YEATS'S USE IN HIS MAJOR WORKS OF THE GREEK MYSTERY RELIGIONS

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PREFACE

In the pattern of symbolism and the thematic content of the later works of William Butler Yeats, the Greek Mystery religions, with their elements of ritual and sometimes complex theology, stand out as a prominent influence. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate some of these sources in the major works of the poet and to explore the manner in which he uses the material to support some of his major themes and philosophical beliefs. The four chapters are concerned primarily with the theme of the ritual death and rebirth of a victim-god; the use of the symbolism inherent in the Greek Mysteries as it pertains to the theory of the personality; the influence of Orphic cosmology on the cyclic theory of history; and Orphic theogony inherent in the theory of the fate of the soul after death.

It is not the purpose of this study to maintain that Yeats's sole source was the mystery religions of Greece. Indeed, within the entire body of his work, Yeats incorporated the most prominent ancient beliefs, for only by unifying these primitive myths could he attain the Unity of Being for which he sought. This investigation is concerned with the role of the Greek Mystery religions as one significant part
of this unity. No attempt is made in this thesis to carry the subject matter to its fullest potential; rather, it is an exploratory study illustrating Yeats's use of ideas from the Greek Mystery religions in developing the dominant themes of his later major works.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There exists within the later major works of William Butler Yeats evidence of a significant influence of the Greek Mystery religions. The elements of the rituals, the themes and symbolism attending the cults have been used by Yeats in various ways to enhance the richness of his verse. The ritual death and rebirth of a victim-god appealed to Yeats as a theme for his verse. Yeats "was convinced that long ago men had performed such mythic rites. And in his poems and plays these rites became one of his dominant themes."¹ In the majority of the plays, the protagonist is a slain and reborn nature god, such as Dionysus, the sun god Cuchulain, or their counterpart.² Like hierophants, the actors are artificial and ceremonial. The theater becomes a temple and the drama, a sacred rite.³ There is also a significant use of the Greek Mystery religions in Yeats's philosophical theories. The cyclic theories exemplified by the symbolic mask, the historical annunciations, and the fate of the soul after death are

²Ibid., p. 203.
³Ibid., p. 209.
characterized by some of those elements inherent in the mystery religions, especially in that of the Orphic cult. The use of a traditional symbol enabled Yeats to bring together his most important beliefs in an effective, unifying manner. The fact that the symbols are traditional ones also enabled him to provide a support for his belief in a Unity of Being which exists among all major religions and doctrines. In Ideas of Good and Evil, where Yeats announces his theory of symbolism, he says of the symbol,

Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret, it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils. The symbols are of all kinds, for everything in heaven or earth has its association, momentous or trivial, in the great memory, and one never knows what forgotten events may have plunged it, like the toadstool and the ragweed, into the great passions.  

Yeats expresses this same idea in his Autobiography when he says, "When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind? It is called up by an image,..."  In his book Science and Poetry I. A. Richards notes that in the later works, Yeats turned to the supernatural world, a world of symbolic phantasmagoria.

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Richards expresses the opinion that Yeats adopted as a technique of inspiration the use of trance or of "dissociated phases of consciousness."\(^6\)

Yeats's interest, however, in the world of the supernatural began when he was a young boy in Sligo. Yeats, as a boy, heard the folk tales of the Irish countrymen from his mother and old servants. Yeats's memory of these folk beliefs remained with him for a lifetime "as among his earliest experiences of the existence of a spiritual world."\(^7\) In his Autobiography, Yeats reminisces about his mother and her interest in the folk tales:

> When I think of her, I almost always see her talking over a cup of tea in the kitchen with our servant, the fisherman's wife, on the only themes outside our house that seemed of interest—the fishing people of Howth, or the pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point. She read no books, but she and the fisherman's wife would tell each other stories that Homer might have told . . .\(^8\)

Yeats's interest in spiritualism and mysticism was lifelong. He began a study of theosophy in the 1880's and continued with magical invocation in the 1890's, then to


\(^7\)Daniel Hoffman, Barbarous Knowledge (New York, 1967), p. 29.

\(^8\)Autobiography, p. 55.
spiritualism and automatic writing in later life.9 Breaking way from the influence of his father, he began his study of psychical research and mysticism by reading A. P. Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism.10 In working out his own pattern of symbolism, Yeats relied heavily on what he learned in the Theosophical Society from 1887 to 1890. The theosophists, who drew their theories from many quarters, were concerned with the correspondences between the natural and spiritual worlds.11 In 1885, at the age of twenty, he became cofounder of the Hermetic Society, whose members were devoted to the study of magic and to the identification of magic symbols with poetic and artistic symbols.12 In 1887 his family moved to London, where he became a follower of Madame Blavatsky.13 Yeats joined the Rosicrucian Order of the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn in 1890. He remained a member for nearly thirty years and took a part in devising some of its rituals. The Order provided him with occult knowledge and enhanced his


11 Ellman, p. 3.


study of esoteric texts of different ages and civilizations.\textsuperscript{14} The ceremonies and dramas of the Golden Dawn were deliberate imitations of Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek Mysteries in which the death, descent, and resurrection of the initiate were enacted.\textsuperscript{15} Although Melchiori reports that Shelley was the first poet to make a deep impression on Yeats,\textsuperscript{16} Blake's works were also an important influence on Yeats, an especially significant influence in the realm of mysticism. Yeats's father had acquainted him with Blake's lyrics when Yeats was fifteen years of age,\textsuperscript{17} and from 1889 to 1892 Yeats edited a three-volume edition of Blake's poetry.\textsuperscript{18}

Homer also had a profound effect upon Yeats. When he was a boy, Yeats had heard his father read Homer.\textsuperscript{19} In Ideas of Good and Evil he says that the closing books of The Odyssey are among "the most perfect poetry of the world."\textsuperscript{20} Yeats refers to Homer in much of his poetry. In Where There

\begin{itemize}
\item Melchiori, pp. 24-25.
\item Melