is the use of doublets: 'The Grey Rock' and 'The Two Kings' are a diptych which prepares the reader for the double perspectives of what Yeats himself called the "complementary forms" of "fables": 'The Magi' and 'The Dolls'; 'The Witch' and 'The Peacock'; To a Child dancing in the Wind' and 'Two Years Later'. The duality, once the relation of the two initial narrative poems has been restored, is everywhere apparent. Half-anonymous yet personal, the minstrel in the theatre dramatises himself against the background of his own heroic tales for a departed audience, and yet he is also the finished man among his enemies, another kind of bard, fierce of satire and ready to assail those enemies.
IV The World Growing Plastic Again

It is not the first time Yeats has so structured a book. *In the Seven Woods: Being Chiefly Poems of the Irish Heroic Age* (1903), had opened with two double-decker heroic tales, followed by sequence of personal lyrics in their shadow. There too, the poet had been present in his narrative tales (a point I shall return to), and his self-dramatisation follows in shorter poems. That structure also has been obliterated in the *Collected Poems*. It had been partly dismantled earlier by Yeats, but its order (if not its sequence) had been carefully preserved. When the book of Yeats's poems is read in the order he himself intended, the two narratives still precede the detumescent little group of lyrics grouped under the section title: "In The Seven Woods", their diminished stature and "heart-revealing intimacy" standing in contrast to the two preceding heroic tales the poet has told.

This partial restoration (which was carried into the *Edition de Luxe* proofs which became *The Poems* [London, Macmillan, 1949], the copy text for the *Variorum Edition* [1957] and the basic text for *Yeats's Poems* [1989]) suggests strongly that the interdependence of narrative and lyric modes continued to matter to Yeats. There is nothing surprising in that: *cante-fable* structure was the term used in the 1890s for ancient Irish story-telling, and any accurate record of his middle years would preserve his preoccupation with it.

Further, one of the ways Yeats sought to remake himself after the end of the nineties was by developing this interdependence of lyric and other modes. He had once seen the long poem as a (Keatsian) "thicket", "a region into which one should wander from the cares of life". He had largely ceased to write narrative poems during the nineties (when he wrote almost everything else). But even during the Eglinton controversy of 1898, in *The Autumn of the Flesh*, when he put his maximum weight behind Arthur Symons's endorsement of the Mallarméan "poetry of essences... [of] little and intense poems", he had written that, though he perceived "a crowning crisis of the world" when

we are beginning to be interested in many things which positive science, the
interpreter of exterior law, has always denied: communion of mind with mind in
thought and without words, foreknowledge in dreams and in visions, and the
coming among us of the dead... I think we will not cease to write long poems, but
rather we will write them more and more as our new belief makes the world plastic
under our hands again...".

Narrative poetry might be necessary to the movement, presumably in a larger educative purpose, particularly in Ireland. Its role was to be for Yeats in part fulfilled by Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) which provided the modern world with what he thought laudable versions of Irish myths. The surprising success of those books I think in part quelled Yeats's sense of an unfilled need for mythological narrative, though he was to use them in writing his own narrative poetry.

V "Mythical Method" and Epic Misreading

T.S. Eliot has a very well-known remark about James Joyce and the "mythical method" of *Ulysses*.

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity
and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.
They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of
an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a
way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense
panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method
already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to
have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the
horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be
comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible
what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may
now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the
modern world possible for art... And only those who have won their own discipline
in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end,
can be of any use in furthering this advance45.

Michael Sidnell suggests43 that Eliot had *In the Seven Woods: Being Chiefly Poems of the Irish
Heroic Age* (1903) in mind when he wrote this passage, and certainly Joyce was to be
impressed enough by the book to parody 'Baile and Aillinn' in *Ulysses*, though there are
signs that his admiration for Yeats's methods might have been a more complex matter
than Eliot allows for here46.

Eliot's attitude to the "mythical method" and to Yeats's "adumbration" of it is very much
a post-Great War attitude. It might also conceal and indebtedness to Yeats that Eliot
preferred to understate47. Its anachronism ignores the facts: in 1903, Yeats had not found
contemporary history anarchic or futile, he lived in a weary time, to be sure, and history
had not delivered an Armageddon he both feared and actively looked forward to, but
weariness of passion, emotional detumescence, was a personal failure, rather than a
failure of history.

Eliot's perspective suggests some development from the "adumbration of method"
supplied by Yeats to the full-blown mythic method of *Ulysses*. The development is a
growth in irony: the futility and anarchy which Eliot believes he perceives in the present
is ordered, controlled and shaped by the "mythical method", which makes that modern
world possible for art by holding, as it were, a myth up to perceived social reality.

In *In the Seven Woods* Yeats had hoped that indefatigable rewriting (eg. of *On Baile's Strand*)
might bring a "less dream-burdened will into my verses"78. But this in itself is not enough
to authenticate the supposed origins of what we could call proto-modernism (at least it
relates to Yeats). There are good reasons to assume that Eliot as a later commentator in
searching for his own poetic roots, might not have comprehended Yeats's imperatives.

Eliot's anachronistic reading of Yeats by the light of a post-War sense of historical
formlessness and disaster does not accord with the relation to myth and the mythic world
which we know Yeats to have held. He was a believer, if a sceptical one, in spirit forces,
and in many phenomena which had direct equivalents in Irish faery belief. Irish myth had
a reality to him which Eliot had no reason to concede. What was the working nature of
that reality?

Consider, for the moment, his preoccupation "with a certain myth [involving "ecstasy at
the contemplation of ruin"] that was itself a reply to a myth [of his own time, that of
progress]". He characterised that relation not as "fiction, but one of those statements our
nature is compelled to make and employ as a truth though there cannot be sufficient
evidence"79. Although Yeats would seem to be using the word *fiction* in a sense remote
from that in which it is used by such a later commentator as Frank Kermode, it
nevertheless seems that in *Responsibilities* he uses Irish mythical stories for those purposes
which Kermode sees as the purposes of fictions, viz., "for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change... Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense of a lost order of time... fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now."80 Irish myths, internalised by a minstrel who is intent on dramatising his own predicament against those elements of myth which he interprets as most relevant to that predicament, become fictions under his hand. There is no wonder that Yeats felt "so little responsibility... for that mythological world"81.

VI Self-Portraiture and "The Tradition of Myself"

To trace Yeats's chief imperative of the years 1900-1914 back to its root-tip, one must recall why he had come to dislike some of his own imperatives of the late nineties. By 1903 he was prepared to admit

I am no longer in much sympathy with an essay like The Autumn of the Body, not that I think that essay untrue. But I think I mistook for a permanent phase of the world what was only a preparation. The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form, to get some kind of disembodied beauty, and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come. I feel about me and in me an impulse to create form, to carry the realization of beauty as far as possible.

It is frequently the case with Yeats that such a statement indicates a tide that has been running for some considerable time, and the directions in which his new enthusiasm for form were to lead him – self-portraiture – indicate in part the origins of the impulse in his sense of the vividness of Irish popular poetry. The very origins of the impulse are first found in a review of 1896, when Yeats recalled being greatly moved by "bad Irish verses" which nevertheless contained "the secret of much Irish poetry" viz., "the actual emotion of the writer"83. The discovery occasioned debates (as early as 1885) with his father who insisted that "personal utterance was only egotism"84. Another influence, not remembered by Yeats, was undoubtedly Douglas Hyde, who had insisted in 1890 that Gaelic folk-songs were "intensely interesting [because]... they certainly represent genuine passion...[and are]... the work of people whom strong passion caused to express themselves in verse"85.

By 1903 the idea had begun to emerge in lectures, where Yeats would tell the story of the bad verses by an "obscure Irish patriotic poet" who describes the "first sight of the hills of his own country as he came back on shipboard".

I found I was moved to tears. I said, "Why is this? It is very bad writing;" and the thought came to me "It is because it is a man's exact feeling, his own absolute thought put down as in a letter." I said to myself, "We have thrown away the most powerful thing in all literature – personal utterance. This poetry of abstract personality has taken the blood out of us, and I will write poetry as full of my own thought as if it were a letter to a friend, and I will write these poems in simple words, never using a phrase I could not use in prose. I will make them the absolute speech of a man."86.

It is not entirely clear at what date Yeats made these firm intentions: what is clear is that by 1903 they were being recalled as fresh imperatives for his audience. In 'Four Years: 1887-1891' he tells us of those earlier hopes, for

an art where the artist's handiwork would hide as under those half-anonymous chisels, or as we find it in some old Scots ballads... I took great pleasure in certain allusions to the singer's life one finds in old romances and ballads, and thought his presence there all the more poignant because we discover it half lost87.
And as the changing experiments got a measure of success Yeats came to dream of a "theatre of speech, of romance, of extravagance", a theatre of narrative and minstrelsy. Narrative poetry had to "find its minstrels again, and lyrical poetry adequate singers" and these were concerns which became separated from those of the Abbey which somewhat to Yeats's dismay had concentrated on what he called "peasant comedy". In 1908 he wrote that "[w]e still dream" of the imperatives expressed in his 'Literature and the Living Voice' written in 1905. That essay represents the high point of his hope for a narrative poetry of the "half-anonymous chisel" and a revival of a culture of the cottage. Loathing modern recitation — "[s]ome youg man in evening clothes will recite to you The Dream of Eugene Aram, and it will be laughable, grotesque, and a little vulgar" — he affirmed

We must go to the villages or we must go back hundreds of years to Wolfram of Eschenbach and the castles of Thuringia. In this, as in all other arts, one finds its law and its true purpose when one is near the source. The minstrel never dramatised anybody but himself. It was impossible, from the nature of the words the poet had put into his mouth, or that he had made for himself, that he should speak as another person. He will go no nearer to drama than we do in daily speech, and he will not allow you for any long time to forget himself. Our own Raftery will stop the tale to cry, "This is what I, Raftery, wrote down in the book of the people"; or, "I, myself, Raftery, went to bed without supper that night"... so many lines of narrative, and then a phrase about himself and his emotions. The reciter cannot be a player, for that is a different art; but he must be a messenger, and he should be as interesting, as exciting, as are all that carry great news. He comes from far off, and he speaks of far-off things with his own peculiar animation... His art is nearer to pattern than that of the player. It is always allusion, never illusion; for what he tells of, no matter how impassioned he may become, is always distant, and for this reason he may permit himself every kind of nobleness... In a short poem he may interrupt the narrative with a burden...

In case any should be deluded by Ezra Pound into thinking that the minstrel phase in Yeats's poetic was the product of Pound's troubadour enthusiasms, it is well to note that this lecture was delivered several years before Pound came onto the London scene. Out of its Irish roots arose Yeats's insistence upon candour, upon the idea that a poet's "life is an experiment in living" that his "passionate speech" (for Yeats the "one art"), is a mode of "self-portraiture". This was the conclusion of that debate with John Buder Yeats, and Yeats may be said to have won it when he wrote to his father in August 1913 about his change from a poetry of "vision" to one of "self portraiture": "I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling.".

VII Lacrimae Rerum and the "Splendour of Imagination"

Responsibilities is the flower of Yeats's Irish speech movement, but it is also its epitaph. With Florence Emery having gone to Ceylon in 1912, its great exemplar (though not its Muse) had departed. It was the end too of the hopes for a revival based on a narrative, peasant culture, which had always been, for all its charm, something of a sentimental cultural project.

The end of the phase begun with In the Seven Woods (1903) also marked the beginning of a poetry in which full self-portraiture was possible without the trope of minstrelsy. That "secondary or interior personality created by me out of the tradition of myself...
personality (alas, to me only possible in my writings)" allowed for the whole scale internalisation of the stances struck towards myth. With one splendid exception, long poems in future were to be greater lyrics and dialogue poems, or more formal extended lyrical modes, such as elegies.

57 Yeats also progresses from Responsibilities more certain that he has created a character called "Yeats". He has earned the right to mythologise himself, and everything can now take place within the compass of a character large enough continually to command our attention. The finished man, among his enemies perhaps, but always within "his own secret meditation... the labyrinth that he has made", which is, for the reader, his text.

58 So, much of the scaffolding found in Responsibilities, useful as it was to structure that collection, is no longer quite so necessary, though the interdependence of shorter and longer poems remains. How Yeats freed himself from a minstrel's dependence upon Irish narrative poetry came about as a result of a controversy over 'The Two Kings' between Ezra Pound and John Butler Yeats.

59 When Pound reviewed Responsibilities Poems and a Play for Poetry (Chicago) he praised (in spite of its "obscurity") 'The Grey Rock' for its "curious nobility... which is, to me at least, the very core of Mr. Yeats's production, the constant element of his writing". Pound could hardly withhold such praise: 'The Grey Rock' had won $250,000 (£50,00) from Poetry in the preceding November, and Yeats had given most of the money to Pound, keeping but £10.0.0 so as to be able to order a book-plate from Thomas Sturge Moore. But Pound was incurious as to the other half of the narrative diptych: "it is impossible to take any interest in a poem like The Two Kings – one might as well read the Idylls of another" he said in the same review, displaying an extraordinarily deaf ear to Tennyson as well as to Yeats. John Buder Yeats was livid:

... what the devil does Ezra Pound mean by comparing The Two Kings' with Tennyson's Idylls? The Two Kings is immortal, and immortal because of its intensity and concentration: it is so full of the "tears of things" that I could not read it aloud... [adding in a foot-note] In The Two Kings there is another quality often sought for by Tennyson, but never attained, and that is splendor of imagination, a liberating splendor, cold as sunrise. I don't agree with Ezra Pound.

60 As Yeats ever after remembered, the phrase gave him the formula 'The Fisherman' adumbrates

Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
in scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, "Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.
The formula, it is to be noted, is a development of John Butler Yeats's description. Yeats adds that troubling polysyllable passionate, a key and frequent "metrical trick"\textsuperscript{106}, but in this context also a key doctrine. From henceforth cold form will contain hot matter, and the "completeness of the holding down" will match the "stirring of the beast underneath" \textsuperscript{107} but the "concord of this discord"\textsuperscript{108} is not wholly a matter of technique and craft.

To write "for my own race and the reality" it was necessary to write not for the insolent, the craven, the knavish or the drunken, the witty, the clever, or any who beat down

... the wise
And great an beaten down

but to write for this

... man who does not exist
A man who is but a dream.

No longer was Yeats addressing dream-figures and re telling Irish heroic narratives to them as a backcloth to the ignominy of the modern world (in some modernist irony as Eliot might have seen it), but writing for a "man who does not exist", setting up what Seamus Heaney has recently called the poet's counter-reality\textsuperscript{109}. Henceforth, Yeats was able directly to "take on the world on his own terms", as Seamus Heaney once put it
defin[ing] the areas where he would negotiate and where he would not; ... never accepting the terms of another's argument but propound [ing] his own.

Heaney continues in the same passage to a wider claim:

I assume that this peremptoriness, this apparent arrogance, is exemplary in an artist, that it is proper and even necessary for him to insist on his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference. This will often seem like irresponsibility [emphasis added] or affectation, sometimes like callousness, but from the artist's point of view it is an act of integrity\textsuperscript{110}.

Proposing that counter-reality, that antiself, that imagined audience, enabled Yeats to perform the poetic equivalent of a Copernican revolution and achieve self-dramatisation without egotism. The process by which this happened is properly the subject of another essay, but it is perhaps best summarised as follows. Yeats came to see that the implicit narrative of his chief character "Yeats" was itself the thread on which he could string, or arrange, his poems. It was not possible entirely to abandon the scaffolding which fictions provided, but it was now possible to abandon a cantelelable dependent upon Irish mythical narrative. It was now bolder to divide himself into Hic and Ille; to bring back in The Wild Swans at Coole (1919), Robartes and Aherne; to augment their number through the happy accident of error; to propagate the Arabian Nights fictions which scaffold the poems until A Vision was ready in 1925\textsuperscript{111}, as his own extended fiction. By these means Yeats turned himself inside out, invented or reinvented fictions about himself, widened that mental theatre and invited his audience to take him on his own terms. This was his paradoxical path to self-dramatisation without egotism.
NOTES

1. (1) Responsibilities represents one of those plateaus of reappraisal and renewal” (John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats [London, Thames and Hudson, 1959, 1973], p. 113). Is there any volume of Yeats's verse which does not?


3. (3) VP., p. 842.

4. (4) On which see YP., p. 706-749.

5. (5) On the changes in the canon, order and text of Responsibilities from 1914 onwards see below, note 8.

6. (6) VPL., p. 646.

7. (7) Examples include the printing of On Baile's Strand with the poems of In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age (Dundrum: Dun Emer, 1903) and of The Green Helmet, An Heroic Farce in the oddly titled The Green Helmet and Other Poems (Churchtown, Dundrum: Cuala, 1910): neither play was an integral part of the sequence of its volume in the way in which The Hour Glass was included within the sequence enclosed by the opening and closing verses of "Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain", and "While I, from that red-throated whisperer" in Responsibilities: Poems and a Play, (Churchtown, Dundrum, 1914). There has been debate over whether The Death of Cuchulain and Purgatory should be seen as part of the sequence of poems in what became (after Yeats's death, but printed according to his volume –order), Last Poems and Two Plays (Dublin, Cuala, 1939). See Phillip L. Marcus, "Yeats's 'Last Poems': a Reconsideration" in Warwick Gould (ed.), Yeats Annual N° 5 (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 3-14


Years Later) which directly complements the other doublets in the 1914 edition: see infra Section III. There were other changes to titles and texts of poems, and the deletion of certain notes. For Later Poems (1922), Yeats rewrote certain portions of The Hour Before Dawn and "The Attack on The Playboy of the Western World, 1907" and other poems not in the Responsibilities unit. He also considered adding The New Faces, written late in 1912 which "well might have appeared earlier [ie in Responsibilities (1914)] beside its sister poems To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing and To a Shade" (Chapman, loc. cit., p. 115), but for Yeats's tact in withholding the poem at Lady Gregory's request. Although he pasted a holograph copy of the poem into the copy of Responsibilities and Other Poems (1917) now in the Holland Library, Washington State University, Pullman, suggesting that he intended it to form part of the Responsibilities sequence in Later Poems (1922). A holograph of the poem was pasted onto p. 49 of Responsibilities and Other Poems (1917), over The Well and the Tree. That poem was the only poem not part of the 1914 sequence: it is the closing lyric from At the Hawk's Well and was added to the sequence (between Beggar to Beggar Cried and Running to Paradise) for the 1916 trade edition. See Chapman, loc. cit., p. 115-129. Sturge Moore clearly drew his inspiration for that volume's cover-design from The Well and the Tree. See W. Gould, (ed.), Yeats Annual N° 4 (London: Macmillan, 1986), plates 9-11.

13. (13) It was Hugh Kenner who remarked that Yeats "was an architect, not a decorator; he didn't accumulate poems, he wrote books" ("The Sacred Book of the Arts", Irish Writing: [W.B. Yeats A Special Number], 31, Summe 1955, p. 24-35), and much reprinted since, eg. in Kenner's Gnomon: Essays on Contemporary Literature (New York: Obolensky, 1958), p. 9-29. Kenner's comment was made about volume-order, and he was to extrapolate his ideas from "books" to the Book. But the idea that "the unit in which to inspect and discuss [Yeats's] development is not the poem or sequence of poems, but the volume", (Irish Writing, loc. cit., p. 27) cannot be translated as easily to "the oeuvre", the deliberate artistic Testament, a division of that new Sacred Book of the Arts" as Kenner might have hoped. When his article had appeared, Mrs. Yeats alerted him to the fact that the order of the "Last Poems" in Poems (London: Macmillan, 1949) was not Yeats's own, thus making it no longer possible to see "order" and "arrangement" as different aspects of the same "Sacred Book" or "dramatic revelation". For Kenner's account see Richard J. Finneran, Editing Yeats's Poems: A Reconsideration (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 165-166. Note, however, that the conclusions Finneran draws from the episode are very dubious.


16. (16) VP., p. 269.

17. (17) VP., p. 320.

18. (18) The same phrase is also used in the epilogue to Johnson's The Poetaster "Leave me. There's something come into my thought That must and shall be sung high and aloof, Safe from the wolf's black jaw, and the dull ass's hoof (YP., p. 551)


20. (20) See for example the chapter "mottoes" in The Monastery (but note the exceptional motto to Ch. xiv, ascribed to a New Play); The Abbot; Peveril of the Peak; Woodstock; The Fair Maid of Perth, etc...

21. (21) VP., p. 269.

22. (22) Analects VII, v. In Legge's translation: "Extreme in my decay. For a long time I have not dreamed as I was wont to, that I saw the Duke of Chau". Yeats's "Prince of Chang" may have been
a simple misremembering (for he does credit the quote to Confucius). Yeats returns to "The great lord of Chou" in Vacillation, VP., p. 502.

23. (23) VP., p. 270.


25. (25) When the contrary thought is expressed in Beggar to Beggar Cried there is no mention of children in the beggar's "ease", and his wife "need not be too comely – let it pass", (VP., p. 300).


27. (27) VP., p. 270-271.


29. (29) Dundrum, Cuala, 1903.

30. (30) Thus when the two colours of the Cuala edition were slavishly followed for the trade edition published by the Macmillan Company, New York, 1903, Yeats felt the book had been "spoil" (Allan Wade, A Bibliography of the Writings of W.B. Yeats, [London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 3rd. edition, revised and edited by Russell K. Alspach, 1968], p. 68). Rubric is not used for the personal level of "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" (eg. lines 30-35, VP., p. 181) which as yet lacks its italicised first stanza, not added until 1932 in what was, however, a congruent development – see VP p. 180). Black type is used for the argument of Baile and Aillinn and yet rubric for the title and opening stage directions of On Baile's Strand, while rubric is used not only for the narrator's level of Baile and Aillinn but also for the Ogham letters of Baile's grave (line 118, VP., p. 114).

31. (31) The legend of Dubhlaing O'Hartagan, who spumed the offer of two hundred years with Aoibhell of Craig Liath by breaking that offer's condition and fighting alongside Murchad, son of Brian Boru in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, is outlined in YP., P. 541. See Also Gods and Fighting Men The Story of the Tuatha De Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland, arranged and put into English by Lady Gregory, with a Preface by W.B. Yeats, (Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 87-88. On the following pages is the story of Midhir and Etain, which Yeats used (among other sources) for The Two Kings.

32. (32) VP., p. 271.

33. (33) Ibid., p. 273.

34. (34) Ibid., p. 272.

35. (35) Ibid., p. 275.

36. (36) Ibid., p. 276.


38. (38) VP., p. 278.


42. (42) For a brief list of sources and authorities see YP., p. 541-542. The story of Etain and Midhir was a favourite of Yeats's and to some extent in his choice of incident (from his most immediate source in Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men [see above n.17] p. 91 and seq.), Yeats was writing around his favourite episode in the story. Midhir's wooing of Etain had been literally
translated for Yeats by Maud Gonne from the French in H. D’Arbois de Jubainville’s *Le Cycle Mythologique Irlandais et La Mythologie Celtique* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1884) for the notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); see VP., p. 805, 817.

43. (43) cf. Lady Gregory’s discreet economy: "he was thankful to his wife for the kindness she had shown to [his brother]" (*Gods and Fighting Men*, op. cit., p. 93). In so far as *The Two Kings* may be said to have a personal allegory, it would seem to refer to Olivia Shakespear and her commitment to her husband, both because of its date of composition (1912) and the probability that Yeats had a second affair with Olivia Shakespear in 1910. See Deirdre Toomey "'Worst Part of Life': Yeats's Horoscopes for Olivia Shakespear" in Warwick Gould (ed.) *Yeats Annual N° 6* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 222-226. But for the view that the poem relates to Maud Gonne, see Phillip L. Marcus, "Incarnation in 'Middle Yeats'" in Richard J. Finneran (ed.) *Yeats Annual N° 1* (London: Macmillan Press, 1892), p. 68-81.

44. (44) VP., p. 286.

45. (45) Myth. 116; the two conceptions just as surely "dying each other's life, living each other's death" as Yeats would later put the Heraclitean thought in *A Vision* (London, Macmillan, 1937, 1962, p. 68).

46. (46) Vpl., p. 583.

47. (47) Myth. p. 333.


49. (49) cf. T.S. Eliot's judgment: "Yeats... was one of the very few whose history is the history of their own time", in "The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. A Lecture" in *Purpose* XII, 3-4, (July-December, 1940), p. 127.

50. (50) E&I., p. 509.


52. (52) VP., p. 316.


54. (54) John Unterecker, op. cit., p. 113-114.


56. (56) III. iv, lines 106-108: "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art. – Off, off, you lendings! – Come, unbutton here." See Henn’s *The Lonely Tower* (London: Methuen, 1950, second ed., 1965), p. 92-94. Ch. VI is an excellent meditation on *Responsibilities*.

57. (57) VP., p. 273. Yeats’s magnificent stanza:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave? (VP., p. 290).

has been deftly traced to its origins in Thomas Davis’s "The Green Above the Red" by Colin Meir in *The Ballads and Songs of W.B. Yeats: The Anglo-Irish Heritage in Subject and Style* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 92-93. As well as forcing the reader to question "delirium", Yeats’s transumption of Davis's lines

Sure 'twas for this Lord Edward died, and Wolf Tone sunk serene –
Because they could not bear to leave the Red above the Green;
And 'twas for this that Owen fought, and Sarsfield nobly bled –
Because their eyes were hot to see the Green above the Red.

brings the verse as well as the heroes of The Nation's popular balladry within the matrix of Yeats's meditation. Davis's lines are here quoted from National and Historical Ballads, Songs, and Poems by Thomas Davis, M.R.I.A. (Dublin: James Duffy and Sons, 1876), p. 191.

58. (58) The word "responsibility" came to be synonymous with the loss of inspiration: such a moment is evoked with paradoxical ease in a stanza of Vacillation

Although the summer sunlight gild
Cloudy leafage of the sky,
Or wintry moonlight sink the field
In storm-scattered intricacy,
I cannot look thereon,
Responsibility so weighs me down. (VP., p. 501, 1933).

In 1889, Yeats pondered the "responsibility of life" felt by a cat who had killed a mouse and become "not half so amusing". The "responsibility of life" was to be "always thinking" (L., p. 140).

59. (59) VP., p. 290-291.

60. (60) Yeats's phrase to describe the qualities he found in William Morris's prose romances. See L., p. 379.

61. (61) VP., p. 316.


63. (63) VP., p. 315.

64. (64) Ibid., p. 316.

65. (65) In a letter to Lady Gregory, 4 April, 1913. The poem was possibly The Three Beggars. See Donald T. Torchiana and Glenn O'Malley (eds.) "Some New Letters from W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory" in ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature iv: 3 (July 1963), p. 9-47 at p. 29.

66. (66) VP., p. 304.

67. (67) Ibid., p. 820.

68. (68) Ezra Pound reviewed Responsibilities (1916), and noted the bardic satire in a response which is worth quoting in a slightly larger compass: "...... Mr. Yeats has not 'gone off. He is the only poet of his decade who has not gradually faded into mediocrity... The new poems... hold their own; they establish their own tonality... There is a new robustness; there is the tooth of satire which is, in Mr. Yeats's case, too good a tooth to keep hidden. The Coat, the wild wolf-dog that will not praise his fleas, The Scholars are all the sort of poem that we would gladly read more of. There are a lot of fools to be killed and Mr. Yeats is an excellent slaughter-master, when he will but turn from ladies with excessive chevelure appearing in pearl-pale nuances... the glamour is still there in The Wind Among the Reeds for those who still want it... The ragged hat in Biscay Bay is a sign of the poet's relationship to his brother Jack B. Yeats, and a far cry from the bridles of Findrinny. But, despite such occasional bits of realism, the tone of the new book is romantic. Mr. Yeats is a romanticist, symbolist, occultist, for better or worse, now and for always... he is the only one left who has sufficient intensity of temperament to turn these modes into art" (Poetry IX, Dec. 1916, p. 150-151).

69. (69) The removal of the sub-title Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age took place in that crucial and overlooked development The Poetical Works of William W. Yeats Vol. 1 Lyrical Poems (1906). In the same volume, the characters' names in The Wind Among the Reeds were removed, a significant dismantlement of myth. Yeats seems to have wanted to get out of myth, as it were, and to demystify his readers by shaking off invented names in order to strike a series of poses in
the face of the various faery and other forces which infest that collection's emotional and psychic geography. (The removal of the character's names is not a wholly successful manoeuvre. They all become the figure at the centre which increases the risk that they will be confused with Yeats himself). "The Old Age of Queen Maeve and Baile and Aillinn follow the lyrics they formerly preceded and which are now separately grouped under the short title In the Seven Woods. In all later collections (except Collected Poems [1933]) the lyrics are replaced after the narratives, though under their separate title.

70. (70) A good example of cante-fable can be found in Comrac Thirdead Inso ("The Fight of Ferdiad") in Eugene O'Curry, On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish: a Series of Lectures ed. W.K. Sullivan, (London, Williams and Norgate, 1873), III, p. 414 and seq.. The term is familiar from the work of such folklorists of Yeats's time as Joseph Jacobs. See his "Childe Rowland", Folklore II: 11 (1891) p. 182-97 (p. 196).

71. (71) (L., p. 106). Yeats's 1889 definition is probably based upon a reading of Keats's description of Endymion as "a little region to wander in ... in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new on a second reading" in a letter to Benjamin Bailey of 8 October, 1817.. See Robert Gittings (ed.), The Letters of John Keats A Selection (Oxford: O.U.P., 1970), p. 27.

72. (72) The Autumn of the Body when collected in Ideas of Good and Evil (1903). See infra Section VI for Yeats's subsequent misgivings about the drift of this essay.

73. (73) E&I., P. 191-194.


76. (76) I hardly hear the purlieu cry
Or a Tommy talk as I pass one by
Before my thoughts begin to run
On F. M'Curdy Atkinson,
The same that had the wooden leg
And that filibustering filibeg
That never dared to slake his drouth,
Magee that had the chinless mouth.
Being afraid to marry on earth
They masturbated for all they were worth.
(Ulysses ed. H.W. Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior, [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986], p. 177). By "The Day of the Rabblemment" Joyce was ready to protest that the Irish Literary Theatre should be less mythic (than, say Diarmuid and Grania or Hyde's The Twisting of the Rope, might suggest). He turned on Yeats in his search for a theatre less Gaelic and mythic, and more Ibsenite and modern: 'In a little and form The Wind Among the Reeds is poetry of the highest order, and The Adoration of the Magi (a story one of the great Russians might have written) shows what Mr. Yeats can do when he breaks with the half-gods. But an aesthete has a floating will, and Mr. Yeats's treacherous instinct of adaptability must be blamed for his recent association with a platform [the Irish language movement] from which even self-respect should have urged him to refrain". Joyce was shortly to meet Yeats (at Russell's behest) in August 1902 and to declare at the end of the tea that Yeats was "too old for me to help you". Yeats was forbearing and replied by not including some notes of the conversation in a preface for Ideas of Good and Evil (1903) but by dedicating his stories in 1904 to Joyce and by stressing in a letter to Joyce that adaptability was necessary or one could "learn[] nothing". For the story of their relation in these years see Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (New and Revised Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982),

77. (77)
p. 98 & ff.; also see Ellmann's *Eminent Domain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 34, from which the quotations above are taken.

77. (77) Could it be that Eliot admired the poems-and-notes method of *The Wind Among the Reeds* enough to imitate it in *The Waste Land*? If so, does the "mythical method" take, in Eliot's view, its ultimate origin not in *The Seven Woods* (as Sidnell suggests) but in the 1899 collection?

78. (78) *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age*, (Dundrum: Cuala, 1903), p. 25. The parallelism of personal and mythical in a poem such as *Baile and Aillinn* is a development from the poems-and-notes method of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Yeats said in 1908 that the "reckless obscurity" of the poems in that collection had led him to construct the elaborate plinths of recondite notes on which they stand, notes full of "more wilful phantasy than I now think admirable, though what most mystical still seems to me the most true" (VP., p. 800).

79. (79) VP1., p. 932.


81. (81) VPl., p. 646.

82. (82) L., p. 402.


84. (84) Au., p. 102-103.


87. (87) Au., p. 150-151.


89. (89) The two essays "What is Popular Poetry?" and "Speaking to the Psaltery" were placed by Yeats at the opening of *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London, A.H. Bullen, 1903) perhaps with the intention of bringing his current concerns to the forefront ahead of older essays, such as "The Autumn of the Body". The definitive article on the subject is that of Ronald Schuchard, "The Minstrel in the Theatre: Chaucer, Arnold and Yeats's New Spiritual Democracy" in Richard J. Finneran (ed.), *Yeats Annual N° 2* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 3-25.

90. (90) Ex., p. 209.


92. (92) Ibid., p. 214.


95. (95) Ex., p. 217-218.

96. (96) L., p. 583. The idea, brewing for so long (see L. 462 for Yeats's 1905 imperatives of "common idiom" and "common passion"), was never abandoned: see E&I p. 512 and 529: "I have spent my life in clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye, and bringing all back to syntax that for fear alone" (*An Introduction for My Plays*, 1937).

97. (97) Mem., p. 142.

99. (99) VP., p. 431.
102. (102) Ibid. Pound had his own fish to fry in the review, wondering aloud whether Yeats could qualify as an Imagist. But he had been present when Yeats had been working on an early draft of The Two Kings when Yeats had summoned both Pound and Sturge Moore to help him get rid of "Miltonic generalization". See Donald T. Torchiana and Glenn O’Malley (eds.) "Some New Letters from W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory" (loc. cit.), p. 14. The same problem of Miltonic influence had beset Keats in his attempts at epic poetry: see Robert Gittings (ed.) The Letters of John Keats A Selection (Oxford O.U.P., 1972), p. 292.
103. (103) Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper, William M. Murphy (eds.) Letters to W.B. Yeats (London, Macmillan, 1977), I, p. 289. John Butler Yeats returned to the attack in a further letter of 14 August, 1914, characterising Pound as sharing with most Americans, but especially American women, a desire to live a "surface life" which "shuts them out of the world of dream and desire. Not for them the shaping power of imagination. They are exiles consoling themselves as they can, by saying things which are to convince themselves and others that they are superior beings... So you see I prefer your Two Kings, which I cannot read without tears, the intensity instantly assuaged by the rhythms of art, and the tears of sorrow mingling with the tears of beauty" (Ibid., p. 301).
104. (104) See E&I., p. 523.
105. (105) VP., p. 348.
106. (106) YP., p. 708.
110. (110) Seamus Heaney, Preoccupations (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 101. Adolphe Haberer alerted me to this juxtaposition, and I am very grateful to him.

AUTHOR

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Michael Robartes and the Dancer
Helicon and ni Houlihan

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1 *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) is an odd combination of ballad-history and epithalamion. Its oddity stems from Yeats's caution about publishing his 1916 poems. These lie like his metaphorical stone amidst marriage-poems written up to three years later. Further, both the ballad-history and the epithalamion breach their own conventions. The former is less faithful to Ireland, and the latter to monogamy than is usually the case. Yet the book's incongruities, both historical and literary, fairly represent the context which engendered 'The Second Coming' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter'.

2 Harold Bloom finds a single unifying theme in the collection: "hatred, sexual and political". Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford divides this into "two central preoccupations: sexuality and politics". I would like to add a third tier: aesthetics: or the tension between aesthetics and politics. That tension is played out with reference to the images of women which dominate this phase of the Yeatsian dialectic. Or perhaps the formulation should be "woman as image". I am more indulgent than feminist criticism to Yeats's characterisation of his Muse, his anima, as female. After all, a number of women-poets have their animus. The problem arises where such images impinge on the public domain.

In February 1916, Eoin MacNeill, nominal head of the Irish National Volunteers, though shut out from the secret inner council, was alarmed by the rising political temperature. Accordingly, he sent round a circular designed to cool the Volunteers' ardour: "what we call our country is not a poetical abstraction, as some of us ... are sometimes apt to imagine – with the help of our patriotic literature. There is no such person as Caitlin ni Houlihan or Roisin Dubh or the Sean bean Bhocht, who is calling upon us to serve her".

Yeats was by no means solely responsible for the fabrication of Cathleen Ni Houlihan. But in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* he implicitly accepts some responsibility by revising her image as personified by Maud Gonne. I will discuss this revision later on. For the moment I want to stress that there is now conflict rather than identity between woman as Muse and woman as Ireland. And I want to stress too that the female figures in this book – wife, daughter, dancer, witch, flawed goddess – can also be understood as incarnations of the Muse. They project the poetry's own self image.
That self image had been shocked and shattered by personal and public trauma. The centre which cannot hold in 'The Second Coming' is partly Yeats's own psychic and imaginative coherence. Hence his newly urgent quest for unities of being, culture, philosophy and form. He was perhaps trying to put poetry back together again. 'A Prayer for My Daughter' was written in 1919. The rhythmic crescendo of the first two stanzas condenses the crisis of the past three years:

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream.

In the first stanza this Lear-like fury has already assailed a first Une of defence. The allusions to Gregory's wood, roof and haystack suggest social structures that stabilise both the mind and the world. But now the storm threatens the whole structure of Yeatsian consciousness – the tower – and it invades the unconscious "under the arches of the bridge". "The elms above the flooded stream", linked with later transactions between nature and art, may stake out an intermediate zone where balance might be rediscovered.

I will end this paper by returning to 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. But now I want to consider first the personal, then the public components of Yeats's symbolic storm. Both have their bizarre aspect. It's arguable that the Easter Rising belongs to the history of farce as well as to that of tragedy and romance. And the same might be said of Yeats's love life in 1915-1917. He had asked Maud Gonne to marry him in the summer after John MacBride's execution. He later proposed, that year and the next, to her daughter Iseult. The second proposal was by the way of an ultimatum. When again rejected, Yeats proposed to Georgie Hyde-Lees and was accepted. In courting Iseult Yeats was perhaps auditioning a Muse Mark Two. Michael Robartes and the Dancer rehearses this whole drama, with its artistic as well as emotional significance. The book features an imaginative ménage à quatre or cinq if we include Lady Gregory. In effect, Yeats is rearranging his female images, writing a kind of rarefied soap opera which we might call Helicon.

Yeats as married man had to face a problem that romantic or courtly poets share with writers of soap opera: namely the dullness of bourgeois wedded bliss. A couple of cancelled lines in 'A Prayer for My Daughter' indicate his total inability to strike a domestic note: "Grant her an even temper and good health / A husband, children and a little wealth". It's not just snobbery that makes it impossible for him to imagine his daughter in a suburban semi. So in the last stanza, as in 'Under Saturn' and the poem 'To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee', he assimilates marriage by transposing the domestic into the dynastic. Even after his marriage Yeats was briefly in "great gloom" (a verbal link with 'A Prayer for My Daughter') due to his brooding on Iseult, the woman or Muse lost. In 'Owen Aherne and His Dancers', tactfully unpublished until The Tower, he represents Iseult as a "wild bird", his wife as possibly "a cage bird", and his own heart as going mad amid "tempest". Critics have speculated as to how deliberately Mrs. Yeats asserted her primacy on Helicon. Certainly she befriended, and thereby demystified Iseult. At the same time, she mystified herself by becoming the medium between Yeats and his supernatural instructors. To use a mythic scheme other than Yeats's, she united Penelope with Circe and thus put paid to Nausicaa. Yeats opted for Solomon and Sheba as pleasingly exotic masks for their relationship. In the poem 'Solomon and the Witch' he fuses mediumistic powers with both love-making and poem-making. Sheba says: "I suddenly cried out in a strange tongue / Not his, not mine". Her utterance nearly but not quite
solves the riddle of the universe and its source is linked with Michael Robartes' pronouncement (in A Vision) that "The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy". The end of the poem wittily connects sexual invitation with the awareness that other phases of the moon must be undergone, other poems written. Sheba appeals: "O! Solomon! let us try again". Thus as Sheba the witch-Muse, Mrs. Yeats takes a power of which some feminists would approve, and becomes high-priestess of the Order of Yeatsian mysteries.

As he puts his imaginative house in order, Yeats uses sexual adjustment as a metaphor for the adjustment of words, images and vision in pursuing the "single light, / When oil and wick are burned in one". The frustrations and jealousies on Helicon produce mismatches between "real images" and "imagined images". In 'Towards Break of Day' Yeats is unusually ironical at the expense of his own idealisations. This Freudian scenario has the male speaker dream or fantasise about an inaccessible waterfall, the "Cold stone and water" of Yeats's frustrated desires. But the woman's sleep, her sexual fantasy, is bitterer. And we infer that the speaker falls further short of male than she of female perfection. He is not the "marvellous stag of Arthur" leapng "From Mountain steep to steep". As poems about poetry 'Towards Break of Day' centres more on vision; 'Solomon and the Witch' more on language; 'An Image from a Past Life' more on image. In fact image for Yeats usually straddles the visual and the verbal: impressions in the mind and imagery in poetry. Here rival Muses, versions of Mrs. Yeats and Maud Gonne, compete for the poet's attention. Ironically the male speaker cannot even see the past lover whose image haunts his present partner. But this irony implies that Yeats's imagination remains open to possibilities that he cannot now glimpse. Significantly, the poem itself echoes words and images from earlier poems about Maud Gonne. So her starry ghost has not in fact been exorcised for ever.

In one sense, however, Sheba has permanently ousted her rival. The occult and Irish Nationalism are no longer aligned. Rather, they are at odds. The tension between aesthetics and politics might also be termed one between Vision and Opinion. Opinion clashes with Yeats's current self-projections as magus: seer or dreamer, Robartes, Solomon, the exultant St. Anthony. It is of course no accident that the book begins with Robartes pronouncing: "Opinion is not worth a rush". This title-poem need not only be read as a dialogue between sexist male and ironical feminist - though, as in 'Towards Break of Day', Yeats's irony seems to half-apologise to real women for the compulsions of his Muse. The poem is also concerned with the relation between opinion, thought or argument and the seamless formal entity of art. This follows from the preface's quotation of Goethe: "The poet needs all philosophy, but he must keep it out of his work". The dancer's "beating breast", "vigorous thigh" and "dreaming eye" (rhythm, syntax, vision) symbolise unity of poem as well as of being: the organic poem. Yeats's Muses have fused into one.

The dancer's anti-type in Michael Robartes and the Dancer is Constance Markievicz, personifying Opinion. In 1918, Markievicz, Maud Gonne and Kathleen Clarke were interned in Holloway Prison. Sinn Fein leaders had been rounded up on the pretext that they were treasonably plotting with Germany. Perhaps Markievicz, whose actions were more extreme than Gonne's, might less disturbingly represent much that Yeats has come to deplore. Nevertheless, she also masks Gonne: Yeats wrote to his wife that he was writing a poem "on Con to avoid writing one on Maud". And Maud and Con together surely mask Cathleen ni Houlihan. I would like to query a point Elizabeth Butler-
Cullingford made at the Yeats Summer School, last year, and one she made this year. Last year she argued that "to call the Republican ethos 'a feminine religion' is to imply that feminity and barbarism are inseparable". In fact, one function of Ireland-as-woman is to exonerate Nationalism from any suspicion of barbarism or aggression. As suffering female Ireland must always be the passive, virtuous victim of a male (British) bully. And secondly I want to dispute the notion that Cathleen looks any better because she has enabled some contemporary Northern Republican women. The relation between Nationalism and Feminism has not yet been resolved in Ireland as a whole. Thus Yeats's attitudes to Markievicz and Gonne question a still powerful and possibly disablling myth: certainly a myth that excludes many aspects both of women and Ireland.

Here I want to make a very broad distinction, though it is far from absolute, between female stereotypes, or archetypes, associated with Catholicism and those which derive from literary and mythic sources – the aising, the Celtic goddess etc. The former implicate both the family and the holy family. Pearse in choosing Easter Monday for the Rising / Resurrection invoked Madonna and Christ together with mother Ireland. He prepared a scenario of women (mothers, widows, sisters) weeping around the (male) Republican cross. Yeats may allude to this pietà configuration in 'Easter, 1916':

...Our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child...

It has not always been easy for Catholic nationalist women to escape from these supportive roles. Recently in the North they have sometimes turned feminist or freedom-fighter. But there are limits to this. Family traditions and tribal roles are still heavily inscribed. [Rita Ann Higgins wrote a lament for Mairead Farrell which hailed her as "Daughter of the Falls Road".]

To get back to Markievicz and Gonne, Anglo-Irish and English by birth. At that period it seems to have been easier for women outside Catholicism to take on an active aura. The exotic outsider, useful as a conspicuous convert, is not subject to tribal trammels. And although converted to Catholicism, each became a Madame or grande dame, not a madonna. These women's image, and self-image, linked Cathleen ni Houlihan with Joan of Arc (or reconstituted Maeve, the warrior-queen). Yeats was reluctantly compelled to recognise Gonne as amazon rather than icon: "beauty like a tightened bow". And she played Joan of Arc to her French lover Millevoy, as she played Ireland / Cathleen to Yeats. It might be argued that active models of Cathleen ni Houlihan legitimise aggression in a different manner from the passive: the heroic feminine complements the pathetic. At the same time, Gonne could see her actions as those of A Servant to the Queen. That is the tide of her autobiography, and the book seems to me to exemplify some ways in which militarism (not only Irish) can be at once justified and cloaked by goddesses or warrior-queens. On the one hand, Maud Gonne speaks as "a free agent", a "soldier in the fight for freedom", a "triumphant" leader. On the other hand, she deflects responsibility by calling herself "one of the little stones" under Cathleen ni Houlihan's feet. Her book is in fact the autobiography of a queen rather than a little stone. And it tells us something about what Yeats, in 'A Prayer for My Daughter', means by arrogance. However, Gonne's image may echo Yeats's reference to the queen's "quiet feet" in 'Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland', her favourite poem. This is a poem in which the warrior-queen and passive-virgin models of Cathleen come together and collude. There is also an element of sexual sublimation...
akin to Mangan's. However, Yeats's candle and rood derive not from Irish Catholicism, but from the nineties religion of art.

Markievicz, though generous and courageous, emerges from the biographies as in part a hyperactive exhibitionist, attracted to uniforms, flags and guns. She organised the Fianna, the boy-Republicans, and joined the Citizen Army in 1916. There was a kind of ideological cross-class romance between her and James Connolly for whom she wrote an elegy, hailing him as her "hero love". Lily Yeats, with local Sligo knowledge, wrote caustically:

Madame Markievicz's madness changed its form when she inherited it. In her father it meant looking for the North Pole in an open boat. Very cooling for him and safe for others. Her followers are said to have been either small boys or drunken dock workers out of work... I don't think any others could have followed her. I would not have followed her across the road.

The title of 'On a Political Prisoner' also implies a prisoner of politics. And to mitigate Yeats's more savage accusations –"Drinking the foul ditch" etc. – I would like to emphasise the extent to which the poem focuses on states of mind. Markievicz's mind –"a bitter, an abstract thing" – is of course aligned with Maud Gonne's "opinionated mind" in 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. But in that poem the speaker represents his own mind too as having "dried up of late". He fears "to be choked with hate". Thus Yeats is not disputing women's right to think, but questioning the tyranny of dogma, and resisting his own "temptations to controversy". Perhaps, indeed, he scapegoats women for aggression in fact predominantly male – which might be as suspect as wrapping up aggression in female images. But this again has to do with the nexus of woman, Ireland, poetry. In 'On a Political Prisoner', as in the title poem, opinion is contrasted with a more complex form of consciousness and expression. The gull suggests how art, poetry negotiates between mystery and storm:

Sea-borne, or balanced on the air
When first it sprang out of the nest
Upon some lofty rock to stare
Upon the cloudy canopy,
While under its storm-beaten breast
Cried out the hollows of the sea.

That is one of the significant births or rebirths in Michael Robartes and the Dancer. And perhaps it also wistfully restores Yeats's pristine vision of Ireland; or imagines Ireland as Iseult, not Maud as she is.

Before considering the 1916 poems, I want to go back behind them to analyse more fully what Yeats meant by Opinion. Opinion is a term long associated with his opposition to the literary tradition of Young Ireland. Whereas that tradition had produced identical patriotic verse – ballads still sung in pubs and clubs – Yeats strove to make Irish poetry a matter of "personal style". In 1914 he spoke at a centenary tribute to Thomas Davis founder of the Young Ireland movement. As ever, he emphasised the inadequate language available to Davis: "worn down to mere abstraction by perpetual mechanical use". As ever too, he contrasted the different motivation of his own movement: "It seemed we had to escape by some great effort the obsession of public life". As public life invaded the artistic sanctuary of the Abbey theatre, Yeats continually brooded in his Journal on the dangers of abstraction and opinion. I'll quote from the Journal, a crucial workshop for Yeats's next decade of writing. "Ireland is ruined by abstraction". "All empty souls tend to extreme
opinions”. And, as in 'A Prayer for My Daughter', it’s clear that Yeats is resisting his own lust to join battle with guns blazing. He notes:

All propositions which set all the truth on one side can only enter rich minds to dislocate and strain.

17 And most vividly of all:

Opinion is the enemy of the artist because it arms his uninspired moment against his inspiration... A mechanism is created which may attack life itself.

18 So Yeats understood the propagandist urge. And he admitted in his tribute to Davis that Davis’s "rhymed lesson-book" was still needed in certain respects. Of course he had taken a leaf out of it himself in 'September 1913'. There he deploys the rhetorical tactics of political nationalism in the interests of cultural nationalism. Eg. the exhortation with roll-call of role-models:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed.
For this Edward Fitzgerald died...

19 Yeats had, in fact, written the best Young Ireland ballad so far. His three 1916 poems are a further culmination. But in making the Davisite tradition, he simultaneously breaks it. He sabotages it from within. He encodes the doubts, the reservations, the revisionist questions about the Rising. Here is a recent successor to Yeats’s 'Easter, 1916'. Written by Ian Duhig, the poem is just headed by a question-mark:

? Of all my questions still unanswered concerning the heroical-pathetic Easter Rising Such as whether England would have kept faith when World War I was all said and done Or which Castle cretin sent in Lancers against well-trained urban guerillas, Whether Constance Markievicz really shot Police Constable Michael Lahiff, Whether Ireland would have been better served if James Connolly had stayed in bed, If Captain Bowen-Colthurst (who shot Sheehy-Skeffington) was mad before he was sent to Ireland And if so why nobody noticed it or at least some behavioural giveaways Or if madness was considered acceptable deportment for officers of His Majesty's forces, Or why anybody should have been surprised that starving Dubliners would loot the shops, My one, persisting, small ignoble nag – dismissed impatiently by the committed over years – But I imagine of some consequence to many at the time weighing up the prospect of a jaunt to Phoenix Park Is why exactly was the General Post Office still open on a Bank Holiday?

20 An immediately obvious way in which 'Easter, 1916' breaks with Young Ireland practice is that Yeats did not send it (as he had sent 'September 1913') to a newspaper for instant publication. The poem was privately printed by Clement Shorter and circulated among friends. 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'The Rose Tree', written in late 1916 and 1917, were not published until 1920. In 1918 Yeats indirectly interpreted this caution in a letter to
Shorter, whose wife had also written rebellion-poems including one called 'Sixteen Dead Men'. Yeats explains that he has postponed a lecture he was to have given on war poetry, a lecture in which he would have quoted Dora Sigerson Shorter's poems:

Times are too dangerous for me to encourage men to risks I am not prepared to share or approve. (That perhaps indicates how poetry and criticism are bound in with the Rising). Dora Sigerson Shorter's ballads were in fact more likely to inflame passions than Yeats's. They are uncomplicated laments in the habitual Young Ireland modes. Cathleen ni Houlihan makes queenly appearances, the Gaelic male is venerated, John Bull attacked and a heroic fulfilment celebrated. There is even a naive appeal entitled A Catholic to his Ulster Brother.

'Easter, 1916', on the other hand qualifies the Young Ireland ballad as lament, as commemoration and as vision. To begin with lament. There is of course no doubt about Yeats's grief or about his horror at the executions. By executing fifteen leaders, and later Roger Casement, the military authorities brutally and stupidly overreacted to an uprising which was always "heroical-pathetic" in Ian Duhig's phrase, and in a sense designed to fail or to succeed though the martyrs of which occasion. During the next year, public opinion, at first against the Rising, began to slip slowly away from the moorings of constitutional Home Rule. I'll quote from Yeats's letters:

The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety ... I have little doubt there have been many miscarriages of justice... We have lost the noblest and most fine natured of our young men.

The very title of the poem, in echoing 'September 1913', apologises to these young men for rhetorically burying "Romantic Ireland". "Vivid faces" too makes amends: vitality set against the receding ascendancy past suggested by:

... grey
Eighteenth century houses.

But there is also distance between these faces and the figure of Yeats. Its sociological dimension is brilliantly captured in his phrase "counter or desk". This anticipates Tom Garvin's conclusion in a recent study that the revolution's ideology was largely generated by marginalised men – in commerce, education, bureaucracies – whose status did not, and could not, match their talents. These men (and the ethos was overwhelmingly male) belonged to a cultural consciousness, a hegemonic tendency, which forged links between the continuing Young Ireland tradition, the Gaelic League and Catholicism. There is critical distance too in the poem's early stages, criticism that prepares for the refrain's famous ambiguity. Firstly, Yeats has struck the low key of personal elegy, rather than the high-key of public lament. Compare: "Did they dare – and did they dare to slay Eoghan Roe O'Neill?" However he reserves direct criticism for those revolutionaries of whom he has direct knowledge: the dead John MacBride and of course the living Markievicz. He allows her charity or socialism, but in a paradox that prefigures "terrible beauty" he combines good-will with ignorant. Ignorant is to be Markievicz's adjective as arrogant is Gonne's.

As Yeats begins by injecting criticism into lament, so he ends by injecting scepticism into commemoration:

Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith...
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
"Excess of love" is Patrick Pearse's own phrase. And before the Rising Yeats had written: "Pearse is a dangerous man, he has the vertigo of self-sacrifice". The word bewildered just hints at both confusion and derangement. It complicates Yeats's tacit approval for "delirium of the brave" in 'September 1913'. "And what if too hovers ambiguously between rhetorical dismissal of doubt and uneasy query. It is also a kind of criticism, or prolonged qualification, that Yeats takes the whole poem to get to this roll-call of names. Then "I write it out in a verse" may not be quite straightforward: does the self-evident statement intend a monument or plain record? Altogether, 'Easter, 1916' seems as alien to Republican commemorations as Wilfred Owen to the ethos of the Cenotaph in London.

27 Primarily, the poem sets forth Yeats's intuition that a world has been swept away: "All changed, changed utterly". But it inhabits that moment of change without leaving the present tense. And "A terrible beauty is born" hardly provides the hoped-for closure of Young Ireland balladry. In 'Easter, 1916' Yeats offers his verse (not art) as a medium for unfolding history. At the same time, he distinguishes his singular voice, his "personal style" from the Young Ireland solidarity of first-person plurals. The first stanza features I and they, they and I.

28 'Sixteen Dead Men' and The Rose Tree' contain no first-person singular. These poems interpret, but barely comment on, a historical momentum becoming irresistible. Both are dialogues. In 'Sixteen Dead Men' constitutional Home Rule has no reply to revolutionary martyrdom:

And is their logic to outweigh
MacDonagh's bony thumb?

29 In the next stanza Yeats refers to

Those new comrades they have found,
Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone.

30 But contrast the note sounded by Dora Sigerson Shorter:

Sixteen dead men! Where do they go?
To join their regiment, where Sarsfield leads.
Wolfe Tone and Emmet, well do they know.
There shall they bivouac, telling great deeds.

31 Perhaps Yeats's image of "MacDonagh's bony thumb" hints a distaste for martyrs' relics while admitting their power. In his letter to Clement Shorter, Yeats says: "the old historical passion is at its greatest intensity". As 'Sixteen Dead Men' concentrates on "the boiling pot" in the foreground, 'The Rose Tree' suggests what lit the flame. Pearse and Connolly agree on a powerful ideological and symbolic package. First, the liberty tree of 1798 which links the socialist Connolly with the United Irishman Wolfe Tone. Secondly Pearse's Catholicised blood-sacrifice:

There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.

32 Yeats's 1916 poems contrast different styles of politics. One style is that of discussion, negotiation, compromise: "logic", "give and take", "politic words". The second style is that of symbolic action, the activating of symbols: "terrible beauty", Rose Tree, the bone and blood of martyrdom. On another level, these poems contrast styles of writing, and continue Yeats's dialectic between aesthetics and politics. It is a considerable irony that the poet Yeats should be marginalised, upstaged, by this symbolism that has become so dangerously popular. The Rose Tree is not his Rose. Beauty is of course a term we associate with the objectives of Romantic poetry. Yeats registers the point that Pearse
and MacDonagh wrote poetry themselves. Pearse "rode our winged horse", MacDonagh "might have won fame in the end". Earlier, in his Journal, Yeats had worried that Opinion might kill MacDonagh's talent:

Within his own mind this mechanical thought is crushing as with an iron roller all that is organic.

One of his obsessions after the Rising was the idea that he might have done something "to turn those young men in some other direction". At the same time he feared that his own movement had been swept to the sidelines by the Davisite tradition and its allies, by a popular poetry that was not "personal style". He wrote to Lady Gregory:

At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.

Within Easter, 1916 itself, Opinion conflicts with poetry and with life:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.

Much quoted is Yeats's earlier criticism of Maud Gonne in his Journal (1909):

Women give themselves to an opinion as if it were some terrible stone doll.

"Enchanted to a stone" characterises Cathleen ni Houlihan as Medusa. But the Journal contains other allusions to stones in the context of aesthetics and states of mind. For instance Yeats describes his antagonist the lawyer John F. Taylor as a machine with the dread of leaving the mind open among impressions,

and as probably thinking

me effeminate... A stone is always stronger, more masculine than a living thing...

his logic was but... the apologetics of a moment, instead of being like living thought", i.e. an "intricacy of leaf and twig".

(Yeats's gender-categories for Opinion and Poetry are interesting here.) Six years later, à propos Sinn Féin and the Lane Gallery, he wrote in a sentence that has both political and poetic implications:

All achievements are won by compromise and these men ... expel from their own mind – by their minds' rigidity – the flowing and existing world.

In 'Easter, 1916' the form itself points the contrast between "stone" or mechanical thought on the one hand, and the "living stream" and the mind susceptible to its impressions on the other. Young Ireland ballads are notable for their mechanical refrains and other structures of rhetorical repetition: structures appropriate to determinism and determination. All Yeats's 1916 poems employ such devices but in an infinitely more sophisticated way. Yeats perhaps calls attention to this in the one section of 'Easter, 1916' that does not produce the expected refrain. Instead of "a terrible beauty" we come up against the image that denotes mechanism or political and poetic rigidity: "The stone's in the midst of all". That conspicuously obstructive line occurs after Yeats has shown what a "living stream" his own techniques can conjure:

The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range.
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change...

The words live, stream, horse, change, minute, cloud, change places in a tumbling kaleidoscope of rhythm, sound and syntax. The syntactical transpositions of "minute by
minute", change, and live are particularly to the point: "Minute by minute they change... Changes minute by minute... Minute by minute they live." The word change in fact participates in one of the many ambiguities of 'Easter, 1916'. One the one hand "All changed, changed utterly" - a structure echoed in the back-to-back appearances of "minute by minute they change" etc. On the other hand, the agents of change are themselves unchanging. 'The Leaders of the Crowd' plays a later visit to this mind-set or set mind. It was written in 1918, a year of many Sinn Féin meetings and continuing competition between Sinn Féiners and Home Rulers. Yeats's oppositions are very obvious, even crude in this poem: tyrannical "certainty" versus the poet's solitary quest. This clears and sets the stage for scenarios in The Tower. And of course Helicon gets a mention – strongly opposed to the "abounding gutter".

Before ending with reference to 'A Prayer for My Daughter', I would like to connect what I have been saying with 'The Second Coming'. And since this seems the right place for it, I want to bring in the French Revolution. Critics can sometimes become hypnotised by the apparatus with which Yeats has surrounded 'The Second Coming'. The preface to Michael Robartes and the Dancer may be a more reliable guide than the Notes. It tells us that Yeats's system or myth means that he "is no longer looking for candlestick and matches but at the objects in the room". At what object in what room is 'The Second Coming' looking? What precisely troubles the poem's sight? What circumstances, as opposed to the geometry of the gyres, have made Yeats sense that he was "receiving the revelation of the character of the next age"? Evidently the First World War, and the intensifying "old historical passion in Ireland" count. (Intensity is a word in the poem). The state of the latter in 1918 involved some military action by the volunteers as well as political advance by Sinn Fein. The 1916 prisoners were still in jail and the Volunteers were assassinating crown agents and RIC Men. Robert Kee concludes that there was little British government counter-violence in that year. But to ignore a majority for self-determination in the 1918 general election was asking for further trouble.

Since 'The Second Coming' has been more accurately dated we know that its writing preceded the arrival of the Black and Tans and the escalation into the Anglo-Irish war. What seems to have confirmed Yeats's perception of "the growing murderousness of the world" was the Russian Revolution of 1917. He wrote to AE in early 1919:

> What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the influence of its lunatic faculty of going against everything which it believes England to affirm) to Marxist revolution or Marxist definitions of value in any form. I consider the Marxist criterion of values as in this age the spearhead of materialism and leading to inevitable murder. From that criterion follows the well-known phrase "Can the bourgeois be innocent?"

In this bicentary year we have heard much about how all subsequent revolutions in some sense invoke the French Revolution. This was so in 1917, with the striking parallel between the fate of the Romanoffs and that of the Bourbons. In the drafts of 'The Second Coming' the words Burke and mob appear, as well as the line "The Germans are now to Russia come". The latter ties in the First World War with the Russian situation. Lenin surrendered territory to the Germans on 3 March 1918. But critical comment on Burke and mob has usually referred them to Burke and Ireland. Eg. Malcolm Brown links the words with the role of French Revolutionary ideas in the 1798 rebellion. And in the contemporary context sees the "rough beast" as anticipating the IRA. It seems more obvious that Burke and mob direct us to Reflections on the Revolution in France. Another
cancelled line reads: "And there's no Burke to cry aloud no Pitt". Is Yeats then, in one
dimension of this poem, "crying aloud" about the Revolution in Russia?

A quick flip through the *Reflections* would certainly have given him much matter for
"blood-dimmed tide". And that word *ceremony*, so evocative of courts: "The ceremony of
innocence is drowned". Does that echo Burke's most famous cry: "the age of chivalry is
gone – That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded." More definitely,
perhaps: Burke's *Reflections* were of course immediately sparked off by a sermon from the
dissenting minister Richard Price. Price's enthusiasm for the Revolution led him to
compare it with the birth of Christ, and to quote the *Nunc Dimittis*: "Mine eyes have seen
thy salvation". Burke subjects Price's use of this text to the heaviest batteries of his irony.

And a couple of words in the passage I'am going to quote also connect with 'The Second
Coming'. Speaking of Price, Burke says:

> A saint and aposde, who may have revelations of his own ... may incline to think it
pious and decorous to compare [the Revolution] with the entrance into the world of
the Prince of Peace, proclaimed in a holy temple ... and not long before not worse
announced by the voice of angels to the quiet innocence of shepherds.

Here we have terms central to 'The Second Coming': revelation, innocence, the nativity
ironised as antithetical to Revolution. Earlier Burke refers to "the Theban and Thracian
Orgies, acted in France". Burke's peculiar horror of the women in the mob may be relevant
to the Bacchante figures in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and 'Meditations in Time of
Civil War' (also to the "crazy salad" eaten in 'A Prayer for My Daughter'). All Yeats's
imagery of "mere anarchy" tends towards Bacchanal revels crazily out of control.

'The Second Coming' begins as a reflection on order and chaos:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...

Such disintegration at the very core of civilisation sounds the alarm of Burkean
apocalypse. Later, the poem finds embodiment for the speaker's apprehension in the
celebrated "rough beast"; "A shape with lion body and the head of a man". This
apparition is introduced in terms that derive from Yeats's experience of the occult and
mediumistic trance. However, the beast may have an ironical as well as a mystical aspect.
"Slouches towards Bethlehem" depends on ironic incongruity as much as on supernatural
awe. Now, I believe that the poem and its beast secrete multiple meanings. Like "a terrible
beauty" they leave the future ambiguously open. Indeed, Yeats's purpose in both 'Easter,
1916' and The Second Coming' may be to warn. Nevertheless, the poem's tone as well as
content seems to have been partly channelled through Burke. Conor Cruise O'Brien
describes Burke's oratory as combining "prophetic feeling for the great forces",
"rhetorical exaggeration", and a "peculiar kind of furious irony".

In 'If I Were Four and Twenty', a decidedly Burkean work contemporary with The Second
Coming', Yeats uses the words beast and loose and evokes early Christianity, when
attacking mechanical Marxist thought:

> Logic is loose again, as once in Calvin and Knox ... or in Christianity itself in the first
raw centuries and because it must always draw its deductions from what any dolt
can understand, the wild beast cannot but destroy mysterious life.

That echoes Yeats on Opinion and Art ten years earlier in his *Journal*: "A mechanism is
created which may attack life itself. So broadly speaking, Marxist logic – a "levelling
wind" – has joined Irish Opinion as the antagonist of *life* and of Yeats's poetry. 'The
Second Coming' might even be read as a pre-emptive strike against Marxist criticism of Yeats, even a troubled prophecy of Terry Eagleton addressing the Yeats Summer School.

'A Prayer for My Daughter' builds up an alternative, healing vision. The poem is an extraordinary synthesis which again has an aesthetic as well as a social dimension. As I said earlier, Yeats is putting poetry together again. His daughter's birth is the most positive birth in this book of nativities. It assuages the poem's earlier vision of "the future years ... Dancing to a frenzied drum" – Thracian and Theban orgies once more. Her desired qualities of kindness and rootedness conflate mother, daughter and Lady Gregory. Opposing this trio of Muses are Maud and Iseult Gonne, the former associated with "an old bellows full of angry wind", the storm of Opinion, a compound of uncontrolled sound – scream, drum – and violence. In contrast, the Wordsworthian linnet invokes the lyric poem. The woman's thoughts are conceived as:

... dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound

a line which does what it says. "Magnanimity" – great-minded or souled – contrasts with narrowing "arrogance and hatred". [In a sentence relevant to 'A Prayer for My Daughter' Yeats describes Maud Gonne's state in September 1917 as "a joyous and self-forgetting condition of political hate the like of which I have not yet encountered"]. On the social level of the poem Yeats's marriage, parenthood and new house reinstate stabilities which might help against the storm. But this rootedness also has implications for Yeats's aesthetic. The "green laurel" complements the linnet as an image for poetry.

In the Irish poetic context, Yeats might be preferring – as indeed he did – William Allingham to Thomas Davis. But there is also an English poetic context. Yeats is recruiting literary allies from the English Romantic tradition. The poem conflates images from Wordsworth and Coleridge (Both of these poets, indeed, had to convalesce from the French Revolution.) It's strange for Yeats to depend on values that derive from an English subjectivity that he had attacked. But at the moment Wordsworth's linnet or Lucy seems a more attractive Muse than Helen. But Yeats’s developed vision of "radical innocence" owes most to Coleridge's 'Dejection' Ode (more than to 'Frost at Midnight' despite the two poets figuring as unlikely babysitters). A number of words and concepts are common to both poems: eg. scream and frenzy, Coleridge finding a remedy for dejection, as Yeats for "great gloom":

From the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the earth...
A sweet and potent music of its own birth
Of all sweet sounds the life and element.

Coleridge also refers to "this beautiful and beauty-making power". Compare Yeats's "magnanimitities of sound" and soul that learns that it is

... self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting.

Yeats seems to be refreshing his dried-up mind from the original sources of Romantic feeling, feeling nurtured by Nature. Thus he reconceives his poetry as linnet and leaf, "natural kindness", as opposed to the unnatural unbalancing beauty of goddesses and queens. This restores artistic wholeness and an organic body politic. And it arms poetry against Opinion:
If there's no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

However, Yeats hasn't gone completely mushy. If the second last stanza reaffirms poetry as soul, or spirit, the last stanza reaffirms it as form. This also brings the poem back to Ireland, to Coole and the Tower. On one level, the speaker desires for his daughter, and for infant Ireland perhaps, the coherent civilisation that Coole symbolises. At another level, Coole also symbolises poetic form: the custom of literary tradition, the ceremony of technique. A highly concentrated climax adjusts the language of the opening crescendo, of "The Second Coming", of the 1916 poems. In an optimistic version of birth and future, beauty is separated from terror, innocence from murder. Yeats also rallies all his resources by uniting both Art and Nature against Opinion, against

... the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.

Perhaps still more positive is the poem's delight in its own power to name, to arrive at new definitions, to fuse word and image in vision:

Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

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Yeats's Maturity: The Poems of *The Tower* (1928)

A. Norman Jeffares

1. It is customary for critics to select *The Tower* of 1928 as the volume which contains the great poems of Yeats’s maturity. The volume consists of thirty poems, some of which had been previously published, in *Seven Poems and a Fragment* (1922), *The Cat and the Moon* (1924) and *October Blast* (1927). In *The Tower*, as the volume is presented in *Collected Poems* (1933), *Fragments*, probably written in 1931, is added, and *The Hero, the Girl and the Fool* is replaced by *The Fool by the Roadside*.

2. The poems, with the exceptions of ‘The New Faces’ of 1912 and ‘Owen Aherne and his Dancers’ of 1917, were written between 1920 and 1927 and these seven years encompassed great achievement, a flowering in Yeats’s life.

3. Married in 1917, he now had a daughter, Anne Butler Yeats, born in 1919, a son, Michael Buder Yeats, born in 1921, so that the Yeats line would continue, something that had come to mean a lot to him, particularly when he was writing his autobiographies and depicting his ancestry in such poems as the ‘Introductory Lines’ to *Responsibilities* (1914). He had his tower in the West of Ireland, Ballylee Castle, which he called Thoor Ballylee; he had bought it for £35 in 1917 and restored it into a summer residence. When he returned to Ireland from Oxford it was to own and occupy the kind of house in Dublin that his father might have graced had the artist been successful in the way of his contemporaries, the lawyers, doctors and businessmen who matched the solidity of the Georgian redbrick town houses of Merrion Square with their own comfortable bourgeois way of living. Yeats’s father had been delighted when his son acquired the tower. John Butler Yeats had been compelled to sell the family lands at Thomastown in Co. Kildare and the money had immediately been swallowed up by repayment of debts; he had earlier sold a family house in Dorset Street in Dublin. He was not, by nature, a man born to keep house and land, let alone buy a house, but, with an ex-landlord’s sense of the joy of owing both a house and land, he now wrote to congratulate his poet son on his acquisition, his actual ownership of a property.
Yeats, established in 82 Merrion Square in 1922, became an establishment figure in the new Ireland, for he was appointed to the Senate of the Irish Free State, a position not without risk; like other Senators he had a detective to protect him in the Civil War, his windows had bullets through them, and at one stage of the Civil War he and his family were isolated in the tower in Galway in the West of Ireland, something he captured so graphically in "The Stare's Nest by the Window":

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned.
Yet no clear fact to be discerned.

He took his Senatorship very seriously, as you will see if you read his contributions to the debates of the Upper House and, in particular, his telling report on the activities of the committee he chaired which was responsible for the new and aesthetically elegant Irish coinage. But while he continued to play his part in the creation of the new Irish State – we are all "like coral insects", he wrote to a friend, describing the work of the Senate – his standing in the world outside Ireland was recognized by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Since his marriage, when his wife George began automatic writing, Yeats was preoccupied by the strange ideas that writing produced. In part, the material echoed some of the thoughts he had put down earlier in the prose of Per Arnica Silentia Lunae, completed in 1917, which he described to his father as "a little philosophical book, a kind of prose backing to my poetry". Later he called it An Alphabet, "part of a religious system more or less logically worked out"; writing it had given him "a new framework and new patterns". Some of these "philosophical" ideas had found expression in the difficult poems 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and "The Phases of the Moon'. He had decided to spend the rest of his life interpreting the material, but the communicators sensibly enough told him not to: "We have come to give you metaphors for poetry" was their message.

And poetry flowed out of Yeats's new self confidence. Many had thought him finished in 1908 when the eight volumes of his Collected Works appeared and he, too, had wondered at times if his inspiration had dried up. The often puzzled, often despairing, often overly-analytic man who reveals himself in the diaries written before his marriage now understood more of his own life through the automatic writing which answered queries about his personal life, about, in particular, his relations with Maud Gonne, Olivia Shakespear, Mabel Dickinson and Iseult Gonne, as well, of course, as dealing with the process of history and the development of human personality.

His verse developed a new kind of eloquence; just as he thought "The Lake Isle of Innisfree' was the first poem to create his own kind of music, so such poems as 'Sailing to Byzantium' have a uniquely mature tone. These are poems written with assurance, spontaneous utterance achieved by painstaking toil, the rehearsal of sounds, the rejection of words, lines, stanzas even. 'Sailing to Byzantium' is linked, like many of these poems, to A Vision which provided a scaffolding – in terms of history or personality – allowing the poet to place his masonry within an architectonic response to human life.

Life is the matter of these poems. 'Sailing to Byzantium' was triggered off when the sixty-one-year-old poet saw a pair of lovers in each other's arms. The present. He has his past, but now the question is how is he to face the future – one of the preoccupations of his life: "a preparation for what never happens", he once wrote. The present crowds in upon him in its vibrating sensuality. From these lovers his attention turns to the birds singing in
the trees, generative yet dying generations, the contradiction of death in life. The vigour of giving life presents itself in other terms; the salmon leaping upstream at Leixlip or Galway in all their dynamic strength, the uncoiling power of the Irish hero Cuchulain’s salmon leap suggested by the symbolism; the mackerel teeming in their profligate profusion around the Irish shores. Fish, flesh or fowl – a nice recapturing of the salmon, the mackerel; the fleshy human lovers; the fowls of the air in the trees – commend all summer long, in the season of physical heat, whatever is begotten in heat, is born and dies. It is sensual music in which all neglect monuments of unageing intellect; it is the great chime of physical nature. An early MS. version read not "That is no country for old men" but "This is no country for old men". The sensual music prepares us for what is to come: its opposite.

Yeats found contraries in Blake, who proclaimed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* "that without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human Existence". The soul arrives into the poem to counterbalance the sensual music, to make the aged man more than a paltry thing; it too can sing.

At this point we realize the poem is not only a matter of contraries. Old men and the young have been contrasted from the start. But the poem contains trebling: the young human lovers, the birds, the fish: whatever is begotten, born and dies. And there is also the doubling of repetition: *all summer long* *all* neglect monuments of unageing intellect. Immediately comes the counter-pointing: an aged man. The *tattered coat* upon a stick is echoed by "every tatter in its mortal dress". The soul can clap its hands and sing, and *louder* *sing*. Here the repetition of *and sing* is intensified by the interposition of *louder*. The *singing school* is swept on in *studying* and the ""monuments of unageing intellect" neglected by the sensual lovers: birds and fish of Ireland – fish, flesh or fowl – are now counterpointed by the "monuments of its own magnificence".

We realize in the third stanza why the poem opened with the word *That* – "That is no country for old men" – for the poet has...

... sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

He has arrived; he looks back at the Ireland he has left behind, and can say (dismissively?) "That is no country for old men".

It is perhaps worth recording that Yeats in the process of writing the poem abandoned several lines and stanzas dealing with the voyager, the transition from Ireland to Byzantium. Here is one fine description of the voyage:

I therefore travel to Byzantium
Among these sunbrown pleasant mariners
Another dozen days and we shall come
Under the jetty and the marble stair.

The mariners too are singing:

Where all is ancient, singing at the oars
That I may look in the great church’s dome
On gold embedded saints and emperors
After the mirroring waters and the foam
Where the dark fins a moment rise
Of fish that carry souls to paradise.
The third stanza uses its repetition, again to intensify. The sages standing in "God's holy fire" are bidden to come from "the holy fire". The mosaic in the wall is gold, and this word will be caught up in the next stanza.

This stanza, like the first and second, is concerned with singing: the sages are to be the singing masters of the poet's soul, that soul that entered the second stanza. His heart is to be consumed. We realise that the begotten, born and dies of the first stanza has shifted; we are now considering human age as being born, begetting and dying. His heart is sick with desire, sick because he is aged; the heart is fastened to a dying animal. He seeks the artifice of eternity instead. And the fourth stanza moves the train of thought rapidly forward, assuming that eternity is not out of nature, but that the poet will not take his next bodily form from any natural thing. The echo of nature in natural prepares us for the next repetition, bodily form repeated as such a form. Then gold is repeated in "hammered gold and gold enamelling"; contrast is emphasized by the drowsy Emperor being kept awake; the gold is repeated in the golden bough on which the golden bird is set to sing, again a key word, and to sing of the underlying tripartite division of life: "what is past, or passing, or to come".

The way in which the thoughts of the poem are tied together by contrasts, parallels, and repetitions, by double and treble entities, is masterly. Though to be surpassed later in the intricacy of 'Byzantium' in The Winding Stair (1933). This is Yeats in charge of his medium, and in charge of his message as well, though it is no easy message to convey: inevitably his concept of eternity returns to the beginning – the young in one another's arms – just as his last cry in 'Politics' was "O that I was young again / And held her in my arms".

In the midst of the achievement comes the questioning: it is not the sudden tragic downturn of Fortune's wheel in The Tower but the pull between delight in imagination, the soaring imagination "excited, passionate, fantastical", and rage at the decrepitude of the ageing body. This allows an incursion in the poem's second section into descriptions of people associated in the poet's mind with the area around the tower: Mrs. French, about whom he read in Barrington's Memoirs; Mary Hynes, the local beauty celebrated by the blind Irish poet Antony Raftery; Hanrahan whom he had created in his own stories of the nineties, The Secret Rose; an earlier bankrupt owner of the tower. All these people are asked if they, too, raged against old age like the poet. The section ends with an account of the imagination and reverts to a thought of Maud Gonne:

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, some silly ever-subtle thought
Or anything called conscience once...

That memory can put the sun under eclipse, blot the day out.

The third section reverts to an older poem 'The Fisherman', written in 1914, in which he had described the dream of writing for an ideal "wise and simple" man:

The freckled man who goes
To a grey place on a hill
In grey Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies

He then contrasted this dream with the reality of writing for Ireland:
The beating down of the wise
And great art beaten down.

23 'The Tower' draws upon Yeats's boyhood in its first section
...when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulben's back
And had the livelong summer day to spend

24 contrasting this physical energy and the timeless summer of youth (like 'Sailing to
Byzantium's "all summer long" in which the delights of physical life were sung) with his
being, in his old age, like a dog with a kettle tied to its tail. Now he intends to write his
will: his beneficiaries will be
...upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone.

25 But what has he got to leave them? Pride (translated into the ethos of his protestant
background this is not a theological sin but self-respect), which he describes in various
effective images ending with the song of the dying swan, fixing its eye upon a fading
gleam. The idea of death nearing him leads to an emphasis upon the youth of his legatees
with an implied backward glance at his own youthful energy; he leaves both faith and
pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain-side,
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

26 He will make his soul, reducing his disabilities of body, blood, mind, or loss of friends and
beauty, until, echoing the fading gleam where the dying swan floats,
... out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream,

all these tribulations
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades,
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades.

28 The 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' begin with a question about the effect of inherited
glory; greatness may give way once ancestral houses are created:
    The sweetness that all longed for night and day
    The gentleness none there had ever known...

29 The second poem, 'My House', describes the tower, where his
Bodily heirs may find,
To exalt a lonely mind,
Befitting emblems of adversity.

30 After the description of Sato's Japanese sword in 'My Table' the poet reverts to his
descendants in the fourth poem, brooding on whether these descendants will continue
the poet's vigour of mind, something he inherited from his old fathers. If they do not, he
does not care if the tower reverts to ruin, for the stones will remain a monument to him
and to Lady Gregory and his wife. The fifth and sixth poems record most sensitively the poet's reaction to participants in the Civil War – whom he envies for their activity, and their disregard for death – and to the possibility of the brutalities that revolution and civil war engender being overcome by love. The final poem returns, after a vision of "phantoms of Hatred and the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness", to his ceaseless pondering upon his own life: could he have proved his worth "In something that all others understand or share"? But that would have been no answer:

... The abstract joy,
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.

'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' is another passionate musing upon public life, full of a complex mixture of mockery, fatalism, a realisation of the madness of earlier dreams of general amelioration, the poem ending in the imagery of evil – Herodias' daughters and the evil goings-on of witchcraft in Kilkenny. This is a disturbing poem, taking the sacking of Athens and the destruction of the ancient image on the Acropolis, the sacred olive tree, as model for later barbarism. In it Yeats shows his ability to condense agony, to put a question and answer it:

But is there any comfort to be found?
Man is in love and loves what vanishes
What more is there to say?

During the period when he was writing the poems in The Tower Yeats was developing new intellectual interests. As a fervent young nationalist he had steeped himself – after his early poetry which dealt with local places and legends in Irish writing – in Gaelic material reached through translations, and poured it into the moulds of Pre-Raphaelitism gradually adding to the hot metal magical ingredients, drawn from his occult studies, as well as his own brand of vague, twilit romantic melancholia. But the Irish writers who wrote in English were given stiff testing and many were rejected. He excluded Swift; among nineteenth-century Irish writers he seems only to have read the early Lever, for instance, and he rejected firmly, anyway, stage-Irish material of the Lever kind, adventuring among writings which could not have been generally popular in West-British houses, those of Carleton and Griffin. The Anglo-Irish writers who were largely outside his approval had found their audience in England rather than in Ireland. We see his particular commitment to Irish literature in the lists he drew up in the nineties of best basic Irish books.

There had been a return to folk-lore under the aegis of Lady Gregory in the late eighteen-nineties but in his middle period Yeats was largely concerned with bringing new Irish drama into being on the Abbey Stage. He did, however, spend an increasing amount of time in England, and we find him reading Chaucer and Spenser and keeping up his interest in Shakespeare – particularly, of course, in Richard the Second, a character in whom he and his father were deeply interested. The middle period was one of visiting country houses, receiving his Civil List pension in 1910 and refusing a knighthood in 1915 to avoid any nationalist saying "only for a ribbon he left us".

Yeats's interest in occultism, so intimately connected with the Order of the Golden Dawn, probably peaked around the turn of the century (at the time of the battles with MacGregor Mathers and Aleister Crowley); spiritualism began to take hold of his attention, witness the essay Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Deserted Places of 1914.
His interests in human personality and in history, in the other world and in possible survival of personality after death were caught up in the excitement of writing *A Vision*. And this, of course, had stimulated earlier poems, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes", 'Demon and Beast', and, of course, "The Second Coming'. In *The Tower* we find more poems related to the ideas of *A Vision*. 'Leda and the Swan' contemplates the union of God and human. He had thought that after the individualist demagogue movement founded by Thomas Hobbes, the English utilitarian, and popularised by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution the soil was "so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries" (compare his attack on Locke in 'Fragments') and he then thought "nothing is now possible but some movement, or birth from above, preceded by some violent announcement". He began to play with the idea of Leda and the Swan "for metaphor", but, as he wrote, bird and lady "took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it". So the poem encapsulates the result of this union in terms of the Greek tradition of the fall of Troy:

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
and Agamemnon dead.

More elaborate are 'Two Songs from a Play' with their emphasis on the historical gyres. They come from Yeats's play *Resurrection*; they suggest that Christianity terminated one 2,000 year period of history and ushered in the start of another era with radical violence: civilization reverses itself. This is the matter of 'The Second Coming' expanded: the parallel of Dionysus, Greek fertility god, is drawn; the muses sing of Magnus Annus because they see the death and rebirth of the god as a recurring ritual. The poem is linked to Virgil's messianic Eclogue and to Shelley's *Hellas*, with the recurrence of Troy. So Astraea and Spica, Athena and Dionysus are linked to Mary and Jesus. And the poem has echoes of Proclus, the Neo-Platonic philosopher, as well as the New Testament. Yeats anticipated modern technology by being a synthesiser.

While *A Vision* pulled together his ideas about historical change there was a new development. In his third period – if we take that as beginning after his marriage in 1917 – Yeats added to his early interest in Irish literature and to his middle-aged study of English authors an awareness of his own tradition. He came from a line of professional people, like so many Irish writers, people as Swift put it of the middling condition, "downstarts" as Shaw called his family (and Joyce could have called his) who had richer relatives and who had, many of them, to earn a living by their writing. Now Yeats read Swift, Berkeley, Burke, Goldsmith, Grattan, whom he had brushed aside in his days as a cultural nationalist. They now became models in their direct speech for his own Senate speeches: they were a prop for his attitudes. No petty people, he called them, and claimed they had created most of the modern literature of Ireland, "the best of its political intelligence". They gave him sanction for investigating his own kind of Irishness. They became his audience, not the imaginary fisherman. The public man, however, could not progress but by autobiographical accounts of moods and reveries, a passionate contemplation of his own nature which led to his questioning of life. In 'Among School Children', for instance, the "sixty-year-old smiling public man", visiting St. Otteran's School in Waterford and approving its use of the Montessori system, dreams of Maud Gonne as a child. His heart is "driven wild" and he embarks upon a contemplation of old age, and ends with the affirmation and characteristically treble question

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole,
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

38 This strain of autobiography when blended with biography extended to contemplation of friends, W.T. Horton, Florence Farr, MacGregor Mathers, in a poem written in Oxford in a moment "of exaltation", the atmospheric 'All Souls' Night', and this new ability to write of his own experiences extended into the love poems. There is the very revealing 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers', the two parts of which were written in four and seven days respectively, after Yeats's marriage (and not published at the time for obvious reasons since it shows his love of Iseult Gonne intruding upon his marriage). Two days after the second poem was completed Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory that "two days ago" he was in the deepest gloom – the misery had produced the two poems of 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers' – he was telling himself he had betrayed three people. Then the automatic writing began, and he became extremely happy.

39 Another poem written earlier and withheld was 'The New Faces', a pondering upon the capacity of Robert Gregory and his wife as successors in Coole to Lady Gregory, a problem which had not to be faced, since Robert Gregory died in action in 1918, and was then praised in the Elegies 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', 'Shepherd and Goatherd', and 'An Irish Airmen foresees his Death'. Two of them strike a note of dignity, of appreciation of qualities Yeats knew he did not himself possess yet could capture so convincingly in his contemplation of Robert Gregory's life.

40 The poems of A Man Young and Old describe in I and II, and probably in VI also, his love for Maud Gonne, while III and V relate to Olivia Shakespear, IV refers to Iseult Gonne, while VII, VIII and IX are possibly more generalized. In these poems the heart has a new strength as an image; this began with the intensity of 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers' where the poet's heart goes mad with strain, then adopts a detached sardonic note. This same vitality erupts into the reverie, the dream in 'Among School Children' when the poet wonders if Maud Gonne as a child was like the school children who stare in momentary wonder on that sixty-year-old smiling public man, "And thereupon my heart is driven wild". The same feeling of poignant reality marks the use of the word heart in A Man Young and Old, I (where Maud Gonne's heart is of stone), II, IV and V.

41 There is the jeux d'esprit of 'The Three Monuments'; there is the neatly classic The Wheel; and there is 'The Gift of Harun al Rashid', his tribute to the young wife whose beauty was "a storm-tossed banner" under which wisdom stood.

42 Though the communicators did not want Yeats to read philosophy he turned to it with pleasure, once A Vision seemed completed in 1925. Some of his reading in Berkeley and Burke did not eventuate until the poems of The Winding Stair, though they percolated his conversation and some of his speeches. Similarly his reading of contemporary Italian philosophers was mainly being digested in the period of The Tower. But his thought, supported by his wide-ranging reading of history and art history – stimulated by his spending some of the Nobel Prize money on such books as Gibbons' Decline and Fall and the Cambridge Histories as well as on other, largely reference books, was not only expanding but also deepening. His ideas of tragedy, which go back to the Hamlet played by Irving, continued to develop. Yeats had been attempting a translation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex many years earlier when Gogarty made him a rough translation. In 1911-12 Yeats took up the idea again and listened while Dr. Rynd of Norwich Cathedral Chapter read the Greek text aloud, while Yeats struggled to turn Jebb's version of the tragedy into "speakable English". This version was abandoned – it had begun as an attempt to show, by
an Abbey production, the absurdity of the Lord Chamberlain's banning the play in England – when the censorship was withdrawn. Mrs. Yeats found the manuscript of his earlier translation and persuaded him to work on it again. This time he based his version upon Paul Masqueray's translation of Sophocles' Greek into French. Yeats was a poet who had founded much of his work upon translation; this was but a continuance of his ability to build upon the work of others, to get to the heart of original work via the interpretations of others.

His knowledge of tragedy, tragedy of his particular kind from which he seized upon examples of what he wanted to concentrate upon, the moment of truth, the tragic gesture, had indeed developed, and in this period he wrote his translations of which there are two good examples in *The Tower*. 'Colonus' Praise' captures the lyric beauty of the original in the flowing natural-seeming language he had mastered, for words obeyed his call and were arranged more nearly to the Sophoclean original than in any other translation1. Yeats's own conception of life breathes through the Greek words of Sophocles. When he finished 'From Oedipus at Colonus' he wrote to Olivia Shakespear that the last line was "very bad Grecian but very good Elizabethan so it must stay"

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;  
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.  
Even from that delight memory treasures so,  
Death, despair, division of families, all entanglements of mankind grow,  
As that old wandering beggar and these God-hated children know.  
In the long echoing street the laughing dancers throng  
The bride is carried to the bridegroom's chamber through torchlight and tumultuous song;  
I celebrate the silent kiss that ends short life or long.  
Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;  
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;  
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.

NOTES

1. (1) I deeply regret he did not write a version of *The Troades* of Euripides; but now Brendan Kennelly has completed one and I look forward enormously to reading it and attending its stage performance.
"Packed in ice"
Personal and traditional in the poetry of W.B. Yeats

Colin Meir

1 Yeats can be infuriatingly enigmatic or even obscure in the kind of short-hand imagery he sometimes employs in his prose essays – as indeed the intrepid and gifted translators from the department of English at Caen can testify – and I think that one of the reasons for this occasional obliqueness may be that the form of prose per se does not make demands of coherence and integrity of metaphor as rigorously as the form of poetry; in a sense, to write prose, despite its habitual grammatical controls, is to invite the confessional or what may be merely random and referential. (You will note, I trust, that the sound effects of that last statement point to its deliberate edge of flippancy!). I don't think, however, that there can be any argument about what Yeats means when, in 'A General Introduction for my Work' (1937), he states:

All that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt... If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accidence, I would be full of self – contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional.

2 The fresh fish analogy is not a very attractive one, but it is of course designed to shock us into recognition of the extremely limited shelf-date (or sell-by date) of the purely personal in poetry. However damaging this attitude was to Yeats's assessment of other poets – by an extension of such reasoning Wilfred Owen was excluded from the 1936 Oxford Book of English Verse where Yeats asserted that passive suffering is not a proper subject for poetry – it does provide a vantage point from which to examine certain stages in Yeats's development from 1914 to 1939; that is, the published volumes from Responsibilities to Last Poems from which the aggregation syllabus is drawn. First of all, however, it is helpful to review, if briefly and necessarily rather crudely, the changes which occurred from the beginning of Yeats's career in his views on the relationship between what a poet writes about and how he chooses to do it, between subject and style.

3 As a young man Yeats had foreseen little difficulty in integrating subject and style (rejecting his father's opinion that personal utterance is only egotism, he had argued that to be personal and natural was all that was needed) but up to 1900 he was to exaggerate
each of these elements at the expense of the other. His preoccupation with subject matter from the mid 1880's to about 1892 stems directly from his self-imposed rôle as critic and mentor of a renascent tradition in Irish literature written in English. Yeats wanted to capture the wide audience of Thomas Davis's "Young Ireland" movement, whose verse – for the most part political doggerel in the worn-out garb of Scott and Macaulay – appeared in The Nation newspaper between 1842 and 1845, and was published under the title, The Spirit of the Nation, a book which had passed its fiftieth edition by 1870. Yeats knew that – with some few but notable exceptions – this work was not good poetry; what he admired was the passion that sustained it. With a naive enthusiasm, fired in part by his own ambition to become a popular poet, Yeats determined that if the ballad writers changed their subject matter but kept their passion, a new and distinctively Irish style could be created:

If they had something else to write about besides political opinions, if more of them would write about the beliefs of the people like Allingham, or about old legends like Ferguson, they would find it easier to get a style.

This idea failed for the principal reason that Yeats had not realised that the subject matter and the feeling in the Young Irelanders' ballads were one and the same thing, and that the passion they evoked was not a transferable commodity. It was nearly 20 years before he came to understand why his efforts "to unite literature to the passion for politics and ennable both thereby" had met with so much resistance in Ireland. In the essay 'Poetry and Tradition' (1907) Yeats draws an illuminating analogy from the plastic arts in order to indicate how a tradition in feeling may persist through the habit of identification with a particular form even when that form is for all other purposes outmoded:

When I was at Siena, I noticed that the Byzantine style persisted in faces of Madonnas for several generations after it had given way to a more natural style in the less loved faces of saints and martyrs. Passion had grown accustomed to those narrow eyes... and to those gaunt cheeks, and would have thought it sacrilege to change.

For John O'Leary, as for Gavan Duffy (whom Yeats records as quoting on his deathbed "one of the worst of the patriotic poems of Young Ireland")", the poetry of The Spirit of the Nation was deeply moving despite the fact that it was badly written; and Yeats clearly implies that he would have met equal resistance to his scheme for improving the ballad writers had he been content merely to encourage a better standard of writing on political subjects – something which of course at that stage he was not prepared to do. How hard-won the lesson was for Yeats is reflected in the numerous references made to The Nation poets in his critical prose, among which the following quotation is particularly relevant to the ballad poetry in Michael Robartes and the Dancer:

Now, after so many years, I can see how natural, how poetical even, an opposition was, that showed what large numbers could not call up certain high feelings without accustomed verses, or believe we had not wronged the feelings when we did but attack the verses.

It is not for nothing that 'Easter 1916', perhaps the most complex of the poems in the 1921 volume, contains echoes of two kinds of popular patriotic appeal:

I write out in a verse –
Mac Donagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is wom,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

7 Yeats here speaks the names of the Irish heroes in a deliberate litany from the Young Ireland text, including – with no sense of irony or incongruity – a line borrowed from the sentimental tradition of the song *The Wearin’ of the Green*. The inclusion of those "accustomed verses" at the end of the poem signals Yeats’s tribute to a history of national feeling: the token names and the manner in which they are named strike to heart of Irish national consciousness.

8 Outrageous as it may seem – as if an 18th century McGonagle should have influenced Wordsworth – the bad poetry of *The Nation* taught Yeats two principles of his craft: that the subject of poetry is passion (feeling); and that it is the choice of subject which determines style. But this understanding did not surface until after 1900, and in the interim Yeats was to shift his emphasis from a predominant concern with subject matter to an almost exclusive concern with style. His disillusionment with the idea of serving a popular literature dates from the cultural-political cataclysm of the death of Parnell in 1891, when, as the poet later put it, "Irish imagination fled the sordid scene". As he clearly indicates in his Introduction to *A Book of Irish Verse* (1895), his own work is now deliberately directed to an esoteric audience, and he increasingly affirms in his critical prose that fidelity to feeling is not enough, and that the Irish writer must study models of style in order to "add art to impulse" and refine his language. Yeats’s concern to get away from the specifically Irish subject matter of the political balladeers of *The Nation* found affinities with the more widespread, symbolist-inspired movement to get away from Victorian rhetoric, from a servile poetry of mere ideas or opinions (from the Tennyson of *In Memoriam*, of whom Yeats quotes Verlaine as saying, "when he should have been broken-hearted, he had many reminiscences") and in insisting on the response to "fragmentary sensuous beauty", the "elaborate record of impressions made upon the poet’s delicate and delighted senses", what was written about became of less importance than how it was done: Yeats emphasised style at the expense of subject matter. Looking back in 1913, he draws an apt analogy from impressionism in painting (again reminding us that he was the son of one painter and the brother of another) which explains that in the 90’s style became divorced from subject matter because the eye was not on what was being painted but on the artist’s method of recording it:

The manner of painting had changed, and we were interested in the fall of drapery and the play of light without concerning ourselves with the meaning, the emotion of the figure itself. How many successful portrait painters gave their sitters the same attention, the same interest they might have given to a beer bottle or an apple.

9 What is surprising is not that Yeats between 1895 and 1900 should have so readily accepted such a divorce of style from subject, since after all this was part and parcel of European aesthetics in the 90’s, but that the change which came next should have been so abrupt and decisive in both his poetics and his practice.

10 Principally, this change meant the integration of subject and style. The theory of poetry as the voice of personality expressed through the spoken word became Yeats’s solution to the basic problem of how to unite feeling and thought, subject and form, passion and logic. To describe in detail how that theory is based upon Yeats’s "discovery" of a model new language for poetry in the Anglo-Irish dialect used in different ways for their different literary purposes by Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory is quite beyond the scope of this paper. In any case, of course, while the concept of such integration remains
dominant in Yeats's poetics, the manner in which he achieved it differs from volume to volume.

11 As early as 1904 Yeats is producing poems which contain dialogue where the logic of what is being said is at least as important as the way it is being said; and instead of the proliferating descriptive and largely phrasal structures of *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), we get idiom used as metaphor, as in 'The Folly of Being Comforted'; or as in these lines from 'Adam's Curse':

I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been nought...'

12 But despite the accomplishment of the verse forms – you can hear in 'Adam's Curse' some of the rhythms of 'A Prayer for My Daughter' – at this stage the stylistic changes are at a somewhat rudimentary level: the ideas, the thought processes carried in the syntax of the poetry, are not very dense or complex; and the idioms are only superficially adequate ("stitching and unstitching", for example, provides a pretty feeble account of the mental and imaginative sweat that goes into making a poem). Neither of these features is of course completely separable from the other: the idioms are part of the syntax, and the image is part of the thought because it helps to express it. The poetry is beginning to achieve the aim Yeats declared to his father in 1913, that of creating "a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling". In the public poetry of the *Responsibilities* volume the syntax already carries greater drive as well as more subtle arguments, and the idioms are mordantly pertinent to theme:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the half pence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

13 The irony of the line "For men were born to pray and save" is all the more telling after the extensively developed rhetorical question whose structure is controlled by the syntactical pattern of *What... but*. In one of his rare lapses of judgement, the late Richard Ellmann gives this as an illustration of Yeats not writing in a common syntax but in an extremely stylised speech, whereas it does in fact frequently occur in Anglo-Irish dialect. Yeats later learns to employ such a colloquial form of address in poems that are concerned with much more profound matters than are dealt with here, where the declarative statement concealed in the question cannot be so baldly imposed on the reader. 'September 1913', whose first stanza is quoted above, uses a different tactic in its next rhetorical question (stanza three) by drawing on the bastardised form of the ballad as found in *The Spirit of the Nation* in such trite stanzas as:

The wild geese – the wild geese – 'tis long since they flew
O'er the billowy ocean's bright bosom of blue.

14 (A note explains that recruits of the Irish Brigade were taken to France and entered on the ships' books as *Wild Geese*).

15 Or as in these equally atrocious lines from Thomas Davis's 'The Green Above the Red':

Sure 'twas for this Lord Edward died, and Wolfe Tone sunk serene
Because they could not bear to leave the Red above the Green...
Yeats's reference to Davis's poem is clear:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing on every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Within this stanza's powerful exhortation the ironic tone of the poem is held in the line, "All that delirium of the brave?", where Yeats uses a word which both defines the changed attitude of his audience to heroism (delirium), and at the same time accuses them of a poverty of imagination which is made explicit in the final stanza:

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son'...

Yeats here devastatingly exposes his audience as being incapable of recognising any kind of idealism except that commonly manifested in love as abnormal behaviour. The poem is not, as several critics mistakenly affirm, in praise of political heroism; it names the token names of *The Nation* balladry merely as an example of its audience's former imaginative capacity, with the understood implication that – in the context of the controversy over the provision of a suitable gallery for the pictures offered to Dublin by Sir Hugh Lane – what is now required is cultural idealism. The longer stanzaic form of 'To a Wealthy Man...' allows for even longer clausal structures which carry the argument, but there is less variety of method than in 'September 1913'. 'To a Shade', another of the group of poems on the same theme, has such subtle changes of tone that it demands very careful reading aloud. Here are its last two sections:

A man
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought
In his full hands what, had they only known,
Had given their children's children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack upon him.
Go, unquiet wanderer,
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet
About your head till the dust stops your ear,
The time for you to taste of that salt breath
And listen at the corners has not come;
You had enough of sorrow before death –
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

Whereas in *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899) Yeats's repetitive use of the conjunction *And*... *And...* merely adds – some-times with charming incantatory effects – descriptive detail, here the parallelism in structure intensifies the thought. It's worth noting, too, that the poem accommodates various contrasts, such as the savage implications of "the pack" (of wolves who have set upon Hugh Lane as they did upon Parnell, the "thin Shade" of the
poem) and the disturbing address to the "unquiet wanderer"; or the image of the grave as a protective bed, "The Glasnevin coverlet", followed by the concretely specific reference, "till the dust stops your ear". Overall, however, the effect of the public poems of the 1914 volume turns on their logic; here Yeats is already able to carry feeling in the very structure of the sentences, in their syntax and grammar, but he is limited by his subject matter and themes. On the other hand, in a deeply personal poem like 'The Cold Heaven' descriptive imagery has priority and colloquial idiom is in the main avoided. As I have pointed out elsewhere, what happens in Michael Robartes and the Dancer is that Yeats's personal voice is expressed through an investigative syntax which vividly embodies feeling (see, for example, the clausal qualifications which express both meaning and feeling in 'Under Saturn'); in contrast, in the ballad poems in that volume he uses various rhetorical devices together with common idioms. 'Sixteen Dead Men', for example, names the names of political heroes in the manner of The Nation poems, but whereas the Young Irelanders had carried such balladic evocation in a second hand style, full of cliches and crude, generalised description, Yeats intensifies the impact of the rhetorical question which structures each of the three stanzas by employing common idioms in a starker and more specific sense than their standard usage:

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O BUT we talked at large before
The sixteen men were shot,
But who can talk of give and take,
What should be and what not
While those dead men are loitering there
To stir the boiling pot?
You say that we should still the land
Till Germany's overcome;
But who is there to argue that
Now Pearse is deaf and dumb?
And is their logic to outweigh
MacDonagh's bony thumb?
How could we dream they'd listen
That have an ear alone
For these new comrades they have found,
Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone,
Or meddle with our give and take
That converse bone to bone?
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Here the metaphoric resonance of boiling pot, deaf and dumb, and bony thumb enables Yeats to escape from the single dimension of meaning to which such poetry is normally restricted; and it is by this basic technique of converting idiom into image that he is able to multiply the levels of meaning in his late songs and ballads. 'Easter 1916' gets its complex texture from its combination of three styles: personal and investigative, lyric, and balladic. It opens with a careful explanation of how the poet's own attitude has been changed by the heroism of particular people; then, after the central lyrically descriptive section, with its metaphor of the stone in the living stream, it explores the dangers inherent in martyrdom to a cause and the validity of its purpose. The sensitive evocation of feeling about the death of the leaders of the Rising is carried through questions which are not rhetorical in any sense:

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What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
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The several changes of tone in this section of the poem delicately expose the ambivalence of Yeats's personal response to the meaning of political sacrifice; but once the balladic note takes over, beginning with "I write it out in a verse" the poem unequivocally declares a public emotion in a public mode. In a different context, the paradox of its last line, which is also its balladic refrain, aptly fits the theme of this paper: "A terrible beauty is born" can be read to mean that passion is given body, feeling given form.

As an illustration of the variety of methods Yeats employs in unifying thought and emotion, it is worth examining the different ways in which he explores one important theme in his poetry, that of the relationship between body and soul, transience and permanence, nature and art. The pivot poem is of course 'Sailing to Byzantium', whose very title immediately conveys the opposition of the Aristodean mode of becoming (sailing) and the Platonic mode of being (Byzantium). Indeed, throughout Yeats appears to be setting up mutually exclusive categories of art and nature – and even at this level of reading the poem there are some critics who misinterpret the opening stanza as scornful of the physical and sensual: one has only to look at the images of teeming life ("salmon falls and mackerel crowded seas") to contradict such a viewpoint. What is important for our purposes here is that the poem works principally through its rich tapestry of metaphor, not through logical argument; its method is not investigative but declarative. In stressing the increasing urgency to discover spiritual reality as physical reality decays, the poem's theme concerns the nature of the human religious imagination, but it is the irony of its last line which poignantly evokes the unavoidable condition that man can only envisage eternity in terms of time. In this way the supernatural is incontrovertibly informed by the natural.

If you'll forgive that hasty summary of such a magnificently major poem, I want to look at two earlier and two or three later poems on this theme. In 'The Dolls' from the 1914 volume Yeats objectively relates the antagonism felt by the dolls which, as artifacts, are immune to change, for the human child, that "noisy and filthy thing", subject by its very nature to time and change. All we are given is the opposition; and because the mode is narrative and dramatic, there is no intrusion of the questioning and questing personal voice. The title poem of Yeats's next volume, The Wild Swans at Coole, deals with this subject in a much more profound manner. Its surface meaning is similar to that of the earlier poem in that Yeats measures his ageing self against the apparent agelessness of the swans, but read in the context of the whole poem, the opening stanza immediately intimates a relationship between transience and permanence:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

On the face of it, the metaphoric implications of this description are limited to an evocation of place which identifies with the mood and age of the speaker; but lodged at the centre of the stanza, and picked up again in the numinous meanings of the last stanza, we have the image of water reflecting the sky. As in Wordsworth's pool "bare to the eye of heaven" (from 'Resolution and Independence'), what is suggested here is that the physical is the region in which the spiritual is identified, thus heralding the meaning of 'Sailing to Byzantium'.
This same theme is explored in different forms in the 1928 volume: most densely and discursively in 'Among School Children', which contains Yeats's most limpidly beautiful expression of the interdependence of body and soul in the lines: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance", / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"; and most graphically in the sonnet form of Leda and the Swan. Here the poet gains dramatic effect from the rhetorical question, a device which had earlier been the stock-in-trade of his public and political poetry, which now is used both to intensify the immediacy of the picture of rape and at the same time to incorporate images directly related to the poem's theme:

How can those terrified vague fingers push
the feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

While at the end of this poem we are left with an unanswered question about the relationship of body and spirit, of the natural and supernatural, two songs from the next volume, The Winding Stair (1933) declare opposite interpretations. In 'A Last Confession', from the sequence 'A Woman Young and Old' in The Winding Stair, Yeats uses the fourTEener of the Anglo-Scots ballad, split into eight/six, in four six-line stanzas:

What lively lad most pleased me
Of all that with me lay?
I answer that I gave my soul
and loved in misery,
But had great pleasure with a lad
That I loved bodily.
Flinging from his arms I laughed
To think his passion such
He fancied that I gave a soul
Did but our bodies touch,
And laughed upon his breast to think
Beast gave beast as much.
I gave what other women gave
That stepped out of their clothes,
But when this soul, its body off;
Naked to naked goes,
He it has found shall find therein
What none other knows,
And give his own and take his own
And rule in his own right;
And though it loved in misery
Close and cling so tight,
There's not a bird of day that dare
Extinguish that delight.

The argument for the distinct separation of body and soul, which is taken up again in 'The Three Bushes' from Last Poems, is quite plainly stated; but such is Yeats's consummate control of his form that he can invoke both Shakespeare and Swedenborg and introduce a complex word without any sense of stylistic impropriety. As in 'Parting' the earlier dialogue song from this sequence which is echoed in the penultimate line of 'A Last Confession', Yeats juxtaposes a polysyllabic word with several monosyllables

He Daylight already flies
From mountain crest to crest
She That light is from the moon.
He That bird...
She Let him sing on,
I offer to love's play
My dark declivities.

Both Extinguish and declivities provide density of meaning as well as rhythmic emphasis at each poem's conclusion.

Perhaps the most dramatic of Yeats's songs on this theme is found in 'Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop', from the sequence 'Words for Music Perhaps' (1933). Again Yeats uses the fourteener in six-eight, the staple of Anglo-Scots ballad narrative; and again the poet forcefully locates the spiritual in the physical. But whereas in 'A Last Confession' the speaker must ironically employ functions of physical love to describe what she claims is the wholly separate union of the soul ("close and cling so tight"), Crazy Jane seizes on the Bishop's own terms of contrast – mansion of the spirit, and foul sty of the body – and asserts their necessary interdependence in metaphors of astonishing anatomic exactness:

A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent

This form, so apparently simple and straightforward, is plastic enough here to enable Yeats to copy its first line from a satiric poem by James Clarence Mangan ('The Woman of Three Cows'), as well as to invoke the central theme of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in its emphasis on man as neither Yahoo nor Houyhnhnm but a creature who must perforce partake of each; the spiritual only has its existence by means of the physical: natural supernaturalism.

Yeats's search for the idioms of common speech, for clarity and for concreteness in poetry, does not mean that he gave up on vision, on Shelleyean spirituality as against what he termed the Robert Burns type of earthiness. A language that expresses the vivacity of common life in the late songs and ballads – found also, though there's no time here to illustrate it today in the major poems of his last period – brings about what he called a re-integration of the mind, a more profound Pre-Raphaelitism. The stress on the vital, the real, gives substance to the visionary, provides its metaphors. In nearly sixty years of development Yeats's style went through many changes – that kind of critical vigilance is the mark of a major writer – but in essence he never changed his concept that poetry is made between sleeping and waking, when – as we might put it – a man's dream is so vivid it peoples the furniture of his waking life. At the beginning of the century, needing to escape from the effeminacy and strained lyricism of the 90's and from the visions which he discovered he had been imagining outside himself, he had turned to Anglo-Irish dialect because its syntax evoked feeling by naming things which directly impinge upon the senses. By 1930, the naming of things within the traditional form of ballad and song provides Yeats with a framework for vision: he is able to combine what Synge had thought of as two distinct kinds of poetry, the *vital* and the *exalted*.

NOTES

1. (1) Essays and Introductions, p. 522.
2. (2) Autobiographies, p. 102-103.
3. (3) Essays and Introductions, p. 3-4.
5. (5) Essays and Introductions, p. 257.
6. (6) Ibid.
7. (7) Ibid.
9. (9) "Poems by Miss Tynan", The Evening Herald, Dublin, 2 Jan. 1892. This review is not listed in Frayne's Uncollected Prose: 1886-1896.

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Yeats and the after-life

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In this paper I do not propose to enter into a discussion of the symbol of the cycle of "states" or "phases of the moon" through which souls pass from life to life, nor into the account of "the soul in Judgment", given in *AVision*, which is Yeats's final elaboration of knowledge gained from many sources, written and unwritten, of the world of discarnate souls. Rather I shall confine myself to a few of his principal Western sources. His debt to India – to the *Upanishads*, of which he himself made a translation, with his Indian teacher Sri Purohit Swamy, would suffice for another paper, which I am not qualified to write. Yeats's search was never limited to the written word, nor is the term *afterlife* really applicable to Yeats's investigations of the soul's history. Implicit in the word *afterlife* is the assumption that we have but one life on this earth, that new born-souls have no prehistory but pass at death into an eternal heaven or hell according to our deserts. This is not the teaching of Indian, nor of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers, nor was it Yeats's belief. Yeats had already seen India afar when, in 1885, he was a member of the Dublin Hermetic Society. It is significant that in the poem 'Mohini Chatterjee' written many years later, in 1928, in recalling the teacher of his youth (sent to Dublin by the Theosophical Society of which Yeats was already a member) it is precisely the Indian teaching on rebirth that he celebrates – the long succession of lives through which the soul must pass on its journey, in which the *afterlife* is indistinguishable from the life of the soul before incarnation. Already at the age of twenty it seems that Yeats had adopted this view, common to Hinduism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, and other sacred traditions embraced within the "perennial philosophy". Perhaps it was not so much the desire for perfection and release from the wheel of return, but rather the poet's insatiable thirst for life, the desire "to live it all again, / And yet again" expressed in so many of Yeats's later poems that had kindled his early conversion – if conversion it was – to the traditional teaching of the East:

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
'Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
'I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain.'
That he might set at rest
A boy's turbulent days
Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these.

2 Mohini Chatterjee’s visit to Dublin was two years before Yeats met for the first time Maud Gonne, the beloved of his youth; her rejection of his love must have fired his need to believe that beyond this present life all desires will be satisfied – and does not that hope lie in every heart, for every human being is bitterly aware of how little of our innate being we can realize in one brief lifetime? In the intervening years a personal love and a personal anguish have become an insight into a universal truth, as Yeats replies to his early teacher:

I add in commentary,
'Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied –
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied –
Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade,
Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or as grey sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet'.

3 Desire for the rich experiences of the Wheel of life, not for that release from the wheel which inspires Buddhist and other forms of monasticism, fired Yeats’s poetry from first to last, and his explorations also of the discarnate phase of soul’s unbroken story.

4 I see in Yeats’s ‘Mohini Chatterjee’ a great declaration of this love of life which energizes his whole work, and the faith which impels the soul’s leap into the dark in order to discover (in Yeats’s master Blake’s words) "whether providence is there also. "Yeats in a later poem implies that faith and hope are the self-realizing energies of the Imagination: "... everything we formulate in the imagination, if we formulate it strongly enough, realizes itself in the circumstances of our life, acting either through our own souls, or through the spirits of nature" – so Yeats wrote in the first year of this century to his fellow students of the Magical Order of the Rosea Rubiae et Aurea Crucis; and indeed the power of magic is the power of imagination. In 'The Tower' Yeats declared without reserve his faith in the Imagination as the creator of this and all worlds:

And I declare my faith:
I mock Plotinus’ thought
And cry in Plato’s teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.

The challenge to Plato and Plotinus would seem to be because the Greek philosophers, like the Christian theologians, have not attained the realization of the Indian scriptures, that Spirit is "that which has value in itself "and that the purified "soul itself is truth". "To Aristotle and Christian orthodoxy", Yeats comments, "only God has value in himself, even Spirit is contingent". It seems that in the name of Indian advaïta he challenges even Plato and Plotinus on similar grounds. Such themes might well seem to lead directly to Indian sources, and it was indeed India that through the Theosophical Society had first kindled his imagination, and to which his long spiritual journey led him at last. But Yeats's declaration of the creative power of the Imagination, and that this power to create worlds extends beyond the grave, Yeats learned, in the first place, from Blake and from Blake's master Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic. Yeats, in his late twenties was (with Edwin J. Ellis, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle in which Yeats's father, J.B. Yeats, moved) the first editor of Blake's Prophetic Books, and these form the foundation of his knowledge of the learning of the Imagination. The writings of Blake's own master, Swedenborg, he had known even earlier. It was Blake, great prophet of the Imagination, who affirmed the creative power of that supreme Self who is the theme of India's scriptures. Blake (although he had read the Bhagavad Geeta in its first translation, by Charles Wilkins, a member of the learned circle of Sir William Jones and the Calcutta Society of Bengal) lacking a more comprehensive term, names that innate creative presence "Jesus the Imagination", or by the Swedenborgian term, "the Divine Human". Blake's "Jesus the Imagination" is not a historical person but a metaphysical reality. In this revolutionary affirmation that the creative principle is within man himself, Blake explicitly, and Swedenborg implicitly made a break with the dualism not only of Christianity, but also, as Yeats recognized in the passage already cited, with the Greek philosophers who set European civilization on the road to that scientific materialism whose supremacy both Blake and Yeats himself radically challenged. In his aphorism "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" Blake summarizes a profound realization, well understood in the Eastern world, that consciousness, not nature, determines appearances. It may be that Yeats's lines about the creation of sun moon and star from the soul itself echo Blake's couplet

If the Sun and Moon should doubt
They'd immediately go out.

- or his more philosophically phrased lines,

... in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven
And Earth and all you behold; tho' it appears without, it is Within,
In your Imagination, of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow.

"For all Things Exist in the Human Imagination".

- but the creation of "translunar paradise" from the dreams and fantasies of the discarnate souls is purely Swedenborgian.

In philosophic terms, the view that appearances are the creation of the perceiving mind, had already been stated by Berkeley in the eighteenth century. Blake had annotated some of his works, and Berkeley's name is honoured by Yeats - "God-appointed Berkeley, who thought all things a dream". Swedenborg was not a philosopher, but a highly respected scientist, assessor of minerals to the Swedish government. His extraordinary writings on the world of discarnate spirits are based upon a transformation of consciousness,
experienced in his late middle life, and which he describes as an opening of the inner worlds. These he calls the heavens and the hells. From this time, and for the rest of his life, Swedenborg was able to perceive discarnate spirits, some who in life had been known to him, others not. From these experiences he built up a picture of the world of the discarnate, of minute and meticulous descriptive precision. He describes a world adjacent to ours, and resembling our world in many ways. His voluminous writings have since provided the foundation of the great body of evidence since collected by the Society of Psychical Research, and the many distinguished researchers in a field in which Yeats was himself an industrious worker. In Yeats's words, "Swedenborg gave what there is of anatomy to the sentimental body of spiritualistic theory, but 'waking trance' and vision were themselves uninvestigated". In this sense Swedenborg was unsophisticated by Indian standards, which recognize the relativity of the observing mind itself. According to Swedenborg whereas in this world objects are fixed and dead, in the discarnate world objects and surroundings, garments, places, all appearances vary and fluctuate according to the state of the spirits, of which they are correspondences — such is Swedenborg's term. Most impressive of all his visionary perceptions is that all separate lives are united in the single body of "the Divine Humanity" — Blake's "Jesus, the Imagination" — the many-in-one and one-in-many of all humankind. I know of no parallel unless the self-revelation of the Lord Krishna of his universal form in the Baghavad Geeta. Yeats's "translunar Paradise" is taken directly from Swedenborg who describes the discarnate spirits creating in accordance with their thoughts and moods their garments and surroundings.

To the second volume of his friend Lady Gregory's Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland (published in 1920) Yeats appended a paper (written in 1914) entitled 'Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places'. By comparing evidence gained from many seances with mediums, collected by Lady Gregory and himself from the Irish-speaking country people, seen in the context of the comprehensive doctrine of Swedenborg, Yeats sought to arrive at "a doctrine of souls", a "vast generalization", an ever-growing structure of thought whose final presentation is A Vision, and which underlies his powerful plays on the discarnate world, The Words upon the Window-Pane, The Dreaming of the Bones, and Purgatory. "I was comparing one belief with another" he writes "and like Paracelsus, who claimed to have collected his knowledge from midwife and hangman, I was discovering a philosophy.

And yet I do not think I have been easily convinced, for I know we make a false beauty by a denial of ugliness, and that if we deny the causes of doubt we make a false faith, and that we must excite the whole being into activity if we would offer to God what is, it may be, the one thing germane to the matter, a consenting of all our faculties.

This all-embracing thought of the Imagination — which I earlier described as Yeats's attitude of faith — is far removed from the negating attitude of discursive reason. He did not possess Swedenborg's psychic gift, nor Blake's soaring imaginative vision. States of expanded consciousness came to him seldom, and then through magical techniques, mediumship, and other aids towards the opening of the mind. Yeats was, one might say, a scientific investigator, but winged by that attitude of imaginative assent which serves to create the reality towards which it is directed — nothing less than the building of the worlds — the heavens and the earths — the soul inhabits.

Yeats did not enter into his prolonged and deep searching of the records, written and unwritten, of the soul's history in search of proofs of survival, but rather because, believing as he did in its immortality he wished to discover more of the discarnate phase
of our single and continuous life. The Catholic teaching of Purgatory and the value of prayers for the dead notwithstanding, Christianity is strangely reticent and incurious on the afterlife, and necromancy has always been actively discouraged. Yeats was aware of this lack and in *A Vision* writes:

> Because we no longer meet the still unpurified dead through our own or others' dreams, and those in freedom through contemplation, religion cannot answer the atheist, and philosophy talks about a first cause or a final purpose, when we would know what we were a little before conception, what we shall be a little after burial.\(^{10}\)

In contrast with this official silence, Swedenborg describes the heavens and hells not as places of reward and punishment but as correspondences of the ever-varying imaginings of the spirits. In an instant they can build up mountains and gardens and palaces or caverns and claustrophobic ruinous surroundings. "This earth- resemblance life" Yeats writes: \(^{11}\) "is the creation of the image-making power of the mind, plucked naked from the body and mainly of the images of memory". In the discarnate state – so Swedenborg teaches – no dissembling is possible, and so the spirit "slips from state to state until he finds himself after a few days 'with those who are in accord with his life in the world.' ... it is characteristic of his whole religious system, the slow drifting of like to like. Then follows a period which may last but a short time or many years, while the soul lives a life so like that of the world that it may not even believe that it has died."\(^{12}\)

So heaven and hell are built always anew and in hell or heaven all do what they please and are surrounded by scenes and circumstances which are the expression of their natures and the creation of their thought.\(^{13}\)

Thus the very trivialities of communications through mediums are just such as we would expect from those whose lives are wrapped up in such things. In *The Words upon the Window-Pane* Yeats evokes the very atmosphere of the séance-rooms he has frequented, and which he describes in the same essay:

> When I had climbed to the top storey of some house in Soho or Holloway, and having paid my shilling, awaited, among servant-girls, the wisdom of some fat old medium. That is an absorbing drama, though if my readers begin to seek it, they will spoil it, for its gravity and simplicity depends on all, or all but all, believing that their dead are near.\(^{14}\)

The form of *The Words upon The Window-Pane* is that of the realistic drama of Ibsen's school, but its drama comes (as in the Nôh theatre of Japan) from the arrival of the tormented spirits of Swift, Stella and Vanessa, still held in the passions of unsatisfied ambition and tragic love, and re-living their past.\(^{15}\)

Yeats compares Swedenborg's account of the discarnate world with that of "the early races of those whose dead are in the rath of fairy hill, of all who see no place of reward or punishment but a continuance of this life, with cattle and sheep, markets and war".\(^{16}\)

Yeats and Lady Gregory collected abundant examples of the Fairy-faith, and Y. Evans-Wentz a young American scholar at that time pursued his studies on "The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries" under Yeats's guidance, working in Ireland and Scotland, Wales and Brittany. The classic work on Scottish beliefs that the world of the fairies is also the world of the dead, Dr. Robert Kirk Aberfoyle's *Secret Commonwealth of the Elves and Fairies*, was, need it be said, in Yeats's library.\(^{17}\)

Yeats finds many parallels in the writings of the Cambridge Platonists, More and Cudworth, and in antiquity. "Orpheus calls them 'a people of dreams'" – a term which he uses in *The Dreaming of the Bones*.\(^{18}\)
And, being dead, we rise,
Dream, and so create
Translunar paradise\(^{16}\).

Yeats concludes his essay by comparing the folk-beliefs of the western world and the visions of Swedenborg with the supreme drama of the world of discarnate spirits, the Noh theatre of Japan. He tells a story from the Isle of Aran of lovers who came to a priest after death asking him to marry them, with that of a Noh play "rich in lyric poetry" in which a Buddhist priest performs that rite for two ghosts on a hill-side who tell him their story; their spirits are set at rest by the performing of the marriage they had not consummated in their earthly life.

Such stories were, for Yeats, first-hand, told him by country-people in County Sligo or in Galway, (as I have myself heard them from Scottish Gaelic people in the Western Isles) and had reached him with all the poignancy of life itself, "warmed on our hearths, and in our souls". In \textit{The Celtic Twilight} he had told many such stories. As in the Noh drama, so in Ireland, this world and the world we go to after death are not far apart. Yeats tells such a story in the words of an old Mayo woman:

\begin{quote}
I have heard of a ghost mat was many years in a tree and many years in the archway of a bridge, and my old Mayo woman says, "there is a bush at my own place, and the people do be saying that there are two souls doing their penance under it. When the wind blows one way the one has shelter, and when it blows from the North the other has shelter. It is twisted over with the way they be rooting under it for shelter"\(^{17}\).
\end{quote}

In \textit{The Dreaming of the Bones} and \textit{Purgatory} Yeats is, again, drawing on what he had long before learned in the Desolate Places. Both these plays are attempts to create an equivalent of the Noh drama, the supreme drama of ghosts. \textit{The Dreaming of the Bones} captures the very atmosphere and beliefs of the west of Ireland and the structure is close to the model of the Noh drama. A young man fleeing for his life after the Easter Rising meets on a hillside near the Abbey of Corcomroe a stranger and a young girl. These offer to lead him by safe ways to his rendez-vous with a boat that will carry him to safety; the chorus describes the stony path among briars and thorn. The stranger begins to tell the story of the adulterous lovers Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, buried nearby, who had first invited the English into Ireland to take their part against Dervorgilla's husband the King of Thomond. Because of their guilt they must haunt the hills, and as "people of dreams" relive again and again their story.

There are echoes of folklore known to Yeats in the chorus and dialogue, as the young man remembers

\begin{quote}
... My Grandam
Would have it they did penance everywhere;
Some lived through their old lives again
\end{quote}

– and the Stranger takes up the theme –

\begin{quote}
And some for an old scruple must hang spitted
Upon the swinging tops of lofty trees,
Some are consumed with fire, some withered up
By hail and sleet out of the windy North
And some but live through their old lives again.
\end{quote}

The drama of the living and the dead unfolds, inwoven with images of mountain and thornbush and old bones buried in the Abbey ruins, as the unassuaged ghosts, still reliving their old sin, vanish at cock-crow. The power of the play lies in Yeats's total
commitment to a theme that to a lesser poet might have been make-believe. But in it he is communicating his deeply-held belief, as also in *Purgatory*, where the son returning to the burnt-out ruin of the castle where he was born witnesses his mother's restless spirit re-enact the night of his conception, when she admitted a groom from the training-stables to her bed. The son vainly attempts to end the old crime by murdering his own son; but only to see the terrible re-enactment at the window of the mined castle play itself out again in the timeless world of the discarnate.

And she must animate that dead night
Not once but many times...

In this fluid world of ever-changing appearances the spirits themselves flow, as Swedenborg reports, into one another’s thoughts and memories, sometimes (still according to Swedenborg) believing themselves to be some other than themselves. In *A Vision* Yeats himself records from his own and Mrs. Yeats’s communications that world of flux and phantasmagoria. One communicator told Yeats, "We will deceive you if we can". Indeed Swedenborg cautions against holding converse with unpurged spirits, a warning unheeded by Yeats, whose thirst for knowledge was greater than his caution – or at least until at a certain moment Yeats and Mrs. Yeats, who had acted as the medium through whom *A Vision* was dictated, stopped (as I was informed by their friend Captain Dermott MacManus) abruptly.

From the account Yeats gives of the writing of *A Vision* it is clear that he encountered just such a flux as Swedenborg describes and the communicators themselves might, if Yeats discussed his experience with other people, "mistake that misunderstanding for their own thought". There were others whom they named frustrators who

...attempted to confuse us or waste time. Who these Frustrators were or why they acted so was never adequately explained, nor will be unless I can finish The Soul in Judgment’ (Book III of this work) but they were always ingenious and sometimes cruel. The automatic script would deteriorate, grow sentimental or confused, and when I pointed this out the communicator would say From such and such an hour, on such and such a day, all is frustration’. I would spread out the script and he would cross all out back to the answer that began it, but had I not divined frustration he would have said nothing”.

In earlier séances reported by Yeats, spirits appeared whose masks proved to be borrowed from a performance of *Tartuffe* currently playing at the Comédie Française, or enacted stories from a serial currently running in a weekly newspaper, or the like. It is no wonder that the Chaldean Oracle warned against that Protean world; and Yeats himself, in his essay on Swedenborg, quotes words that he nevertheless continued for so long to disregard:

Stoop not down to the darkly splendid world wherein continually lieth a faithless depth of Hades wrapped in cloud, delighting in unintelligible images”.

For all that he made a series of drawings of "spirit heads" for the astrologer, Varley, we may be certain that Blake needed no medium to communicate truths which he was able to discern directly in his own imagination. An expansion, not a relinquishment, of conscious control is the mark of the imaginative vision of the poet as it is of the Yogi.

Writing in 1937, by which time Yeats had become to some extent familiar with India’s more subtle thought on the nature of the Self, he returns to Swedenborg once more. Already he had understood that the worlds of the discarnate are worlds of the Imagination, and from Blake that the Imagination is "the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body". He had already understood that no
study of nature will ever discover the heavens and hells discerned by Swedenborg, for these are regions not of nature but of the human imagination. Swedenborg's visions had not opened to him a region of nature but of imagination. "Possibly I should deny to the visions of Swedenborg" Yeats writes, "the character of conscious Samadhi, Turéyyā as Patanjali or the Upanishads understand that term is a sovereign condition and cannot accept a limit" but concedes "we may, I think, concede to Swedenborg an impure Samadhi". Yeats concludes that "there are two interpretations of psychic phenomena. In England and America it is attributed to spirits, whereas almost without exception, Continental investigators discover its origin in some hitherto unimagined power of the individual mind and body. These two points of view, spiritism and animism, are not in the eyes of the student of Yoga contradictory: to quote from the Chândogya Upanishad "The wise man sees in Self those that are alive and those that are dead"21. In A Vision the obscure symbol of the "thirteenth cone" or sphere is the abode within which live "all souls that have been set free". What for Blake is a Person (Jesus the Imagination) and for Swedenborg also, (the Divine Human) is for Yeats an abstraction, a cone or sphere. Yet there is surely an echo both of Blake and of Swedenborg in a passage of great beauty in the first version of A Vision22 in which Yeats writes:

We can sometimes hear the voices of the spirits of the Thirteenth Sphere, those men and women who have finished all their cycles and are called Those who Wait. We may even while we live hear their voices when in a state of trance, but speaking detached and broken sentences, and that which they say is always the greatest wisdom attainable to our soul.

29 In the later version23, Yeats repeats his warning that "mere spirits" (using the word in the Swedenborgian sense, as the unpurged dead) are the objective, a reflection and distortion; Reality itself is to be found in the Daimon, in what they call, in commemoration of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Ghosdy Self. The blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all".

30 The convergence of Swedenborg, Blake and Yeats himself is surely something more than the transmission of knowledge – Yeats's words carry the conviction of direct experience – as indeed does Swedenborg's unprecedented vision of "the Grand Man of the Heavens" whom he calls the Divine-Humanity, who when at a distance is seen as one man, but from a nearer view an innumerable multitude. Blake, who describes that Person as "Jesus the Christ" seems to be paraphrasing Swedenborg closely, although there is no doubt of his imaginative realization, present throughout his writings, of that universal Self; Blake writes

Then those in Great Eternity met in the Council of God
As one Man, for contracting their Exalted Senses
They behold Multitude, or Expanding they behold as one,
As One Man all the Universal family, and that One Man
They call Jesus the Christ, and they in him and he in them
Live in Perfect Harmony, in Eden, the land of life24.

31 Blake, Swedenborg, and Yeats himself in the passages cited, all suffered from want of a received language in which to speak of a knowledge outside the bounds of the post-Renaissance West; but the depth and comprehensiveness of Yeats's understanding of the mystery he perceived afar off reveals itself as the more authentic as we understand how deeply he was "engaged in that endless research into life, death, God, that is every man's reverie"25. It is Yeats's greatness that life itself was, first and last, his book of wisdom, and
not the printed word; wide as his reading was, the truth he pursued through many pages could, ultimately, be found in no written book.

Swedenborg's vivid world of discarnate souls is in some sense progressive, spirits passing from state to state, rising to higher, or descending to lower heavens or hells, but reincarnation forms no part of Swedenborg's essentially conventional Christian system. It might be assumed that Yeats's belief in reincarnation came from his Indian studies, together with elements from Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry and other Neoplatonists. The evidence, however, points to another source, Swedenborg's "disciple and antagonist" – so Yeats truly describes him – Blake. Crabb Robinson, the diarist and friend of Wordsworth, who visited Blake when nearing the end of his life tells that Blake held that there would be no life after death if there were not also a life before birth. Yeats could not have known that Blake had illustrated, in the beautiful tempera painting found at Arlington Court in Devonshire only in the year 1949, Porphyry's De Antro Nympharum, a book Yeats himself loved and often quotes, a work loved also by the Italian painters of the Florentine school. In that work Porphyry sets forth in beautiful mythological symbols, the Neoplatonic doctrine of the descent of souls, their clothing in mortal garment by the nymphs of the sacred cave, and their return to the world of immortality. But Yeats, with his infallible discernment, recognized, from many passages in Blake, that reincarnation was indeed a part of his system. In the essay on Swedenborg already cited, Yeats makes this important distinction between Swedenborg and Blake. He refers to the teaching of discarnate spirits, speaking through a great number of automatists and trance speakers, and all the essential thought of Swedenborg remains, but ... these spirits do not believe in an Eternal Hell, and, like Blake, they describe unhuman races, powers of the elements, and declare that the soul is no creature of the womb, having lived many lives upon the earth. The sorrow of death, they tell us again and again, is not so bitter as the sorrow of birth.

In his commentary in the Ellis and Yeats edition of Blake's prophetic Books Yeats had written,

Blake's doctrine of reincarnation divides his teaching from that of Swedenborg and Boehme, and unites it with that of the eastern mystics and mediaeval Kabbalists.

Yeats had recognized this belief implicit in a number of passages in Blake, which have in turn clearly influenced his own thought – or rather, his own symbolic language. This radical difference between Blake and Swedenborg can be attributed to Blake's knowledge of the works of his one-time friend Thomas Taylor the Platonist and Taylor's translations – the first into English – of Plato, Plotinus, and the most important writings of the Neoplatonists. Many passages in Yeats which describe the descent and return of souls can be ascribed directly to his reading of Blake, whose writings, as Blake's first editor, he knew so well. Although certain images – as the body as the garment of the soul Yeats might have derived directly from Taylor's Porphyry, others could only have reached him through Blake. One such example is the earth as the cradle of the generating souls, the "daughters of Albion" are described, in terms Blake clearly derives from Porphyry's nymphs of the Cave as the weavers of bodily garments. Yeats in two poems uses the image of the Cradle with dramatic power. The use that comes most powerfully to mind is in 'The Second Coming'. The image follows Yeats's awesome vision of "the rough beast" – the antichrist – approaching the place of birth:

The darkness drops again, but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

35 Much in this passage derives from Blake's poem 'The Mental Traveller', itself based on the parable in Plato's Laws which describes the alternation of ages, ruled in turn by God and by earth-born men. After twenty centuries of Christendom (Yeats declares, and Blake and Swedenborg had already announced a New Age) we have reached the point of reversal, and the turning of the gyres that rock the cradle of the world into which the Lord Jesus was born, are about to witness another birth. So far this is Platonic symbolism but the cradle is Christian, and comes specifically from Blake, who had written:

This World is all a Cradle for the erred wandering Phantom  
Rock'd by Year, Month, Day and Hour, and every two Moments  
Between, dwells a Daughter of Beulah to feed the Human Vegetable.

36 (that is, the bodily garment of the generated soul). Like Porphyry's Nymphs who on "stone looms" weave the "purple garments" of generated bodies the "daughters of Beulah" (a Swedenborgian and Biblical symbol of the married state) clothe the discarnate souls:

Entune, Daughters of Albion, your hymning Chorus mildly,  
Cord of affection thrilling extatic on the iron Reel  
To the golden Loom of Love, to the moth-laboured Woof  
A Garment and a Cradle for the infantine Terror  
Lamentation it fly back and hide in non-entity's dark wild.

37 No symbol of power has a single source, and there may be also in the image of the cradle a resonance of Plotinus' phrase describing the spiritually unawakened souls passing "as it were, from bed to bed, from sleep to sleep". No poet knows so well how to resonate the multiple overtones of symbolic image as does Yeats. The learning of poets differs in kind from that of academic scholars, though they may read the same books. The "learning of the Imagination" is a search for truth and reality, not for information as such or in the service of some theory. Yeats does not display his learning – rather he conceals it in some casual phrase that yet will serve as a clue to the discerning; and these will invariably find that he writes always from a great background of exact, though undisclosed, knowledge. His clues are sufficient for the serious student (I mean especially the student of that "knowledge absolute" Yeats himself pursued) while concealing from the imaginatively unprepared a kind of learning they would not understand. I met only once the great Renaissance scholar, Edgar Wind, who said, on that occasion, how greatly he admired Yeats whose art, like that of Botticelli and other Florentine painters, was to veil deep wisdom and exact knowledge in a gossamer-light vesture of beauty. Such clues, need it be said, are likely to be overlooked by commentators for whom (in the words of one of these) "the supernatural forms no part of our mental furniture". So what to Yeats were the deep mysteries of the soul, whose theme runs through the art and literature of all sacred traditions is passed over.

38 Even now Yeats's writings continue to be studied in ingorance and disregard for the deep current of imaginative knowledge from which it is drawn. True, the sources he studied – even the written ones – are unlikely to be found on any University syllabus – Dee and Paracelsus, Myers and Lombroso, the Kabbalah Denudata and the 17th century Rev. Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle's Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies. But then neither are the works of Plotinus and Porphyry nor Thomas Taylor the Platonist, the Hermetica, the Baghavad Geeta and the Upanishads. In contrast, the works of T.S. Eliot are interwoven with allusions to literary sources, English, French and Italian generally known and studied in
the English faculties of Western Universities. But between these two great poets lies a
watershed. At the time it was held that whereas Eliot's was a great seminal mind, Yeats
somehow succeeded in writing great poetry despite his disreputable dabbings in
psychical research and his studies of obsolete superstitions of Kabbalah and alchemy.
Now it is clear that the civilization on which Eliot's work is supported, and of which it is
the last great expression, belongs to the past; while Yeats, in looking to the "excluded
knowledge" of the *Philosophia Perennis*, the learning of the Imagination embodied in the
sacred traditions alike of the West and of the East, and above all to India, has opened for
us a door into the universal mind, and into the future; "the rise of soul against intellect,
now beginning in the world" as in words of self-realizing prophecy he himself
proclaimed. For his poetry is more than an *art*, it is a profound mode of thought, an
extension of the frontiers of wisdom.

To return to the image of the Cradle: the other poem in which this image is used with
great power is "The Phases of the Moon", which in *A Vision* prefaces the elaborate symbol
of the wheel of reincarnations. This lunar wheel, a symbol to be found in both Buddhist
and Upanishadic scriptures I shall not discuss, except insofar as Yeats describes the souls
seeking successive incarnations as in flight from "a dream" – Orpheus' "people of
dreams" in the House of Hades – who seek refuge in life after life:

Reformer, merchant, statesman, learned man,
Dutiful husband, honest wife by turn,
Cradle after cradle, and all in flight, and all
Deformed, because there's no deformity
But saves us from a dream.

The poetic ease of Yeats's language and the strength of his images in themselves should
never deceive us into taking the precise and learned allusions from which he weaves the
magic of his words for simple description or poetic flight of fancy. All is deliberately
chosen to lend strength to the edifice of his poetic thought from the traditional body of
knowledge from which it is drawn. A typical example of the image which may seem
descriptive to the simple reader but which resonates with meaning for the initiate, is the
image of the souls in flight, which may refer to a passage in Plotinus

It is possible to reconcile all those apparent contradictions – the divine sowing to
birth, as opposed to a voluntary descent aiming at the completion of the universe;
the judgment and the cave; necessity and free choice – embodiment as an evil; the
Empedoclean teaching of a flight from God, a wandering away, a sin bringing its
punishment; the "solace of flight" of Heraclitus; in a word a voluntary descent
which is also involuntary.

In an earlier passage Plotinus cites Empedocles "where he says that it is a law for faulty
souls to descend to this sphere" and in another passage declares that "no one can ever
escape the suffering entailed by ill deeds done; the divine law is ineluctable, carrying
bound up, as one with it, the fore-ordained execution of its doom. The sufferer, all
unaware, is swept onward towards his due, hurried always by the restless driving of his
errors, until at last wearied out by that against which he struggled, he falls into his fit
place, and by self-chosen movement is brought to the lot he never chose".

The Phases of the Moon' owes much also to Blake who both in an early book, *Vala or The
Four Zoas* and later in *Milton*, describes how Los and Enitharmon, agents of time and space,
give forms to "the spectres of the dead":

104
... stern desire
I feel to fabricate embodied semblances in which the dead
May live before us in our palaces in our gardens of [pleasure]
and labour

Los creates
... a lovely form, inspir'd, divinely human,
– and the bodiless spectres

   Assimilating to those forms, Embodied and Lovely,
   In youth and beauty, in the arms of Enitharmon mild reposing.

This theme is more fully developed by Blake in the poem Milton. Again Blake is drawing on
Porphyry’s myth, in which two gates are described, one to the South, through which the
souls descend, the other to the North by which they return to the world of immortals.
Blake's allusion is unmistakeable when he writes of "Two Gates thro' which all Souls
descend, One Southward... the other toward the North". Blake's enigmas, like Yeats's, are
never vague or imprecise, though they may remain deeply obscure to those unaware of
their allusion. For Blake, "Time is the mercy of Eternity" and souls who seek incarnation
do so from their need of embodiment They come from "the borders of non-entity".

Where Souls incessant wail, being piteous
Passions and Desires
With neither lineament nor form, but like to wat’ry clouds
The Passions and Desires descend upon the hungry winds
For such alone Sleepers remain, mere passion and appetite.
The Sons of Los clothe them and feed and provide houses and fields.

Yeats in the essay on Swedenborg already cited is surely remembering Blake's wailing
souls about to descend into incarnation when he writes that "had our ears the subtlety we
could listen to the wailing of the spirit betrayed into a cradle". Whereas Yeats weaves
his symbolic images into a texture of flawless beauty, Blake's use of images only an
initiate will recognize must merely bewilder the uninitiated with their obscurity, as if
challenging, sphinx-like, the baffled reader. For example, the "wat’ry clouds" which
surround the generating souls are no vague description but allude to the "moist
envelopes" described by Porphyry, which the souls gather about themselves in their
descent into generation. These moist envelopes are also a commonplace of the world of
psychical research, and Yeats writes of the "luminous cloud, or a sort of phosphorescent
mud" or the "cobweb of vapour we can see and handle" of the seance-room, drawn out of
the body of the medium and the sitters. In the same way Blake's sleepers – a word he uses
throughout his writings – lead us back to Plotinus' use of the term for the spiritually
unawakened. Academic readers often take refuge from the necessity to understand
Yeats's A Vision by quoting the spirit who told him "we have come to give you metaphors
for poetry". But such images as Yeats received from the spirits, or discovered in his
learned sources, are not those descriptive images perceived by superficial readers, of his
(or Blake's, or Shelley's) poetry but the common language of symbolic images within an
age-old and universal tradition of spiritual discourse transmitted from Homer to
Porphyry, to Dante and Botticelli, to Blake and Shelley and Yeats, continuously re-verified
by anonymous humanity – the universal context in which alone these poets (painters
also) can be fully understood. The quest for reality and truth was at all times Yeats's
inspiring purpose, and he cared not at all when that quest led him into regions
undreamed of by the reader who brings to his work only the received culture of our
modern secular society – no more than had Blake and Shelley before him.
As to the complexities of AVision with its twenty-eight-fold lunar cycles of incarnations, the summation of all Yeats's studies of the written and unwritten doctrine of souls, only in this work does he allude to The Upanishads, to which he had turned increasingly in his later years as it became clear to him that India alone possessed the full doctrine. To say that Yeats had himself full knowledge and understanding of his Indian sources would not be true; but he had chosen the direction in which he was to travel during the last years of his life, and had travelled some way along that path. His commitment is witnessed in those translations of the ten principal Upanishads he made with his teacher, Sri Purohit Swamy.

To doubt Yeats's total commitment to the restoration of the immemorial doctrine of the Perennial Philosophy is impossible to any reader who has become aware of the universal language of myth and image Yeats employs. True he was less a mystic or prophetic visionary than an explorer of the frontiers of the soul's universe as he attempted to present and discover an alternative to the naive materialism of the scientific atheist view of the world current in his time and place. Yeats was a member and initiate of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, and in an address given in 1901 to that society he was able to speak without reserve of his deepest beliefs, in words moving in their sincerity and simplicity:

The great Adept may indeed have to hide much of his deepest life, lest he tell it to the careless and the indifferent, but he will sorrow and not rejoice over this silence, for he will be always seeking ways of giving the purest substance of his soul to fill the emptiness of other souls. It will seem to him better that his soul be weakened, that he be kept wandering upon the earth even, than that other souls should lack anything of strength and quiet... He will remember, while he is with them, the old magical image of the pelican feeding its young with its own blood; and when, his sacrifice over, he goes his way to supreme Adeptship, he will go absolutely alone, for men attain to the supreme wisdom in a loneliness that is like the loneliness of death.

Yeats concludes his address, in which he is for once sharing his deepest thought openly with the like-minded:

We have set before us a certain work that may be of incalculable importance in the change of thought that is coming upon the world.

Who can suppose that he had in mind any mere change in literary fashion?

NOTES
2. (2) 'Is the Order of the Rosea Rubia and Aurea Crucis to remain a Magical Order?' (1900).
3. (3) Introduction to Aphorisms of Yoga by Patanjali, translation Sri Purohit Swamy, p. 16, note.
4. (4) 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell plate 7'. Complete Writings edited by Geoffrey Keynes, p. 151. (Hereafter Keynes followed by page-number).
7. (7) Ibid., 69.25, Keynes, p. 707.
9. (9) Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland, II, p. 296, (Hereafter V.B.).
11. (11) V.B., p. 301.
12. (12) V.B., p. 300.
13. (13) V.B., p. 305.
15. (15) V.B., p. 300.
17. (17) Celtic Twilight, p. 165.
22. (22) V.I., p. 237.
23. (23) V.II., p. 22.
24. (24) 'Vala or the Four Zoas', Night the First, 1.469-74, Keynes, p. 277.
28. (28) 'Jerusalem', Plate 56, 1.9-14, Keynes, p. 688.
30. (30) Ibid., IV.8.2. and IV.3.25
31. (31) Ibid.
32. (32) 'Vala Night the Sixth', 1.439, Keynes, p. 331.
33. (33) Ibid., 474-5, Keynes, p. 332.
35. (35) V.B., p. 315.
37. (37) See Note 2.
Yeats and degeneration

Seamus Deane

1 We take Yeats's word for it that he and his generation were "the last romantics", but that still blinds us to the power of certain aspects of the romantic ideology or ideologies which he shared with his contemporaries. Even more so, it glamourises for us the applications of that ideology in his construction of the idea of Ireland and the very specific role it plays in his poetry. I am concerned here with only one aspect of this enterprise, although I would argue that it is central to an understanding of the modes of representation that dominate his mature work.

2 It is clear that Yeats shared with many of his contemporaries the notion that the modern era was distinguished by a profound and pervasive degeneration in the quality of the social life and in the quality of the individuals who participated in it. We can find abundant evidence of this in the work of Conrad, Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and many others. The reasons given for this degeneration are various. We know that the tide of Hardy's novel, _The Return of the Native_ could be taken as an epigraph for this period. The return can take the form of a retreat to the seventeenth century before men began to think and to feel in separate, even antithetical, ways. It can be a return to Christianity, or to pre-Christian Wessex or Ireland, or a return to the blood consciousness which rationality had effectively suppressed. At one level, the return is to that which is radically distinctive of the human person before the blights of civilisation had infected it and made it pallid. Some writers see that distinctiveness realised in the form of a particular civilisation. In T.S. Eliot, for instance, that civilisation is seventeenth-century Anglicanism; in Pound, it can be early Renaissance Italy; in Hardy, it is the always vanishing moment in time that his pre-modern Wessex strives to represent.

3 All of these idealised moments in history are free of the mass populations, the bureaucratic systems, the forms of rational organisation that were even then being analysed by Max Weber and the first generation of professional sociologists. But ideal versions of civilisation do not easily accommodate notions of a radical humanness which has somehow been reduced or distorted. There is, coincident with the view that we were once at one with the universe, the belief that we were then also vital, alive in a way no longer possible within the complex modern world. Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge in Hardy's novel, yields his sovereignty to Donald Farfrae, a man of mild and equable...
temperament and of great efficiency. But Farfrae lacks that mysterious vitality that makes Henchard what he is. He is greater than Farfrae precisely because he has retained something of the uncivilised and barbaric in his nature. It is one of the contradictions of the then prevalent attitude towards civilisation. It may not exist any longer as it once did in the past; that is a matter of regret. But it may also be the case that mankind as such cannot become civilised without undergoing some serious loss, a deprivation of instinctual, even savage, energies. Behind or within every civilised facade there is, phantasmally present, a Kurtz, that tragic figure from Conrad in whom the European imperial system questions its own nature and its whole future.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has recently identified many of the racist features in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, showing how the black natives are constantly referred to as though they were not truly human. And of course the degeneration of Kurtz consists in his fall from Europeanism into Africanism. The narrator, Marlow, deals with this by telling a lie about it; this works in one way to uphold the system Kurtz has threatened, but it is quite ineffectual in other respects. The question that is unanswerable within the fiction and yet is part of its meaning is a question about the very category of human nature itself. Is it, au fond, infernal? Is barbarism our origin or is that into which we fall when we lose the constraints of civilisation? In fact these questions are one question; the alternatives they propose are false. The relation between the civilised and the barbaric is one that imperialism was bound to read hierarchically. Barbarism is that condition into which we degenerate; but can we really be said to degenerate into that which we natively possess? Further, there were so many romantic theorisings about the purity and superiority of origin, childhood, natality, the natural, that it was difficult to see how these could consort with theories about origins that were degenerate. There were new narratives, indeed a new hermeneutic, created to answer the problem, in part by changing the question. The greatest of the new narratives was psychoanalysis. It was posited on the assumption that the telling of a story would bring one to a truth, not about something outside the self, but about the very formation of that condition called selfhood. The sophistication of these new narratives would seem to distance them from more vulgar accounts of the new phenomenon of degeneracy, but it is my suggestion that they were not only kindred narratives; they were interdependent and it is in Yeats, where both narratives are startlingly combined, that we see their collusive function most clearly.

The vulgar narratives to which I refer are those of the race theorists, the proponents of eugenics and the prophets of the coming degeneration. They include Sir Francis Galton, Max Nordau, Gobineau, Spengler, Lombroso and a host of others. Their common theme was the degeneration of the white races or of superior types within those races, the deleterious effects of miscegenation, the new salience of certain degenerate types – criminal types, decadent artists – and the need to overcome these problematic conditions by selective breeding, isolation of the defective groups and a restoration of moral as well as physical vigour in the predominant races. It is at this time – from the 1860s to the 1890s – that the old version of blue-blood aristocracy is reconstituted as the elite of the physically healthy and morally confident. The new vogue for physical health is as manifest in the different versions of the so-called muscular Christianity as in the first public body-building competitions, popularised by Sandow and the famous regime that he promoted. The pseudo-scientific basis for all of this was to be found in a vulgarised version of Darwinian evolutionary theory, adjusted by his son-in-law Galton, the inventor of the word *eugenics*, to prove that some races (white) were privileged to have an
evolutionary destiny while others (non-white) were, alas, trapped in an evolutionary cul-de-sac. It was therefore the duty of the white man to realise that destiny and the fate of others to wittingly or unwittingly help him on his way towards this goal of global hegemony and bodily excellence.

6 Ireland had its own peculiar version of this race theory in the writings of Standish O'Grady specifically and in the general clamour for a restoration of the energies – usually described as heroic – of the pre-Christian Celts. It is well-known that the Yeatsian dream of peasant and nobleman co-operating to produce a new Ireland was well-developed before he took it over, attracted by its apparent capacity to solve or dissolve sectarian religious divisions, to ratify the role of the ascendency and to valorise the role of the peasantry as opposed to that of the middle classes. The homology between this Irish version of modern conditions and that of European race theory in the imperial era is interesting in itself and should be further investigated. But Yeats grafts this particular narrative onto another, also coincident with it historically, but apparently distant from it in its substance. This is occult theory. Europe's interest in the occult – then understood as an Eastern possession that had been lost to the West – seems to run athwart its preoccupation with degenerative tendencies and the threat to white supremacy. But it is in fact another example of Europe's insatiable search for a rejuvenation of its cultural energies, an ironic feature of its wish to reorganise itself as an integral culture even while it is experiencing the actuality of its having become a dispersed, global market economy. The one territory the East had retained, the West was now determined to conquer again for itself. The proliferation of occult societies in Europe, particularly in London, during the 80s and 90s, the steady stream of Eastern mystics and their Western interpreters – Madame Blavatsky being the best known of these – and the new fashion for "the wisdom of the East" are as much features of Europe's imperial anxieties as are the various theories of race and of types. Occultism is the East under western eyes. Yeats's famous remark, that Ireland belonged to Asia until the Battle of the Boyne, exposes the political nature of this act of imaginative repossession. If Ireland became a western country in 1690, it was now time for it to recover the eastern territory which had then been expropriated. The peasantry lived in the East; the ascendency lived in the West; the middle classes lived in the condition of degeneracy that had afflicted the West because of its failure to incorporate the East. This is a metaphysical geography that conceals class, race and religious divisions at one level only to release them later at another and in a more apocalyptic manner. For Yeats, like Conrad, Lawrence, Eliot and others at the time, saw the situation in the light of an ultimate collapse, the decline of the West, the end of civilisation, the loosing of the blood-dimmed tide.

7 The importance of occult beliefs does not reside in their ultimate truth only; it also derives from their function. However diverse their expression may be, they are all understood to have their origin in the Great Memory, in some species of essential spirit in which we and the world share. As a consequence, occultism is a bonding agency in the life of a people. It is communal, it is ancient, it exchanges the bewildering diversities of historical change for the recurrence of predictable cyclic patterns. It stabilises a community and – importantly in the Irish context – it is a religion that is not institutionalised.

8 Because it is not susceptible to annexation by either Protestantism or Catholicism, occultism has for Yeats an immediate, collectivist function in Irish conditions. It provides a religious foundation free of sectarian rancour. In addition, it has the attraction of being
a secret doctrine that is also a matter of common knowledge, esoteric and public; repressed in the advanced desacralised cultures, it is still a living force in the Ireland of the peasantry and a new discovery in the salons of the new mysticism. Yeats sees himself as belonging to both, to the Order of the Golden Dawn and to Sligo, to a spiritual ascendancy and a spiritual community. In trying to describe Yeats's situating of himself in this regard, I shall to some degree reinscribe the sectarian terms that he concealed in his sponsorship of the occult, and adapting for our present purpose Karl Kraus's dictum on psychoanalysis: "Occultism is that illness of which it believes itself to be the cure".

First, though, I would suggest to you that the formal analysis of the modern condition that is closest to Yeats's is that of Max Weber – rather than Nietzsche. Nietzsche does indeed play a role, but it is Weber – especially the Weber of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of capitalism* – who provides the anti-Marxian analysis that casts light on what Yeats was attempting to do. Despite obvious differences, both men affirm the nation, not class, as the source of communal values. Weber is famous, even notorious, for the dichotomous pattern of his thought, as is Yeats, although Weber's oppositions are quite different – bureaucracy versus charisma, asceticism versus mysticism, Realpolitik versus ethics, and so on. But it is his account of the passage from the otherworldly directed society of feudal Catholicism via Protestantism to the rationally organised, bureaucratic secular world that has its bearing on Yeats. In brief rehearsal, he says this: Luther destroyed the monasteries, the first rationally organized system devoted to otherworldliness; Calvin reorganized daily life, Christianizing it thoroughly, making it subject to a kind of monastic severity and so methodically organizing ethical conduct that social life assumed the aspect of a business enterprise. Despite the devotional intensity of the Protestant ethic, the sacred eventually disappeared as a category and all that remained was that system of organisation, based on the principle of deferred pleasure, that was adapted by modern capitalism. But, further, Weber associates this triadically phased movement with three figures – the magician, the prophet and the priest. The magician has what Weber famously called "charismatic power", but in a traditional society he exercised it as personal power. The prophet (like Luther) exercised his power for the sake of a doctrine; the priest, the inheritor of the prophet, is an official of the subsequently rationalised, institutionalised religion and is without charisma. He is the figure of the bureaucrat, in clerical guise.

Here, in this description of the relationship of the world of modern capitalism to the historically precedent worlds of (a) non-institutionalised religion – magic, in other words and (b) mediaeval Catholicism, (c) Lutheranism and Calvinism, or protestantism, we see a European / German version of Yeats's reading of the Irish situation. More than that, we see too Yeats's reading of his own position as prophet, intermediate between the magician on the one hand and the priest on the other, the Protestant prophet dividing the pre-Christian world of magic from the drear Catholic-bureaucratic world of post-Famine Ireland.

Degeneracy, then, is a phenomenon that accompanies rationalization, institutionalism. Yet in Yeats's case the phenomenon needed to be looked at carefully, because he saw it as a symptom of both the Protestant Ascendancy and the Irish catholic middle class. He wanted to rescue the ascendancy from its decline, to restore to it the charismatic (or heroic) leadership it once had by renewing its contacts with the peasantry, by making them possessors, not so much of the land as of the soil, the matrix of ancestral, magical beliefs out of which charismatic selfhood emerged. To do this as a programme, as O'Grady
had tried to do, was beyond or beneath him. He had to embody as action, in the perfection of his own life and work, the process whereby the styles of prophetic, charismatic leadership could be reasserted by an exemplary repossession of magical / folk beliefs.

It was a troubling, dramatic enterprise. Part of the trouble was to find an explanation for degeneracy, for the loss of charisma and the heroic spirit of leadership. This took a deceptively simple form. The triadic pattern remains. We may say it went from Violence to Civilisation to Violence. Within this, there are complexities and contradictions. The originary violence that is a prelude to the achievement of civilization, is natural, in the sense that it is fundamental to human nature and is joyous, as is the violence of the ancient Irish sagas. It is an energy that is radically creative. The latter, modern form of violence is not a radical energy, but something sterile, reactive, dispersive. Yet on many occasions Yeats queries this characterisation. Hatred of what is, of a civilization that has gone dead, is legitimate; the violence that accompanies it is perhaps productive as well as justified, for it might signal a return to origin, to the world where the mage and the hero dominate, to the charismatic power system he so admired in its later proto-fascist or fascist forms in Mussolini's Italy or the Ireland of Kevin O'Higgins and General O'Duffy. Through such violence, we might have a return to the occult, although his great fear is that we might instead have a reaffirmation of middle-class, catholic, bureaucratic power. The civilization itself, which Yeats sees almost entirely in terms of the Anglo-Irish Big House and eighteenth century Anglo-Ireland – contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, represented in the famous images of tower, house, fountain, bird and their ruined or ferocious extensions. In brutal terms, Yeats has to ask himself the same questions about originary Protestant as he does about terminal catholic violence. Is one creative, the other sterile? Is one the degenerate form of the other? Or is it a rebirth of the other, a kind of sacred violence that comes as a relief and rescue from the motley world of the fin de siecle ennui, despair and the religious laodicanism of the commercialised society?

In 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', we see Yeats observing violence under these two aspects, questioning its relationship to civilization, its legitimacy in governing a reading of Irish and indeed human history and finally, regarding himself as the daemonic prophet, caught between a world in which magic is re-emerging and from which civilization is disappearing. The question that dominates all others in the poem concerns degeneracy and inheritance. 'Ancestral Houses' asks if degeneracy is in fact the product of a civilization that, by its very success, takes away our greatness by subduing our violence and bitterness. The following poem, 'My House', sees Yeats himself as the descendant of a man-at-arms, but refuses the charge of degeneracy for himself, since he too is a founder and an exponent of the "daemonic rage" of the secret sect along with "Il Penseroso's Platonist" whose light is visible from afar to "benighted travellers". The third poem, 'My Table' brings together the changeless work of art, Sato's sword, which is also a weapon of war, and envisages the poet himself as the inheritor of that changelessness now doomed to live in an era where change intensifies again and thereby becoming a prophet of doom, a crazed aristocrat in a plebeian world, a peacock that screams. 'My Descendants' sees Yeats now as father, the man whose inheritors may eventually become degenerate. If so, the poem pleads, may the tower become a ruin; even in its ruin, it will remain a monument to him and his children. "The Road at my Door" brings the poet-prophet face to face with modern violence, the participants in the Irish Civil War, the
"affable irregular" and the Free State soldiers. In broken weather and in a broken world, he reascends his tower, his prophetic voice frozen by envy – envy of their nonchalance, their vitality. "The Stare's Nest by my Window" is a sequence of images of random violence, governed by the cry for something natural to begin again, for the process of rebuilding to resume in the ruins of the broken civilisation. Finally, 'I see Phantoms of Hatred ...', the seventh poem in the sequence, is, of course, a vision – specifically, through the figure of Jacques Molay, a hero of the occultists, of the destruction of the old world of magic by monarchy and church and the vengeful savagery of modern warfare that follows the death of the occult. The role of the poet-prophet is legitimised on the basis that, had he given himself to civilization, he would have felt its loss the more. Instead, having remained loyal to the "daemonic images", he can survive, speaking for the civilization destroyed and the one to come, identifying his poetic-prophetic powers with those energies of the occult and the violence which both produced and destroyed the civilization he laments.

Out of the degenerate, the heroic may come. This is a theme in 'Easter 1916', in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and in many of the poems of the decade that culminates with the publication of 'The Tower'. Its coming is horrific as well as heroic; the great distorted images of the poetry of these years – phantasmal and nightmarish creatures, human and animal, – seem to represent a world that is being increasingly haunted by what it repressed. Ireland and Europe are plagued by violence and Yeats interprets it as the return of the repressed in the form of occult nightmare. It is at this point that contradiction occurs. Jacques Molay, Robert Artisson, the Rough Beast are all sinister figures, implying catastrophic change. The occult is a zone of terror. Is it out of this or in reaction to it that the heroic, charismatic figures, the new leadership, is to emerge? Are these also bitter and violent men? How are we to understand greatness, as he calls it? It would seem that greatness must be the faculty of controlling anarchic violence, fashioning out of it a civilization. But civilization is itself, as he repeatedly tells us in these poems, a dream, a vision of order that we dreamt. Greatness belongs to him who makes a dream out of nightmare, someone like Yeats himself who knows the daemonic and endures it and yet uses its fierce pressure to create the dream of order that is poetry. But it is surely evident that, as Yeats produces his great poems about history, as the specific actualities of the violent world of the early twentieth century become more immediate and present in his writings, the system of interpretation inside which these poems operate becomes more and more amorphous and apocalyptic. He spent much of his life creating heroic figures; they are numerous enough to form a litany. But with all their charisma, they are also tragic figures – Synge, Hugh Lane, Parnell, Maud Gonne, Swift, Robert Gregory – overwhelmed by the atrocious world they had been born to. Of course, the explanation given is that they were "born out of phase". But that is precisely the point. Yeats cannot envisage a future that does not have a terrifying aspect. His historical world is a closed cyclic system; yet this blunts what he wants to say about the specific character of modern violence. He can in one way absorb it into his system; but his images have a disruptive force, breaking the system and announcing the end of all peace, of all order. The occult is not the therapy for the modern world; it is, in these poems, the disease for which it thinks itself the cure. Its phantasmal appearances are the product of a terminal degeneration that affects the West in particular. The prophet can only remember the future in terms of the past. Yeats, because he could not see the world as sacred any more saw it instead as demonic. But that demonic element seemed to him to be in a way preferable to the rational bureaucratic and soulless alternative – which he of
course identified with Marxism, Socialism, Fabianism, Bernard Shaw. His alternative, charismatic, prophetic, heroic, and apocalyptic, was fascism. The dream of order had become possible only because, unlike Joyce, he could not awaken from the nightmare of history. Fascism was what magic became when it returned out of its deep occlusion to become politics.

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The Yeatsean Apocalypse

Augustine Martin

1 In the Christian Dispensation the word apocalypse denotes the revelation granted to John the Evangelist, on the Isle of Patmos; foretelling the end of the world and the signs and wonders accompanying it. That last book of the New Testament which Catholics call The Apocalypse of St. John is usually referred to as the Book of "Revelations" in the Protestant tradition. The term apocalypse has otherwise been largely used to mean any kind of revelation involving the end of the world, or at least the end to some decisive phase in the world's history marked by signs and portents. The word "millennial" is often used to describe the apocalyptic process whether it be linear and terminal, on the one hand, or cyclical and recurrent, on the other. In the former case eschatologists speak of a last battle between good and evil, calling it "Armageddon"; in the latter case they speak of a "New Dispensation". The "cyclical" version of historic process was also favoured in the pre-Christian world, notably in the thought of Plato.

2 Though Yeats is regarded as eminently a poet of apocalypse, none of these key words occurs in his poetry – with the exception of "revelation" which makes its sole and thunderous entry in 'The Second Coming'. Their absence is not remarkable in itself. The reason may be purely aesthetic – as words they are rather dry and abstract in texture; and none of them moves easily to the iambic beat of English verse.

3 The study of apocalypse developed its own intellectual discipline: Eschatology: contemplation of the four last things, Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgment. I've checked in the Concordance to see how they fare in Yeats's poetical economy.

4 JUDGMENT: makes four appearances, two of them germane to our theme: 'Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment' and 'The Man and the Echo', the second profoundly significant as the poet "stands in judgment on his soul" and thereafter "sinks at last into the night".

5 HEAVEN and its variations occupy almost a page of the Concordance. About a quarter are used with relevance to our concern, others being merely decorative or conventional as with 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'. A pattern recurs in the early poems associated with what I provisionally term "soft-core apocalypse": thus 'The Wanderings of Oisin' foretells that "earth and heaven and hell would die"; 'The Shadowy Waters' foresees a time "when earth and heaven would be folded up" or alternatively "when heaven and
earth are withering"; the early "Rose" poems presage that "peace of heaven with hell" of which Blake had so frequently written. I call these "soft-core" because they are not accompanied by historical violence and are thus distinguished from his later poems of apocalypse written after 1917. They are part of what Yeats himself called "the poetry of longing and complaint, the cry of the heart against necessity".

6 It is characteristic of this soulful early mood that in 'The Island of Statues' "all night long the heavens weep and weep while later, in sharp contrast, "heaven yawns" and its joints "crack" in 'Crazy Jane Reproved'; In 'The Tower' the human soul leaps into a "desolate heaven", while finding positive injustice in the world epitomised by the tide of 'The Cold Heaven'. In the apocalyptic sense heaven, singular and plural, has a notably active force in the later poems, "blazing into the head" in 'Lapis Lazuli', controlling the stars in "Veronica's Napkin'; labouring and sighing in 'The Lady's Third Song', and "opening" momentously as "gyres run on" in 'Under Ben Bulben'. The adjectival form understandably, as with "all heavenly glory" in 'Among School Children', is mostly honorific and benign.

7 HELL: Curiously the word occurs only thirteen times and its apocalyptic reference is confined to its association with Heaven in the early poems noted above.

8 DEATH: Like all serious poets Yeats is much possessed with it. Together with its morphemes, death takes up four pages of the Concordance, a vivid minority of the references being relevant to the apocalyptic theme: "God's death" is but a play in the 'Two Songs' from The Resurrection; that inscrutable "crime of death and birth" enlivens the 'Dialogue of Self and Soul'; in 'Upon a Dying Lady' the heroine joins those legendary world-shakers,

    Achilles, Timon, Babar, Barhaim, all
    Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death.

9 In 'Blood and the Moon' he asks

    Is every modern nation like the tower
    Half dead at the top?

10 "Agamemnon dead" in 'Leda and the Swan' marks the fall of the Trojan world; "Children dazed or dead" are victims of the crumbling gyre, with the "Crazed Moon... staggering in the sky"; because of "those new dead" in 'the Spirit Medium' the speaker clings to the solace of spade and earth.

11 I now want to distinguish Yeats's early intimations of apocalypse from his later – without, I hope, compromising the continuity between them. A passage from his celebrated Introduction to The Resurrection – a play of later, "hard-core apocalypse" – provides the necessary perspective.

    When I was a boy everyone talked about progress, and rebellion against my elders took the form of aversion to that myth. I took satisfaction in certain public disasters, felt a son of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin, and then came upon the story of Oisin in Tuna nOg, and reshaped it into my "Wanderings of Oisin'...
    Presently Oisin and his islands faded and the sort of images that came into 'Rosa Alchemica' and The Adoration of the Magi' took their place. Our civilisation was about to reverse itself, or some new civilisation about to be born from all that our age rejected, from all that my stories symbolised as a harlot, and take after its mother; because we had worshipped a single god it would worship many or receive from Joachim of Flora's Holy Spirit a multitudinous influx.

12 Yeats sees in 'Oisin' and these two stories a unity of concern not immediately visible to the reader, chiefly because he did not carry through his plans for the poem. He had
planned for it "an elaborate metaphor of a breaking wave intended to prove that all life rose and fell in the poem" and the hero, having experienced Christian revelation, was to have "passed in death over another sea to another island".

I have discussed elsewhere the apocalyptic structure of The Secret Rose (1897) which had been first planned so as to end with 'The Adoration of the Magi'. The volume would then have encompassed the "twenty centuries of stony sleep" of the Christian era, enacted the savage Nativity and Epiphany of a New Dispensation, and thus supplied the millennial continuity abandoned in the execution of 'The Wanderings of Oisin'.

The figure of Michael Robartes presides over 'Rosa Alchemica' and "The Adoration of the Magi'. The character is based on MacGregor Mathers whom Yeats met in London around 1888 and whose Order of the Golden Dawn Yeats joined in 1890. This occult sodality becomes the Order of the Alchemical Rose in these millennial stories. Mathers was convinced that the present world was doomed to perish in some vast holocaust:

He began to foresee changes in the world, announcing in 1893 or 1894 the imminence of immense wars... Was this prophecy of his, which would shortly be repeated by mediums and clairvoyants all over the world, an unconscious inference taken up into an imagination brooding upon war, or was it prevision?

Yeats's own field research threw up the ubiquitous belief among Irish country people in the Battle of the Valley of the Black Pig, a prophecy informing several poems in The Wind among the Reeds. In a prose sketch entitled 'War', published in the 1902 edition of The Celtic Twilight, he reports a conversation he had with an Irish country woman:

And presently our talk of war shifted, as it had a way of doing, to the battle of the Black Pig, which seems to her a battle between Ireland and England, but to me an Armageddon which shall quench all things in Ancestral Darkness...

In a note to his lyric, 'The Valley of the Black Pig' he writes

I have myself heard said that the girths shall rot from the bellies of the horses, because of the few men that shall come alive out of the valley.

And in the lyric itself

... Unknown spears
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
And the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.

while the speaker grows "weary of the world's empires".

This final phrase introduces the last word I want to chase in the Concordance, that most crucial of all Yeats's apocalyptic words - "world". Like Martha Clifford in Ulysses, Yeats "does not like that world".

WORLD, with its morphemes, takes up three pages of the Concordance: about half of these are conventional - "They have gone about the world like wind". There are then two crucial and related senses of the word, both of them related to our theme.

There is the biblical, New Testament, sense of "world", the sense in which, according to the Parable of the Unjust Steward, the "children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light"; the same sense in which the Christian, with baptism, renounces "the World, the Flesh and the Devil". The most schematic example of this usage is in 'Beggar to Beggar cried' where the speaker finds it "time to put off the world" in order to - "make my soul" and to "rid me of the devil in my shoes... And the worse devil that is between my thighs". But the idea is already prominent in 'The Song of
the Happy Shepherd' where the "sick children of the world" are warned against scientific materialism, and later, in 'Adam's Curse' where the poetic spirit exclaims against the
... bankers schoolmasters and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.

22 This biblical sense of "world" is, of course, closely related to its use in English Romantic poetry: in Wordsworth's "the world is too much with us" it is seen as the enemy of health-giving and uppercase "Nature".

23 (With Yeats "nature" has no such status, it is largely an indifferent, often a destructive force; but most significantly it connotes material process as opposed to the eternity of the soul and of art. The poet in 'Sailing to Byzantium' is "out of nature", free to contemplate its process. God will eventually "burn nature with a kiss" as in The Man who Dreamed of Fairyland'. "Earth", on the other hand, is mostly seen affectionately; "the old earth's dreamy youth" is a source of inspiration and healing to the Happy Shepherd.)

24 The second sense of the "world" is as a place which is soon to pass away. Considering its first meaning this consummation is devoutly to be wished, and is repeatedly wished in the lyrics. The exemplary poem here is 'He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World' in The Wind among the Reeds (1899), which, with The Secret Rose (1897), his summary "fin-de-siècle" statement, epitome of his "softcore apocalypse". Already in 'Oisin' we have seen "God shake the world with restless hands"; in 'The Rose of the World' the poet "and the labouring world are passing by"; "time and the world are ever in flight" in 'Into the Twilight'; in The Blessed' again "time and the world are ebbing away".

25 How this world is to end, whether with a bang or a whimper, is never quite clear. Yeats's letters of the period show, here and there, a man sniffing the wind with rumours of wars. Apocalyptic doctrine does ordain – as far back as in Plato's Laws – that the moment of change must involve violence. Yeats himself had exclaimed, after seeing Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi:

> After Stephane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.

26 But is that savage god, who brings down the philistine fabric of Victorianism, destined to "preside" over the new dispensation making it an age of brutal anarchy? Or is he merely the agent of change, a portent of apocalypse, like the "boar without bristles" that comes out of the West in 'He mourns for the Change'? And what is his relationship to the rough beasts and rampant swans of the later "hard-core" apocalyptics? To arrive at an answer it will help to look again at 'Rosa Alchemica' and 'The Tables of the Law'.

27 The narrator of 'Rosa Alchemica', a lapsed Rosicrucian, is still a practitioner and scholar of alchemy on which he is writing a book when the story opens. Alchemy was the central sacrament of these Rosicrucians – fictional counterparts of the Golden Dawn – who had derived it in turn from Hermetism and Theosophy. The narrator reveals that the true alchemist "sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of an universal transformation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance". The book he is writing is intended as "a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences".

28 His reverie is interrupted by Michael Robartes who conveys him to the temple of the Alchemical Rose which stands on the Atlantic coast, lecturing him as they go on the
imminent return of the pagan gods, Celtic and Classical. When the narrator performs the
dance of initiation he notices an image of the Alchemical Rose on the ceiling and, on the
floor, the face of "a pale Christ on a pale cross". (It is worth noting that the story
appeared side by side with an essay by Havelock Ellis on Nietzsche in *The Savoy*, April
1896). When he asks for an explanation he is told that the dancers desire "to trouble His
unity with their multitudinous feet".

In 'The Tables of the Law' the same narrator recalls that Owen Aherne had believed "that
the beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and finally life herself,
by sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city", a belief
given weight later "by the fermentation of belief which is coming upon our (Irish) people
with the reawakening of their imaginative life".

In "The Adoration of the Magi" the same narrator – waiting in dread of "that inquietude
of the veil of the temple, which M. Mallarmé considers a characteristic of our times" – is
visited by three old Irish storytellers from a western island. They had been reading
Virgil's 'Messianic Eclogue' – Yeats mentions the Fifth while clearly meaning the Fourth
Eclogue – when a voice comes to them over the waters telling them to set out for Paris
where a dying woman will give them "the secret names of the gods" which when intoned
bring back the Immortals. They make the journey, finding a beautiful, dying Irishwoman
in a Parisian brothel. As they kneel by the bedside they hear the voice of Hermes telling
them to "bow down before her... that the Immortals may come again".

The voice continues: "When the Immortals would overthrow the things of to-day and
bring in the things that were yesterday, they have no-one to help them, but one whom
the things that are to-day have cast out... this woman has been driven out of time and has
lain upon the bosom of Eternity". Hermes goes on to announce that "another Argo shall
carry heroes over the sea, and another Achilles beleager another Troy". In time the
woman revives long enough to intone the secret names of the Irish gods and other names
"till the spirit went out of her body". A final name they do not catch, but it is explained to
them that it was that of a "symbolist painter" who attended the Black Mass and had
"taught her to see visions and to hear voices".

(In a 1925 version Yeats altered the story to accord with the "hard-core" apocalypse of
that period: "another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleager Troy";
the harlot gives birth to "the likeness of a unicorn... most unlike man of all living
things, being cold, hard and virginal". Some critics, neglecting to compare the several
versions, have mistakenly attributed these uncompromising images to the earlier, softer
version of the fable).

The evidence of these stories, together with that of the poems and commentaries, suggest
the overthrow of Victorian convention and ethics in favour of no brutal disorder, but of a
subversive concept of art and beauty – "torches thrown into a burning city" – distilled
from Nietzsche, Pater, Wilde and Gustave Moreau, sponsored by such mystical patrons as
Joachim with his "multitudinous influx" and Blake who wrote of Christ: "His mother
should a harlot have been, Just such an one as Magdalen"; and Shelley who announced:

- The world's great age begins anew;
- The golden age returns.

That the Armageddon should be an Irish affair, with Celtic gods and mystic harlot, is
consonant with current Renanesque theories of the Celt and with Yeats's current
determination to found an Order of Celtic mysteries, and to find, with the help of "A.E." a Celtic Avatar among the hills of Donegal.

After this Armageddon, I would therefore insist, the New Dispensation would be akin to the dream of the Alchemists: a new Golden Age of the kind foretold in Virgil’s Eclogue; Joachim’s Age of the Holy Spirit; Blake’s Golden Age of the Ancients. It is indeed, as Yeats is soon to acknowledge, a "fanciful reverie" which he quickly buries – marking the spot – as the century turns and he enters upon the Iron Age of the Lane controversies and the Playboy riots, the world out of which the "hard-core" apocalyptic of his middle age are born.

But these feverish millenial hopes are dramatically revived in 1914 when Mather’s prophecies of "immense wars" become a reality. The poet who can so eloquently despair of sacrificial blood in 'September 1913' soon finds himself celebrating the Medusa birth of "a terrible beauty" in 'Easter 1916', completing that brilliant triptych with 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' which faces the appalling reality that "days are dragon-ridden" while nightmare "rides upon sleep". And in a shrewd reversal of Tennyson’s nervous Christian optimism he acknowledges with mingled dread and fascination:

So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead;
All men are dancers and their tread
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

This visionary terrorism, born of an apprehension of total war, has drawn upon the poet charges of "hysteria", "brutality", "fascist authoritarianism". The poem used most to indict him is The Second Coming', written in the midst of Ireland’s experience of the Black and Tans, and in the bloody aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The most celebrated of these indictments has come from Harold Bloom in his book Yeats (1970) where he levels charges that have often been reiterated, especially in the terminology of Marxism. Having, with a spirited pedantry, upbraided Yeats for switching from an imaglogy of the Sphinx of Memphis, in the drafts, to an unearned appropriation of St. Matthew’s "second coming of Jesus" in the final text – why can’t Yeats have his clinamen?

He concludes that Ivor Winters was justified in asserting that Yeats's attitude towards the beast is different from ours; we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying – he is Yeats's judgment upon all that we regard as civilised. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality.

It is my intention in this essay to give a context, a sense of continuity and human process to Yeats’s dialogue with apocalypse. Therefore I may be forgiven if I point to that quibble with the word "surely" which can be usefully referred to one of Yeats’s early annunciations of apocalypse, the final couplet of The Secret Rose':
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,  
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?

Exclamations like "surely" are characteristic, and highly effective, gestures of the apocalyptic liturgy. But the assertion I want to refute categorically — and I hope for the last time — is the assumption that the "rough beast", any more than the "savage god" will preside over the new dispensation, or that the poet in any way "approves of this kind of brutality". The rough beast is a portent of change and the violence that accompanies it. When Yeats seems to be saying "let it come down" he is responding as a human being does in the pause before an imminent and inevitable thunder-storm.

It has been the misfortune of his generation to be born into the end of a primary phase, a miserable changing-post in history, marked by the eclipse of the individual personality and the tyranny of systems – Socialism, Capitalism, Communism, Administration, Democracy itself. In a world where "conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul" the poet, in the expectation of momentous change, utters "that one word 'Rejoice'", it is because the ugliness will soon be over and humanity will run on "that unfashionable gyre again". Out of the violence that accompanies the crumbling of the primary gyre the end of the millennium, will emerge a new antithetical civilisation, reaching its fullness, its new "Unity of Being", around 2,500 A.D. Like its great predecessors, Athens, Byzantium and Urbino it will find "Delight in Art whose end is peace". And if Yeats's belief in reincarnation holds good he may be reborn into it, perhaps as a court poet.

The version of the gyres that follows is especially adapted to the reading of Yeats's apocalyptic poetry which I have proposed in the preceding pages. The crumbling of each gyre is marked by a personage, a polity, and one exemplary poem. The projected "New Bethlehem" — named tentatively from the last line of 'The Second Coming', is left to more prophetic commentators to characterise.
NOTES

2. (2) Autobiographies, p. 336.

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Meeting Places of Life, Poetry and Theatre: 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'

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1 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' is a poem about the intertwining of life and art: the ageing poet, in his seventies, looks back at work written in his twenties and in early middle age, scrutinising it to see how much of his real life went into it. The poem was published (in journals) in January 1939, the month in which Yeats died, so has the poignancy of last words. But it offers another special fascination; the impression it gives us of being taken behind the scenes, shown the play from the perspective of its author, allowed to see what he chose to extract from his life experience and turn into theatre and – even more interestingly – what he left out. It is a poem about gaps and omissions; also it seems to me, about the poetic energy released by the painful process of identifying them.

2 I have used the word play figuratively but I think there is a special appropriateness in looking at this poem from a dramatic angle, which is what I want to do. This is not just because two of the early works Yeats selects for revaluation are plays, though there is significance in that. Both The Countess Cathleen and On Baile's Strand were written for performance and The Wanderings of Oisin, though far too diffuse to be dramatic, makes moves in that direction (Oisin's long monologue is set in a framework of a dialogue with St. Patrick, who cuts in from time to time, almost as if in a play). There is too the powerful initiating imagery of the circus, striking a theatrical note from the start.

3 My main reason for focusing on the theatricality in the poem, however, is the final stanza. The vision of the "foul rag and bone shop" which Yeats's re-experiencing of his past has drawn out of him is intensely dramatic. His passion as he confronts the awful reality of the mounds of refuse, the broken cans, seems about to explode – almost, it could be, into a new play. I am reminded of the closing sequence of Beckett's novel, The Unnamable, when one of the voices reaches a pitch of agitation (having called out earlier "not I") that seems to demand what it was given later by its author; the chance to become, in the play, Not I, a real mouth on a real stage, writhing and raging in a real stage dark.
Beckett will occasionally make his way into this discussion. The poem draws us sometimes in his direction and the thought of his writings casts a strong backward light on those of Yeats. If I may introduce a more personal note, Beckett’s presence in this paper has also been prompted by meeting with him earlier in the day on which I arrived in Caen. I believe the participants in the colloque and others will be pleased and touched to know that Beckett’s love of Yeats’s poetry was expressed in his good wishes for the success of this occasion. It is certainly a great pleasure to me to be conveying his greetings and sympathetic interest to those of us here—admirers of Yeats all—from his great Irish successor.

Yeats’s poem is structured so as to remind us of different kinds of self-expression and invite us into the revaluation the poet is making of it. It is a re-run of high dramatic moments. But they are all rendered now in the poet’s own voice, the actors can no longer speak for themselves. It is a meaningful reversal of the essential principle involved in dramatising, which is precisely to cut the characters free of their author, give them independent life, their separate voices. The dramatist is not to be identified in his play. He has created a world which can only be held up and kept in being by his personae.

Yeats loved the idea of this independent journeying of the personae. He wrote revealingly in an article published in *The United Irishman* at the time his play, *Where There is Nothing*, was published by that journal (in 1902):

> So far as I am a dramatist, so far as I have made these people alive, I watch them with wonder and pity, and I do not even ask myself were they right to go upon that journey.¹

But in ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ he pulls his characters back to himself, scrutinises them as projections of his own hidden feelings, does implicitly ask the question: "were they right to go upon that journey?" Or perhaps it should be phrased: "was I right to send them on that journey rather than some other journey I was making in my mind?"

Yeats’s introduction in *The United Irishman* includes an allusion to *The Countess Cathleen*. The plays in this group, he said, were all concerned with types of religious passion.

Ireland was more religious than any other European country, which was perhaps why I, who have been bred and born here, can hardly write at all unless I write about religious ideas.

There had been spectacular reinforcement for his view of the grip of religion on Irish minds three years earlier, in 1899, when *The Countess Cathleen* was performed in Dublin. It was judged to be "dangerous and demoralising" and unpatriotic too, because, said Yeats "I pictured Irish men and women selling their souls to keep death from their houses". Those scandalised by the Countess’ bargaining with devils could not accept that her act—motivated by her passionate urge to save her poor tenants from damnation—had anything saintly about it. Yeats himself, in his article of 1902, had hinted at reservations of his own about her conduct. She was "intoxicated with passion", he said; and, "the commandment of mercy is followed to the forgetting of all else". The words convey a sense of dangerous extremes, though extremes of virtue. Yet the final scene of the play endorses the Countess’ act. After her death (for she cannot live without a soul), the poet in the play has a vision which shows her being received into heaven by angels, one of whom pronounces benign judgement:

> The Light of Lights
> Looks always on the motive, not the deed,
> The Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone.
This climax seems like an acceptance of the Countess' idealistic self-sacrifice by the poet who wrote the play, as does his calm summing up in his 1902 article. The Countess is included among those early characters of his whom he sees "with wonder and pity", not even asking himself "were they right to go upon that journey". Could it really have been like this? At the time he wrote the play, had Yeats been able to view this particular "journey" with that remote and untormented gaze? It is hard to believe so. We know how obsessively he revised the play, how close he felt to it, how he wrote himself into it as the poet Aleel who loves the Countess with the same hopelessness Yeats himself suffered in his love for the fanatical Maud Gonne. The play was not quite the rounded off, complete experience those comments of 1902 might suggest. Its performance history points to some camouflaging of the passion that had gone into its conception. Florence Farr as Aleel drew enthusiastic plaudits which it is rather hard to account for now unless we envisage the production as aesthetically muted and stylised, one that avoided realism and strong passion. The actress cannot but have played down the virility of Aleel, the force of his sexual frustration.

Thirty and more years later, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion,' Yeats was to offer a very different perspective on his feelings about The Countess Cathleen. We will return to that question: at this point I want simply to register that for an informed reader of Yeats, someone who knew about his personal situation, a rather curious gap could already have been apparent in 1902 between the play and the life.

Turning now to the poem, we observe that it opens on a note of real life. The poet bewails a situation familiar to anyone who tries to write:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.

A bad case of writer's block. But this is also, of course, a literary convention, one much used, for example, by a poet who was often in Yeats's thoughts; Sir Philip Sidney. The opening sonnet in the Astrophel and Stella sequence is taken up for most of its length with the painful writer's block he is suffering from. He tells how he has tried to deal with it, "oft turning others' leaves" to see if literature would inspire his "sun-burned" brain. But he is not looking in the right place: "Fool, said my Muse to me. Look in thy heart and write". Once he realises that immersion in real life is needed, he is able to start.

Of course it cannot be guaranteed that Sidney or any other particular writer would spring to the mind of all readers of 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. The poem is not dependent on our catching all its possible echoes. It does invite us to be aware of echoes, however, by constantly looking outside itself to Yeats's own earlier work and even to his commentaries upon it and to our knowledge of his life. Intertextuality is the medium in which this poem operates - and also its subject. If we do look out to Sidney's poem, we will bring to our reading of Yeats's an extra layer of piquancy, when considering his curious use of the word heart. For Sidney, the heart is the source of inspiration: he turns to it with relief. For Yeats it is a very different matter. The blockage he is enduring connects with old age and, as he puts it, with the need to settle for the heart:

Maybe, at last, being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although

I have broken off at this awkward point because the obtrusive rhyme ("although/so") invites it. This is a moment of decisive contrast One the one hand we have the heart -
grudgingly accepted as something to be settled for in old age. On the other – Crash, bang, the sound of drums and cymbals – in they come; the circus animals:

Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

This unexpected, bold, brassy, enigmatic image obviously sets up the sharpest possible contrast with the physical depletion and frustration communicated at the start of the poem. We feel the force of the poet's longing for the seemingly endless supply of energy in his circus time; the physical virtuosity, the exhilarating danger. The imagery of stilt-walking and circus fascinated Yeats in this late period, as the poem 'High Talk' reminds us with its assertive opening line, "Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye". The imagery sets up many trains of thought but I want to focus for the moment on a particular aspect, the peculiar nature of the theatricality Yeats conjures up. His circus is a very incomplete, even shabby sort of show: it has a lion (only one?), a woman (ditto) and everything else to match, to judge from the amused mockery of "and the Lord knows what". Perhaps it is not to be taken too seriously; it is only a circus, maybe in the idiomatic usage of something far from finished or satisfactory. There is a puzzle here, as there is in the tide, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', with its ambiguous possessive case. Who has deserted whom? Has the poet complete control over his show or has it in some way taken him over? Beckett comes to mind here, irresistibly, with his great circus image; Pozzo swaggering onto the stage in Waiting for Godot, cracking a whip and driving Lucky by a rope. Lucky is in a way his circus animal: he carries the luggage like a wretched donkey and performs to order – the dance, the think. He seems to belong body and soul to Pozzo, yet in the second act positions are reversed when the rope attaching master and slave becomes the rope blind Pozzo needs Lucky to guide him by. Yeats's imagery too hints at the possibility of being controlled by the inventions of one's own mind; the theme is a deep preoccupation of both these great Irish poets.

In Yeats's poem witty ambiguities invite the reader to carry forward the circus – with all its mixed associations – into the discussion of the early writings that takes up the following three stanzas. "Stilted boys" is one such ambiguity; it suggests real performers, possibly clowns on stilts. But as the poem 'High Talk' assures us, this is above all an image: "All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all". Stilted can mean the opposite of a virtuoso performance; it can refer to verbal expression that is not really expressive, whether because too formal or too inhibited, or in some way false. The "burnished chariot" which is only just at home in the circus (high talk for a circus car perhaps) certainly belongs to Yeats's stage world of Oisin and Baile, as well as in the more mundane scene where such a property specifically occurs, The Unicorn from the Stars. The thrust of all this is to assign some rather showy theatrical props – with the slight suggestion of vulgarity as well as virtuosity about them – to the early works at which Yeats is now going to take his new look.

All three belong within the same short period: The Wanderings of Oisin, 1889; The Countess Cathleen, 1892; On Baile's Strand, not produced till 1904 but started in 1901, its theme being handled even earlier. Yeats's retrospective is an extremely active one. He deconstructs the three works, revealing expressive gaps and omissions and so opening them up to new readings. Finally he reconstructs by incorporating revised perspectives in the old works,
or inviting the reader to do so. We engage with him in shaping new responses and in the process changing the works to which we are responding.

19 The first work revalued in this way, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, is prefaced by the weary question from the old poet: "What can I but enumerate old themes?" The languor and depletion of the opening lines is recalled, "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain". But the circus animals have given him a charge of energy. Something new certainly comes into his clever precis of the long-ago narrative:

First the sea-rider Oisin led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;

20 The sea-rider, the enchanted islands, the dreams – all this belongs to the original; the tale of the hero, wandering in a supernatural space and time with the fairy woman, Niamh, who plucks him out of his human life, to take him on a love journey that lasts for hundreds of years of earth time. But what of the colloquialism, "led by the nose"? Was this in the original? Probably few people will know *The Wanderings of Oisin* well enough to be sure whether or not the attitude expressed in the phrase is somehow part of the poem. An uneasiness is set up; we may feel a need to go outside the poem we are reading, back to the narrative that is being so enigmatically summarised. The work of deconstruction has begun and we are drawn into it by curiosity and (possibly) imperfect memory.

21 Whatever we do or don't remember of the early poem, we are bound to realise, from the verbal incongruity of "led by the nose" in the stately context, that contradictory attitudes to the story are being brought into collision. A romantic view predominates. The poem's themes are said to spring from an "embittered heart" but the bitterness leads back into romance; "old songs or courtly shows". On the other hand, the hero has been led by the nose; somehow cheated or conned; this sounds more like realism than romance. Our confidence in our ability to read *The Wanderings of Oisin* is unsettled. Then comes the undermining blast that sets the whole edifice trembling; the unexpected question:

But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

22 The poet has in one breath detached himself from his persona (this was only a character he "set on" a journey) and identified himself with him: they are at one in their infatuation with the fairy bride. And a gulf opens up: the feeling Yeats did not put into the poem pours out. He is surely relying on his readers to supply the missing name, Maud Gonne, and to draw the contrast between the sexual fulfilment achieved by the lover in the poem and the denial of it the poet experienced in actuality. Once these connections between the life and the art have been wrily exposed, we cannot help but take them into our reading – of the old poem as well as the new. Yeats is moving in and out of his personae with a mercurial lightness which reminds me again of Beckett and those narrators in his trilogy; the Molloys and Morans and Malones who invent each other, wear each other's hats, tell each other's stories, discard each other as the narration becomes increasingly self-conscious and ends with the Unnamable's claim to have invented all the others. Everything is provisional, fluid: the story can never be thought of as complete. So it is with Yeats's narrative. The gap between the fable and the newly revealed feeling behind it creates a similar sense of provisionality; both unnerving and full of possibility.
The second stanza continues in the same vein. Another fable swims into view, seeming at first remarkably complete, almost as if all Yeats had to do was find a name for it:

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
*The Countess Cathleen* was the name I gave it;
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.

Up to this point the play is still the play he described in 1902 (with a sharper edge on the Countess who is now crazed with pity). But in the second half of the stanza an immense gap opens up:

I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it.

A. Norman Jeffares has commented that Cathleen is not easily identified with Maud Gonne, since no such fanaticism and hate as Yeats alludes to is seen to enslave the character of the play. It is true; and this is exactly the gap Yeats is deliberately opening up for us in the poem of his old age. In the spaces between the fable and the feeling now admitted to, a second drama emerges; the drama of the poet's relationship with his characters. We are invited to take a near-Pirandellian perspective on the incompleteness of the story those characters presented. We see how certain bitter thoughts did not find their way in; that the Countess was idealised in a way which only partly expressed Yeats's feeling about sacrificial acts of a lofty, impersonal kind. We can understand how the part of Aleel could be played by a woman; how Florence Farr's femininity could be a concealing mask for the more fierce and virile frustration the situation of Aleel seems to require.

This is the only stanza in the poem where the word *heart* is not used. Yet it has the most heart in it, in the sense of tender feeling: there is a world of tenderness in that "my dear". The play curiously gains in feeling, from the more complex, ravaged context Yeats provides for it in the poem. The retrospective sows doubt, and in doing so casts a sombre but richer light back on the original, making it fuller, more interesting. We are drawn ever more closely into a sense of collaboration with the poet in his re-making of his youthful works.

The stanza ends with a return to the young poet, beguiled by dreams:

And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

Dreams crowd into the centre of the scene in the third stanza of the retrospect section, to be recognised by the poet as having displaced a large part of reality. The play conjured up in the opening lines, *On Baile's Strand*, is summarised in a terse two lines:

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;

Yeats is evidently relying on his readers here to fill in the rest of the play from his gnomic account of its tragic climax. Doubtless he was right in his assumption that it would be a work well enough known for the process to work; this was a play people might well have seen on stage as well as read. For those who had enjoyed that experience (and also for those who read with imagination alert) there would be no forgetting the haunting last moments, when the emphasis comes to rest, not on the stricken, off-stage hero, driven to his crazy battle with the waves by his discovery that he has killed his only son, but on the unheroic, even squalid figures of the Fool and Blind Man. While the hero is performing his high act, they are preparing for their low one; to creep into houses left empty in all
the excitement, and steal bread or what they can find. The curtain line is their exulting, "We will put our hands into the ovens".

The poem invites us to think about the oddity of this deliberate anti-climax in the light of all our knowledge – not just of the play itself but of Yeats's own comments upon it. He knew well by the time he wrote 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' that he could take many of his readers with him in these flights of retrospect and oblique allusion. In his last play, The Death of Cuchulain (1939), he mischievously requires of his audience, through the Old Man who addresses them in a prologue, to bring to this new play their knowledge of other works: "the old epics and Mr. Yeats' plays about them".

Fifty years after his death, even more readers may be expected to have even more knowledge of the life material surrounding Yeats's poem, including the rich stores of self-revelation in his letters. They will be likely to know, for example, the letter he wrote in 1904 to Frank Fay, the actor who played Cuchulain, explaining his thinking about the characterisation in On Baile's Strand. It is a letter worth knowing, for it casts a very sharp light on Yeats's closeness to his persona, Cuchulain – and offers a hint for our reading of the poem that was to be written so many years later.

Cuchulain's age in the play was pinned down for Fay with pernickety exactness: "about 40, not less than 35 or 36 and not more than 45 or 46". Yeats's own age at the time was 38. Cuchulain had put away illusions and dreams – "that make young men a woman's servant" – and become a deliberate lover who can never really surrender himself, a little hard, a man who left the people about him "a little repelled". Perhaps, says Yeats, with a rush of deep intuition, the young man to whom he is instinctively drawn (though he must fight and kill him) could have given him the thing he was most in need of – affection. For all this, Cuchulain is a glamorous figure: "repellent yet alluring". With this letter in mind, we, as readers of the poem, might be tempted by Yeats's emphases in letter and poem to view the Cuchulain figure as a supreme kind of performer, a circus animal. But the letter also reminds us that he casts a darker, less glamorous shadow which is incorporated in the play in the chorus character of the Fool. Yeats puts it very directly; Cuchulain "is the fool – wandering, passive, houseless and almost loveless".

This is a poignant analysis: almost more poignant than the dramatic action which is meant to embody it. Yeats takes pains to hedge it round with cautions: the analysis may be wrong, he tells Fay, for the character was created out of instinct and it is the instinct that must be trusted. Yet the impression remains that the analysis is true, this is a play of the heart: that uncomfortable, troublesome heart which in the poem has up to now been associated with bitterness and decay. The play itself, even though committed to high talk and high-wire ways, gives us at least one moment of painful, low key tenderness. It is a moment of silence, when Cuchulain, sitting between the Fool and Blind Man, learns from their gossip that it is his son he has slain – and we feel what it means to him through the shaking of the bench where they are sitting. "It is Cuchulain who is trembling", the Fool tells the Blind Man, "It is Cuchulain who is shaking the bench". A moment bereft of words which is more telling by far – in terms of human feeling – than the torrent of words the hero finds when he rushes to his revenge; his absurd revenge on the forces of the sea.

The old poet looking back knows well there were "heart-mysteries" there; painful ones, to do with ageing ("not more than 45 or 46"), lack of a certain kind of affection. But he turned from them, he tells us now (as Cuchulain in the play breaks his moving silence with a return to the high talk of the flamboyant self):
Heart-mysteries there and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me.
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

The retrospect is over and in the final stanza of the poem the poet faces head-on the opposition of heart and circus that has been suggesting itself throughout. First he pays tribute to the images created by his youthful imagination:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?

"Masterful images"? Yes, they have power, we must agree: certainly for the poet – and for us too, since he has made us take them into our reading of his poetry. The plays have even, to some extent, cut themselves free from the matrix, been revived from time to time on the public stage, an acid test for independent holding-power. But were they ever complete, would that be possible for anything that grew in the mystic state called "pure mind"? The concept of completeness, of full expression, is one the poem has been subtly undermining throughout. Now the poet faces the paradox the work of deconstruction has brought him to; a work forced on him by the ravages of time but – and this is where Yeats's greatness shows – embraced by him as a way in to a fuller math.

He answers that question, "out of what began?" with a violent outpouring of squalid imagery:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

Enervation is totally dispersed as he confronts this horrid reality. The circus animals may have deserted the poet but he is also deserting them. By admitting into the works of his youth truths that could not find expression then, in those dream structures. In doing so, he has found the vitality to shape a new world, an extraordinarily vivid if repulsive one. It is made up of debris and leavings but it is not quiescent. The figure of the raving slut who keeps the till looms over the refuse and broken cans with the promise – or threat – of potent action. This enigmatic figure, with her hand on the till, seems to have sprung from the depths of the unconscious, where the most secret, perhaps shameful accounts of profit and loss are kept. The poem does not have to be taken as a bitterly resigned acceptance of old age and the death of imagination. It is not that, any more than Beckett's "Fail again. Fail better" is a statement about the failure of some particular work.

The poet may have lost the ladder that let him climb high up above the discordant litter of life. To lie down among the old cans looks a grim alternative. But the dynamic energy that has rushed into the poem is the best illustration of the poet's reminder – to himself as well as to us – that the foul rag and bone shop is the place where all the ladders start. We surely end our reading in a state of active curiosity, not passive melancholy. What might not grow out of this harsh reality, what new drama might not already be shaping itself around the menacing figure of the raving slut who keeps the till? Like Beckett, whose characters must all venture down among "the trash" in order to find their right way, Yeats in this poem goes lower only to find new ways of climbing higher.
NOTES


2. (2) I am indebted to Deirdre Toomey for information about reviews of Florence Farr’s performance which will appear in Volume 2 of the *Collected Letters*.


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Lapis Lazuli

Jacqueline Genet

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity
Muets contours, votre énigme excède la pensée
Comme fait l’éternité.
(Keats, Ode sur une urne grecque)

1 Lapis Lazuli, placé dans Last Poems après "The Gyres", est comme ce poème inspiré par la découverte de la permanence au-delà des mutations, par l’éternel retour des civilisations sans cesse détruites et toujours renaissantes, mais également par la conviction passionnée que l’art sait triompher de la destruction.

2 À l’origine, le poème se voulait l’illustration des différences entre l’Orient et l’Occident :
"Ascète, disciple, dureté de la pierre, thème éternel de l’Orient voluptueux. Cri héroïque au cœur du désespoir. Mais non, j’ai tort, l’Orient a toujours ses solutions et ignore donc tout de la tragédie. C’est nous – et non pas l’Orient – qui devons élever ce cri héroïque". L’Occident dans ‘Lapis Lazuli’ est représenté par le courage de ses héros de tragédie, l’Orient par la sagesse de ses Chinois. On peut opposer les trois premières strophes tournées vers l’Occident, à la dernière strophe qui est orientale ; à l’Ouest, nous devons, au cœur du désespoir, faire entendre un cri héroïque – c’est le courage des héros de tragédie – ; l’Orient par contre a ses propres solutions – croyance en la prédestination, réincarnation etc. – et ignore le tragique. Le poème s’ouvre sur le point de vue occidental des femmes hystériques et la troisième strophe s’achève sur l’attitude très différente du sculpteur grec Callimaque. Les Grecs sont "but half-European", écrit Yeats dans 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan'. Callimaque est donc l’intermédiaire artistique entre l’Occident et l’Orient ; la strophe qui lui est consacrée est structurellement le pivot entre les deux premières strophes et la dernière. Dans sa version définitive, le poème, plus largement, propose une vision de l’homme, de l’histoire et de l’art, face à notre condition tragique.

3 Ces vers sont dédiés à Harry Clifton qui avait offert à Yeats, pour ses soixante-dix ans, un lapis-lazuli sculpté par un artiste chinois, une "montagne" de la période Ch’ien Lung (1739-1795). Le poète écrit à Dorothy Wellesley le 6 juillet 1935 : "Je remarque que vous avez beaucoup de lapis-lazuli, quelqu’un m’en a envoyé, en cadeau, un grand morceau sculpté par un artiste chinois et représentant une montagne avec un temple, des arbres,
des sentiers et un ascète et son disciple prêts à gravir la montagne". Dans cette description Yeats oublie le serviteur qui suit à distance respectueuse et qui semble porter un luth, et la grue en vol qui se trouve sur l'autre face, deux éléments qu'il utilise dans son poème. Sur l'original est aussi gravée une courte inscription de quatre vers. Dans cette même lettre, le poète évoque l'"extase héroïque", thème majeur de son poème : "Je crois que le véritable mouvement poétique de notre époque va vers une discipline héroïque. Les gens qui se soucient beaucoup de morale, perdent toujours l'extase héroïque. Ceux qui la connaissent sont, la plupart du temps, ceux que Dowson a décrits (je ne peux pas retrouver le poème mais voici les vers, à quelque chose près) :

Wine and women and song  
To us they belong  
To us the bitter and gay.

4 *Bitter and gay*, c'est bien là l'état d'esprit héroïque". Les vers d'Ernest Dowson, empruntés à sa 'Villanelle of the Poet's Road', sont en réalité :

Wine and woman and song,  
Three things garnish our way :  
Yet is day over long.  
...  
Unto us they belong,  
Us the bitter and gay,  
Wine and woman and song.

5 On a dit qu'une visite de Frank O'Connor avait cristallisé tous ces éléments et contribué à l'élaboration du poème : "J'allais voir Yeats, un soir, très troublé que j'étais par une représentation peu satisfaisante de la Dervogilla de Lady Gregory, qui avait été gâchée pour moi, parce que l'héroïne pleurait au baisser du rideau. Je n'en parlai pas immédiatement, car je remarquai sur la cheminée une nouvelle acquisition ; un beau morceau de lapis où étaient sculptées les scènes joyeuses d'un pèlerinage chinois. Yeats l'aimait beaucoup et me dit qu'il composait un poème à celui qui le lui avait offert Puis il continua en me parlant d'une lettre d'Edmund Dulac, qu'il venait de recevoir, et qui était terrifié de ce qui allait arriver si Londres était bombardée. Je lui parlai de mon expérience personnelle et lui demandai : "Est-il jamais permis à un acteur de sangloter au baisser du rideau ?" et il répondit "Jamais !". Cette anecdote de Frank O'Connor paraît contestable car s'il évoque la reprise par l'Abbaye de la Dervogilla de Lady Gregory, elle se situe du 17 au 24 avril 1937 ; or même s'il n'était pas publié, le poème était alors achevé comme Yeats le dit dans une lettre du 26 juillet 1936 à Dorothy Wellesley. Mais c'était chez le poète une conviction profonde qu'il exprime également dans ses écrits théoriques. Il devait écrire :


Il s'ouvre sur une strophe relativement brève (huit vers) qui rappelle une critique adressée à Yeats dans sa jeunesse : "Une femme répétait... que peindre des tableaux ou écrire de la poésie à cette époque, c'était jouer de la lyre pendant que Rome brûlait". Ce reproche est exprimé ici par les "femmes hystériques". La strophe traduit formellement cette hystérie. Des femmes énervées ne prennent pas grand soin de leur langage. Celui-ci
est très familier : hysterical, sick, King Billy, if nothing drastic is done, beaten flat ; une même expression est reprise : For everybody knows or else should know. Ce vers, du point de vue de la métrique, rompt avec les précédents. Une scansion mécanique donne en effet 5 pieds. Une scansion plus conforme avec la diction de Yeats compte 4 pieds comme les autres vers, mais avec l'emploi d'un péon qui crée un rythme différent :

For e / very body knows

Cette rupture du rythme tend à donner à la strope le ton d'une conversation à bâtons rompus. Les constructions grammaticales contribuent aussi à cet effet : les trois premiers vers constituent un ensemble ; ainsi que les trois suivants et les trois derniers. Mais le tout forme un raisonnement unique : le vers 6 appartient à deux ensembles : il termine le deuxième et ouvre le dernier. La nervosité s'exprime par les allitérations en h du premier vers qui donnent une diction haletante. Celles-ci sont d'ailleurs nombreuses dans cette section comme si les femmes, soucieuses de convaincre, voulaient asséner leur pensée par une série de plosives : drastic / done ; palette / poets / aeroplane / zeppelin / pitch ; bow / Billy / bomb-balls / beaten ; until / town / beaten / flat. Que palette et poets soient par l'allitération associés à aeroplane et zeppelin souligne la futilité de l'œuvre de l'artiste. Il en est de même du lien allitératif entre fiddle-bow et bomb-balls ou beaten. Beaten apparaît dans deux groupes d'allitérations : celui des bombes et celui de la ville anéantie, soulignant le lien de cause à effet, le caractère irrémédiable de ce bombardement. Les rimes pauvres de la deuxième partie de la strope (done / in ; out / flat) contribuent à la discordance de l'évocation. Les femmes rejettent donc les trois arts : peinture (palette) musique (fiddle-bow) et poésie (poets) et cette gaieté qui ne sert de rien puisqu'elle est incapable d'améliorer la situation actuelle. Au lieu de s'engager, de s'efforcer de changer le monde, les artistes, pensent-elles, refusent d'assumer leur responsabilité : la réalité tragique ne les concerne pas. C'est pourquoi ils sont à blâmer. Ces femmes ne sont pas sans évoquer Maud Gonne et la comtesse Markiewicz qui avaient renoncé à la beauté – à l'art – pour se consacrer à la politique, qui avaient préféré l'action à la contemplation. Pour elles, l'art semble un luxe frivole dans le chaos de notre civilisation mourante :

That if nothing drastic is done

6 ce vers, le seul de trois accents dans cette section – met en avant la détermination des femmes –

Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat.

7 Yeats a pu s'inspirer ici d'une ballade "The Battle of the Boyne', incluse dans l'anthologie Irish Minstrelsy, éditée par H. Halliday Sparling que le poète avait probablement rencontré chez William Morris

King James has pitched his tent between
The lines for to retire ;
But King William threw his bomb-balls in
And set them all on fire'.

8 Outre Bomb-balls, Yeats reprend le verbe pitch utilisé non plus pour dresser une tente mais pour précipiter des bombes sur la ville. Les zeppelins étaient anachroniques en 1936, mais il se souvenait des bombardements de zeppelins sur Londres pendant la guerre de 1914-18. Le kaiser Guillaume II dont les avions et les zeppelins avaient harcelé
l'Angleterre lors de la première guerre mondiale lui rappelle cette époque où un autre
King Billy, le roi Guillaume III d'Orange, combattit Jacques II Stuart à la bataille de la
Boyne en 1690. On perçoit ici la pression des événements contemporains : les Allemands
réoccupaient la Rhénanie alors que Yeats composait son poème ; les Italiens avaient
envahi l'Abyssinie en 1935 ; et la guerre civile faisait rage en Espagne. La répétition de
l'histoire amorce le thème des cycles de civilisations. En même temps, le rapprochement
entre les armes modernes et celles de jadis vise à discréditer les démons mécaniques de
notre époque ; la diction familière et le vocabulaire qui est celui-là même du sportif
décrivant son jeu favori (cricket ou baseball) contribuent à donner la même impression –
le vers "Pitch like Billy bomb-balls in" a un caractère ludique, accentué par les assonances
en i : zeppelin, will, pitch, King, Billy, in, until, qui contraste avec la tragédie du dernier vers.
Le jugement des femmes devient dès lors absurde. Comment d'ailleurs les prendre au
sérieux, elles qui sont "hystériques" ? Yeats se refuse à raisonner avec elles mais les
présente sur un mode ironique de telle sorte que sa position, sans être explicitée, est
evidente depuis le début. La suite du poème est une réfutation, indirecte, formulée par les
héros de tragédie, l'artiste et les sages de Chine.

9  La deuxième strophe est – à première vue – une redéfinition du héros tragique. Le
prosaïque n'est plus de mise. La coupure avec la section précédente est marquée par un
tétramètre trochaïque :

All per / form their / tragic/play.

10 Que le dernier pied soit incomplet et se limite à play met le mot en valeur. Puis suivent
deux vers trochaïques également, construits symétriquement :

There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That’s Ophelia, that Cordelia.

11 Outre la coupure des vers par la virgule et la répétition de there et de that, la symétrie est
soulignée dans le deuxième vers par la rime interne Ophelia, Cordelia. Remarquons
egalement le parallélisme entre les deux vers qui constituent un ensemble soulignant
discrètement qu'Ophelia est un personnage féminin de Hamlet et Cordelia de King Lear. Ces
personnages sont réunis dans le they du vers suivant et implicitement opposés aux
"femmes hystériques" de la première strophe. La rupture du yet est indiquée par l'iambe
initial qui rompt le rythme des trochées précédents. Le spondée de stage-curtain suggère,
par le poids des accents, le caractère irrévocabile de ce rideau qui tombe lorsque la pièce
s'achève. On retrouve le mot play en fin de ligne au vers suivant, mis en valeur cette fois
par les allitérations :

prominent, part, play

La rime play / gay n'est pas innocente, non plus
que l'insertion de weep à la rime entre play et gay, comme si le jeu et la gaieté qui
entourent les pleurs les absorbaient ou au moins les contrôlaient. Toute cette section est
savamment construite

Gaieté transfiguring all that dread

12 est une manière d'apposition à gay ; de même que :
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost

13 reprend les deux vers précédents. Au centre de la section, gaiety en début de vers s'oppose
à tragedy qui ouvre aussi un vers. Ainsi ressortent les deux contraires que Yeats s'emploie
to réconcilier. La rime lost / uttermost accentue la déréliction tragique.

Tragedy wrought to its uttermost
compte trois pieds au milieu d'une section de tétramètres, concision qui met en relief le tragique de la condition humaine. La succession des verbes aimed at, found and lost, tous trois accentués, indique le péripole de l'homme. Yeats ne nous dit pas ce à quoi il tend. Le aimed at résume toutes les aspirations. Une fois atteintes, elles sont réduites à néant par la mort : lost. Le caractère irrémédiable de cette perte est symbolisé par ce Black out qui éclate seul en début de vers, encore isolé par la ponctuation qui le suit. Le flamboiement divin dans la tête est concomitant ; la révélation céleste accompagne la mort. Celle-ci intervient l'espace du point virgule ; la juxtaposition contradictoire des ténèbres (bBack out) et de la lumière du feu (blazing) est renforcée par l'allitération en bl. Celle en h (Heaven / head) doublée de l'assonance en e tend à confondre ciel et tête. La fin de la section universalise la vision : Hamlet et Lear divagent : l'allitération rambles et rages résume leur condition tragique ; tous les rideaux tombent en même temps sur des milliers de scènes. Néanmoins la tragédie n’en est pas plus grande. Les personnages restent gais. Il ne s’agit plus d’un stage-curtain mais de drop-scenes, c’est à dire de rideaux sur lesquels des scènes sont représentées6. Ce n’est plus une fermeture mais une ouverture. Comme il lui arrive si souvent, Yeats superpose ici plusieurs niveaux de signification. Notre monde est une vaste tragédie ; chacun d’entre nous en est un des acteurs. Par le simple fait de leur mort, les êtres humains sont des personnages tragiques. Le drame de la vie individuelle se confond donc avec celui du théâtre, identification bien connue de Jacques dans As you like it

...All the world's a stage.

Le personnage de théâtre devient le porte-parole de l’humanité ; c’est toujours nous-même que nous voyons sur scène7. Cette section est constituée d’un vocabulaire presque exclusivement théâtral : les noms propres sont ceux de personnages de théâtre, le vocabulaire concret est celui de la scène : perform, tragic play, struts, scene, the great stage-curtain about to drop their... part in the play, Unes, black-out drop-scenes, stages. Le black out du vers 19 est à la fois le moment où s’éteignent les feux de la rampe, celui de la mort d’un héros de théâtre, d’un homme, et celui de la mine de la civilisation menacée par le grondement des avions, cette image de guerre prolongeant sa vision de la première strophe. Par ailleurs le théâtre est une métaphore de la conception cyclique de la vie : l’acteur apparaît, parle et disparaît, remplacé par un comparse et cela soir après soir. Pour Yeats, "la tragédie doit toujours être une submersion et une rupture des digues qui séparent un homme d’un autre homme"8. Il écrit dans The Cutting of an Agate : "Timon d’Athènes envisage sa propre fin, et fait construire son tombeau sur 'une plage voisine du flot salé', et Cléopâtre pose l’aspic sur son sein, et leurs mots nous émeuvent parce que leur douleur n’est pas la leur propre devant le tombeau ou l’aspic, mais celle que leur inspire la destinée de tous les hommes"9. Les personnages que choisit Yeats sont ceux de Shakespeare (dans une certaine mesure, Yeats se découvre à travers Shakespeare), mais ils n’ont rien de la mélancolie que le grand dramaturge reprochait à Jacques. Hamlet et Lear affrontent gaiement le malheur et la mort. Lear était un des personnages favoris de Yeats ; on sait qu’il lui évoquait William Pollexfen. Quand tombe le rideau, la vision finale de ces personnages est la prise de conscience de l’irrévocablement défaite, qu’ils envisagent non dans les pleurs mais dans la joie.

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia ;
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay.

16 Yeats écrivait dans son Introduction à *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* : "Dans toutes les grandes tragédies, la tragédie est une joie pour celui qui meurt ; en Grèce le chœur tragique dansait et dans 'Introduction générale à mon œuvre' : "les héros de Shakespeare nous transmettent par leurs regards ou par l'agencement métaphorique de leur discours, l'élargissement soudain de leur vision, leur extase à l'approche de la mort... Mais tous doivent demeurer froids ; aucune actrice n'a jamais sangloté en jouant Cléopâtre ; même l'esprit superficiel d'un producteur n'y a jamais pensé... J'ai entendu dire par Lady Gregory... 'la tragédie doit être une joie pour l'homme qui meurt'"12. L'homme, l'artiste et le poète doivent accepter gaiement la mort et Shakespeare en donne l'exemple. "Les personnages de Shakespeare, quand l'obscurité finale les enveloppe, parlent dans une extase qui est pour moitié l'abandon au chagrin et pour moitié les derniers jeux et rai lleries de l'épée victorieuse face au monde vaincu"11. La tragédie n'est pas la soumission accablée de l'homme devant la malignité du destin, mais l'acceptation joyeuse qui métamorphose en triomphe la crainte naturelle – la tragic joy de 'The Gyres'. À l'instant de la mort qui est aussi celui de son triomphe, le personnage de théâtre atteint l'image qu'il a voulu donner de lui-même ; au-delà de son être temporaire, il devient une image intemporelle et, en mourant, accède à l'immortalité. L'homme est ainsi spirituellement supérieur à son destin, puisqu'il est capable de le supporter sans se briser. Encore dans ce monde, il commence à regarder l'au-delà :
Black out ; Heaven blazing into the head.

17 C'est le point de rencontre du temps et de l'éternité, de la mortalité et de l'immortalité, du choix et du hasard, du moi et de l'anti-moi, un instant d'intensité où l'être touche à la perfection, à l'Unité d'Être. Il semble en effet que telle soit la pensée de Yeats si l'on se réfère à ce passage de *The Cutting of an Agate* : "...la noblesse des arts est dans le mélange des contraires, une douleur intense, une joie intense, la perfection de la personnalité et son abdication complète, une énergie turbulente et débor dante et un calme marmonéen ; et sa rose rouge s'épanouit au lieu de rencontre des deux bras de la croix et au rendez-vous du mortel et de l'immortel, du temps et de l'éternité"14. Dans une lettre non publiée du 9 octobre 1938 à Ethel Mannin, Yeats écrivait : "Selon Rilke, la mort d'un homme naît avec lui, et si sa vie est réussie et qu'il échappe à la simple 'mort de la masse', sa nature est complétée par son union finale avec elle". L'homme incarne alors sa vérité. Peu avant sa mort, le poète écrivait à Lady Elizabeth Pelham : "L'homme peut incarner la vérité mais il ne peut pas la connaître. Je dois l'incarner, en achieving ma vie"15. Ainsi par l'extase héroïque et non point par l'hystérie ou l'action publique, le héros réagit devant la tragédie, devant la mort-réaction proprement individuelle par opposition au caractère collectif de la lutte que présentaient les femmes. A Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats confiait : "Pour moi le but suprême est un acte de foi et de raison qui permette de se réjouir au cœur même de la tragédie. But impossible. Cependant je pense qu'il est vrai que rien ne peut nous atteindre"16. C'est la volonté individuelle du héros déchiré par des forces contraires, qui permet au moment de la mort cet "embrasement", expression de sa totale liberté. Désormais, le champ du poème va se rétrécir progressivement, sa tension décroître, son ton s'apaiser jusqu'à l'immobilité et le final solennel. Au héros de tragédie, Yeats associe à la strophe suivante, l'artiste représenté par Callimaque. La régularité du rythme – toute la strophe est écrite en tétramètres – avec les rimes alternées (abab cdcd efef) qui divisent la section en trois quatrains cohérents, traduit d'abord la procession inévitable des
civilisations, puis la disparition non moins fatale des œuvres du sculpteur. Les deux derniers vers sont l'expression de la philosophie de Yeats, son message de courage face à la mort. La section s'ouvre sur un panorama du désastre universel, car Yeats réunit tragédie personnelle et tragédie publique :

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
Old civilisations put to the sword.

Au théâtre de l'histoire, on assiste à la parade des "vieilles civilisations passées au fil de l'épée" qui rappelle 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' et "The Gyres'. Le sujet demeure anonyme (they) et ce n'est qu'au troisième vers qu'on comprend qu'il s'agit des civilisations. Ce they englobe les siècles d'humanité. Le deuxième vers de la strophe, avec son caractère pictural, suggère une procession qui sans cesse se poursuit grâce au flot continu de participants venus de tous pays, à en juger par la multiplicité des moyens de transport. De plus, la vision de la mine des "vieilles civilisations" fait écho à l'évocation tragique de l'avenir par les "femmes hystériques", et ainsi se trouve déjà implicitement exprimée la croyance aux cycles de l'histoire. Au sculpteur et ciseleur athénien, représentant de ces anciennes civilisations, Yeats dont on connaît la fascination pour les arts visuels s'était déjà intéressé dans Une Vision : "Avec Callimaque, revit le pur ionique, comme l'a prouvé Furtwängler, et sur le seul exemple de son travail qui nous soit connu – une chaise en marbre –, un Perse est représenté, et ne peut-on pas découvrir un symbole perse dans cette lampe de bronze, en forme de palmier, qui nous est connue par une description de Pausanias". Yeats choisit Callimaque et non Phidias et ses "fameux ivoires" comme dans 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', à cause de son rôle dans le motif Occident-Orient. Dans le schéma yeatsien de l'histoire, l'art grec est passé d'un style ionique ou oriental élégant à un style dorique vigoureux, et naturaliste. Au milieu du v ième siècle, avec Phidias, le style ionique était passé de mode ; cependant à la fin du siècle, Callimaque retournait au style ancien ionique. Et dans Une Vision, Yeats cite donc comme seul exemple qui subsiste de son œuvre cette chaise de marbre dont le Perse est l'emblème approprié de la transition entre l'Occident et l'Orient. Le poète avait probablement lu la description de l'Érechthéion sur l'Acropole dans la Description de la Grèce de Pausanias, traduit par J.G. Frazer, et il avait été influencé par Les Chefs-d'œuvre de la sculpture grecque de Furtwängler. La lampe que Callimaque avait conçue pour l'Érechthéion et qu'admirait Pausanias a été détruite. C'était une lampe d'or dont la fumée s'échappait par le tronc creux d'un palmier de bronze.

Il fut aussi, dit-on, le premier à employer le foret pour creuser et fouiller le marbre, ce qui explique la beauté de ses draperies. Le souffle du vent marin avec les allitérations en s soulève le vers comme les draperies du marbre et se prolonge dans les vers qui suivent : shaped, stem, slender, stood, combinés avec les allitérations en l : long lamp. Ces draperies évoquent l'Asie, dès l'essai 'Certaines Nobles Pièces du Japon' en 1916 ; on peut donc déceler une association plus ou moins consciente entre Callimaque et les Chinois de la dernière section : "Peut-être serait-il bien que nous nous mettions à l'école de l'Asie car dans l'art européen la distance prise à l'égard de la vie provient essentiellement de nos difficultés avec ce qui est matériel. Dans la Grèce à demi asiatique Callimaque pouvait encore revenir à une utilisation stylisée des plis et de la chute d'un drapé après Phidias qui l'utilisait, lui, de manière naturaliste". Beauté et événescence sont inéluctablement liées. L'artiste dont les œuvres contribuent le plus à l'éclat d'une civilisation est
condamné à périr comme un chacun. L'œuvre de Callimaque évoquée par deux enjambements successifs harmonieux est brusquement interrompue par une césure :

No handiwork of Callimachus,
Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
Made draperies that seemed to rise
When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
Of a slender palm, stood but a day.

20 La symétrie répétitive de stands négatif et de stood but a day brise en éclats l'œuvre d'art. Celle-ci n'est plus ici, à la différence de l'oiseau d'or de 'Sailing to Byzantium', un objet éternel qui échappe au flux du temps. Elle s'insère dans la mutabilité générale de l'histoire humaine et est donc vouée à la disparition. Le rejet de stands à la fin du vers 32, alors que le sujet No handiwork of Callimachus apparaissait dès le vers 39, en focalisant l'attention sur ce verbe, souligne l'absence de permanence de l'œuvre d'art – ce que reprend la répétition du même verbe deux vers plus bas : stood but a day. Ce caractère éphémère de l'œuvre d'art, exprimé successivement par le No... stands ou le stood but, trouve sa conclusion logique dans fall.

21 Mais
All things / fall and / are built / again.

22 Les deux premiers pieds sont trochaïques, rythme descendant comme il sied à ce cataclysme général. Après la tragédie, la gaieté de la reconstruction s'exprime dans un rythme iambique ascendant. Le dernier vers qui explicite cette idée – en répétant le verbe build- est lui aussi construit sur un rythme ascendant : deux iambes, un anapeste et un iambique final qui met en valeur l'adjectif gay placé en position finale. Si le poète accepte gaiement la destruction, c'est que des cendres renaitra la civilisation de l'avenir ; peu importe la mort de son œuvre ; il est gai car il n'ignore pas, lui, le nécessaire bâtisseur de l'homme que tout sera reconstruit. La gaieté est associée à la force créatrice, symbole de la liberté de l'artiste, du constructeur. Se rire du drame inéluctable qui est celui de chaque être, créer des œuvres d'art tout en sachant qu'elles sont vouées à la mort, est une manière de transcender ce drame. Les poètes et les artistes doivent créer et recréer, obéissant ainsi à la loi du serpent -"le récurrent et le beau...le serpent multicolore" qui est celle de la vie : naissance, mort ; forme, informe.

23 La section 4 dévoile enfin en une strophe très courte, au cœur du poème, le petit objet précieux, ce lapis-lazuli qui est à l'origine du poème et qui en est le symbole final. Des "montagnes" comme celle de Yeats étaient répandues sous le règne de Ch'ien Lung mais habituellement sculptées dans le jade et l'ouvrage Chinese Jade throughout the ages explique que ces montagnes "devraient peut-être être considérées comme des objets de contemplation poétique. Leurs pentes rocheuses sont souvent peuplées de personnages et d'animaux symboliques empruntés à la mythologie du taoïsme et sur un grand nombre sont aussi gravés des poèmes". La section est factuelle : le lapis nous est décrit dans sa réalité physique. On revient non pas à la familiarité du début mais à la simplicité de celui qui présente et explicite les significations : "A symbol of...". La concision et le dépouillement suggèrent la sobriété de cette œuvre d'art occupée horizontalement par les trois Chinois. Les deux premiers sont l'ascète – le sage vieillard – et son disciple, comme le précise la lettre à Dorothy Wellesley. Le troisième, sans doute parce qu'il se tient derrière les autres, est pour le poète : "...doubtless a serving-man". Verticalement est gravé l'échassier. Dans le symbolisme extrême-oriental, la grue évoque la longévité.
Au Japon on offre souvent aux vieillards des peintures ou gravures où figurent des grues, avec des tortues et des pins, tous trois symboles de longévité. C’est avec ce mot que rime lapis-lazuli. Comme l’oiseau qui y est représenté, comme les œuvres de Callimaque, ce lapis durera fort longtemps sinon éternellement Une place particulière est réservée au troisième homme auquel sont consacrés les deux derniers vers. L’instrument de musique qu’il porte clôt la strophe, unissant le fiddle-bow de la première section aux mournful melodies de la fin du poème.

24 Le lien entre les strophes 4 et 5 s’effectue par les rimes : serving-man et stone d’une part ; instrument et dent de l’autre, ce dernier lien se trouvant cimenté par la rime intérieure : accidental / dent. L’objet d’art lui-même subit les ravages du temps, explique maintenant Yeats. La réalité de la section précédente va s’animer et laisser place à celle de l’imaginaire. Chaque détail du lapis a son importance, comme l’indique l’anaphore : Every discoloration / Every accidental crack. Les allitérations en d (discoloration / accidental / dent), relient ces deux premiers vers où se modèle devant nous le relief du lapis : on le voit (discoloration) ; on le touche (crack or dent). A partir de seems l’imagination s’évade : nous sommes hors du temps dans la confusion des saisons : les branches fleurissent au cœur de la neige. Le choix s’offre au lecteur. Est-ce ...a water-course or an avalanche
Or lofty slope where it still snows.
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
Sweetens the little half-way house.

25 C’est la vignette traditionnelle des chinoiseries. À nous de donner au poème sa forme définitive en retenant une de ces possibilités de signification. L’art est le fruit de la relation qui existe non seulement entre le créateur et sa création, mais aussi entre cette création et celui qui la reçoit – point de vue courant certes en ce qui concerne le théâtre, mais plus original pour la sculpture ou la poésie. Éclat de l’eau, blancheur de l’avalanche ou de la neige qui tombe, voilà un paysage tout de luminosité et de fluidité, comme le suggère la combinaison des liquides : lofty slope / still, et des allitérations en s qui traduisent le glissement : slope / still / snows et auquel s’allie l’assonance slope / snows. Mais cette beauté n’est pas impressionnante. Elle est à la mesure de l’homme : la douceur délicate (sweetens) est celle des branches d’arbres fruitiers et celle de la petite maison. Le prunier, dont le thème est fréquemment utilisé dans la peinture extrême-orientale, est un symbole du printemps, du renouvellement, de la jeunesse et de la pureté. Les Immortels sont sensés se nourrir de fleurs de prunier. La fleur de sakura – le cerisier – est également un symbole de pureté, en même temps qu’une image de la prospérité et de la félicité de l’existence terrestre, préfiguration de la béatitude intemporelle. On a là un décor oriental miniaturisé qui s’anime devant nous, mais qui est en même temps purement imaginaire – tous les arbres du lapis de Yeats sont des pins stylisés, immédiatement reconnaissables, même avec une connaissance élémentaire de l’iconographie chinoise. Le poème n’est pas une analyse iconographique mais une contemplation de l’imaginaire.

26 Le I / Delight to imagine reprend le seems précédent. Le premier introduit un paysage mouvant. Le moi du poète rêve maintenant avec les personnages. Comme Keats, dans ’Ode on a Grecian Urn’, il ne se contente pas de voir les personnages figés dans leur mouvement. Il ne les considère pas comme des créations statiques mais il spécule sur leur destination. Nous progressons dans l’imaginaire. Les Chinois gravissent la pente. L’ascension s’achève au milieu du poème grâce à l’intervention du poète-magicien :

... and I
Delight to imagine them seated there
Les voilà assis contemplant la "scène tragique" qui s'étend à leurs pieds. C'est une sorte de vision en abyme : celle des personnages à l'intérieur de celle de l'auteur. Ils sont assis sur la montagne et le ciel, tous deux placés sur un même plan. On retrouve là le symbolisme de la transcendance. Les Chinois font ainsi figures de saints, non de divinités car la petite maison est seulement à mi-chemin et non au sommet. Même eux sont soumis à la mortalité. La répétition de there, en fin de vers puis au début du vers suivant, souligne l'importance de ce lieu. L'ascension a opéré une purification qui leur a apporté le don de vision. Les personnages peuvent concentrer leur attention sur le Tao, le principe ultime de l'univers sans être distraits par les contingences de la vie ordinaire. Le stare du vers suivant nous situe dans cette vision, prolongée par les eyes du final.

Les Chinois contempler une "scène tragique". Nous sommes à nouveau au théâtre, comme dans la deuxième strophe : "All perform their tragic play". Mais cette fois le tragique et le jeu sont dissociés. Le tragique est repris par les mournful melodies et le jeu apparaît au vers suivant. C'est cette activité ludique, un art – ici la musique – qui va métamorphoser la tragédie et faire éclater le final : la gaieté. La musique du Chinois semble se répandre sur cette strophe avec ses nombreuses allitérations – après celles du début, les t de tragic et de stare qui semblent prolonger la contemplation, et les m de mournful melodies qui ajoutent à l'harmonie du trimètre- et les assonances : le ai de Chinamen, climb, I, delight. On est proche des synesthésies keatsiennes. Keats lui aussi entendait les "pipes and timbrels" des musiciens dessinés sur l'urne grecque. Après la littérature et les arts visuels examinés respectivement aux strophes 2 et 3 avec les héros de Shakespeare puis avec Callimaque, Yeats introduit donc la musique, reprenant ainsi ce trio dénoncé, au début du poème, par les "femmes hystériques". Grâce à l'instrument des Chinois, le fiddle-bow des temps modernes recouvre toute sa dignité. La musique, l'art a, là encore, une fonction cathartique. Après le héros et l'artiste, c'est le sage qui, grâce à elle, triomphe de la crainte naturelle à l'homme. Le visage ridé est le masque de l'antique sagesse, parfaitement consciente du drame humain évoqué par les mélodies. La souffrance a sillonné de rides ces visages, mais le rayonnement du regard témoigne de la victoire de l'être sur la douleur. Les yeux –et la triple répétition du mot eyes confère à ces hommes la qualité de visionnaires – sont étincelants (glittering) car ils expriment l'intensité de la vie intérieure du Sage. Les Chinois sont devenus spectateurs, au théâtre de la vie, où ils furent jadis acteurs. Le conflit s'achève sur ce tableau stylisé, image des affirmations passionnées des strophes précédentes. Tout dans cette dernière strophe contribue à souligner l'éclat de l'apothéose : après la blancheur éclatante du paysage, les yeux étincelants des Chinois –autant d'images d'éblouissante lumière.

C'est l'instant où le Ciel flamboie dans la tête, où l'homme, encore dans ce monde, a la vision de l'éternité. C'est l'instant où les contraires se rejoignent et sont transcendés. "Les arts qui m'intéressent..., nous permettent de mieux pénétrer pendant quelques instants dans les profondeurs de l'esprit qui étaient jusque là trop subtiles pour que nous les habitions". C'est le point culminant de l'art : "Les arts sont à leur apogée quand ils recherchent une vie toujours plus dédaigneuse de ce qui n'est pas elle-même... ; qui atteint à (la) plénitude... – c'est la source de la joie tragique et de la perfection de la tragédie –, quand le monde lui-même a disparu dans la mort.

Un sentiment de gaieté parcourt donc tout le poème. L'adjectif gay revient quatre fois, aux première, deuxième, troisième et cinquième sections. Engelberg remarque que l'essai d'Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature', que Yeats lut dans sa jeunesse et qu'il commente dans son essai 'The Celtic Element in Literature'(1897) met en avant l'origine
celtique du mot gay. "Our word gay, it is said, is itself Celtic" disait Arnold. D'abord, il est employé par les "femmes hystériques" qui lui donnent une signification superficielle, erronée, puisqu'elles confondent gaieté et frivolité irresponsible. Mais dès cette strophe on sait que les arts visuels, la musique et la poésie sont toujours gais malgré la destruction. La deuxième section évoque la gaieté du drame tragique. Celle d'Hamlet et de Lear est capable de métamorphoser la "crainte". Elle est la victoire de l'individu face aux ténèbres. Gais également ceux qui s'engagent dans l'histoire, le temps, pour édifier de nouvelles civilisations, les constructeurs de l'avenir, Callimaque et sa sculpture. Le reste du poème focalise la gaieté sur le lapis-lazuli : elle appartient aux sages qui sont déjà à moitié hors du monde.

Mais c'est d'un gaieté tragique qu'il s'agit et la tragédie est omniprésente. Dans la première section, elle est dans la vision apocalyptique de la ville détruite. Ensuite elle est le lot des héros de Shakespeare – tragic play, black out, Tragedy wrought to its uttermost. Elle subsiste dans la troisième section : les civilisations passent au fil de l'épée et tout s'effondre. Enfin les mélodies du Chinois sont mournful.

Mais, ayant atteint son sommet, la tragédie, comme la spirale yeatsienne, s'inverse et la gaieté l'emporte : tout est reconstruit. Elle a le dernier mot au sens propre et figuré puisqu'elle est le mot final de la section 3 et le dernier mot du poème. Ainsi, bien que Hamlet et Lear prévoient leur fin tragique, bien que périsse l'œuvre de Callimaque, et que les Chinois voient s'effondrer leur civilisation, ils ne cèdent pas à l'hystérie ; ils ne recherchent pas de mesures pratiques, mais donnent une réponse personnelle à la tragédie extérieure et peuvent ainsi en triompher. Yeats était fasciné par le "troisième œil" des mystiques orientaux qui, comme il l'explique dans l'introduction à 'Un Moine indien' de Shri Purohit Swami, est "non pas un organe physique, mais l'appréhension directe, par l'esprit humain, de la vérité au-delà de toutes les contradictions". Cette appréhension directe... de la vérité explique la gaieté des personnages de Shakespeare, des artistes et des Chinois. Ce choix montre le caractère universel de la "joie tragique", puisque Yeats réunit les héros tragiques de l'Occident et les Sages de l'Asie, l'expérience dramatique des premiers et la vision panoramique des seconds, les représentants de l'Incarnation, et ceux de la Transfiguration, les deux mouvements opposés de l'âme.

Pour Kleinstuck, c'est à Nietzsche que Yeats emprunte cette notion de "joie tragique" dont il trouve l'accomplissement chez Shakespeare et chez Sophocle. Il écrira en 1938 : "Les arts sont tous la chambre nuptiale de la joie. Pas de tragédie légitime si elle ne mène un héros à sa joie ultime. Polonius quitte peut-être la scène pitoyablement, mais j'entends une musique de danse dans 'Absente-toi un moment de la félicité' ou dans le discours de Hamlet sur Ophélie morte, et que dire des adieux de Cléopâtre, de l'accès de rage de Lear sous les éclairs, d'Œdipe s'enfonçant, à la fin de l'histoire, dans une terre 'fendue' par l'amour ?" C'est une sorte de philosophie de la "joie tragique", une transfiguration de la douleur par la joie qui s'élabora au cours de son œuvre ; il l'appelle extase ou joie ou gaieté. Ainsi dès Les Ombres sur la Mer, il écrit : 'J'essaie d'introduire dans cette pièce une sorte d'extase grave et il explique plus tard : "L'extase comprend des émotions comme celles de Deirdre de Synge après la mort de son amant, qui sont, pour l'ego, les pires douleurs". Puis une représentation de On Baile's Strand occasionne cette remarque : "Cuchulain me parut un personnage héroïque car il était la joie créatrice libérée de la peur". Et dans une lettre à Dorothy Wellesley de 1936 : "La joie est le salut de l'âme". Les dernières œuvres contiennent une véritable mystique de la joie.
Le lapis-lazuli de ce poème qui est donc l'expression poétique d'idées exprimées en prose à plusieurs reprises, est une sorte de pierre philosophale, capable de recréer à partir des ruines, et engendrant à chaque fois une gaieté nouvelle. La "joie tragique" de 'The Gyres' était une sorte d'exultation dans la destruction ; mais maintenant elle est capable de métamorphoser la crainte. C'est la différence entre la vision apocalyptique et la vision esthétique. Nous sommes ici dans l'œuvre d'art et c'est essentiellement de ce point de vue que sont interprétés l'histoire et ses changements. L'alchimie du lapis a transformé en lumière le feu du monde :

Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy,
We that look on but laugh in tragic joy30.

Nous pouvons ignorer le point de vue des femmes hystériques, même si l'histoire semble leur donner raison. L'artiste préserve sa liberté en créant son œuvre dans un monde qui paradoxalement le détruit, lui, sa création et sa civilisation. L'art a sauvé le poète et lui a permis d'affirmer l'immunité de l'homme envers son destin individuel et collectif. Cette foi en la gaieté, cette confiance prophétique à travers une sombre période, n'est-ce pas finalement un message humaniste, un défi lancé à la mort ? Le héros transcende la mauvaise fortune. Les constructeurs sont des artistes créateurs et les artistes, comme les héros des drames, savent triompher de la nécessité tragique. Chez Keats, l'urne grecque aidait à affronter la mort. Chez Yeats, ce n'est plus l'art mais la créativité, donc la libre faculté d'invention, l'imagination qui vainc l'éphémère et engendre la joie tragique, mariage des contraires, aspect de l'Unité d'Être. "Il y a dans la joie créatrice une acceptation de ce que la vie apporte, parce que nous avons compris la beauté de ce qu'elle apporte, ou une haine de la mort pour ce qu'elle emporte, qui éveille en nous par quelque sympathie, peut-être, envers tous les autres hommes, une énergie si noble, si puissante, que nous rions tout haut et nous moquons de la mort et de l'oubli, dans la terreur ou la douceur de notre exaltation"31. La maîtrise remarquable du poète qui passe du ton délibérément familier du début à la dignité de la dernière strophe, de l'hystérie à l'immobilité des Chinois gravés sur le lapis-lazuli, de la fébrilité irresponsable à la beauté immobile, de l'immobilité à la mobilité imaginaire, tout cela pour accéder par la volonté à la sagesse, laissant au lecteur le soin d'unir les plans successifs en un tout cohérent, contribue à la beauté de ce poème qui est bien, comme Yeats le disait à Dorothy Wellesley : "presque le meilleur de ceux que j'ai écrits ces dernières années32."

NOTES

3. (3) Ibid. p. 836-837.
8. (8) Le Webster définit drop-scene : "a drop-curtain on which a scene is painted".
10. (10) Ibid., p. 255 ; Essais et Introductions, p. 181.
18. (18) E.&l., p. 225 ; La Taille d’une Agate, p. 149.
22. (22) Explorations, p. 170 ; et p. 158.
27. (27) Ibid., p. 587.
29. (29) Ibid., p. 876.

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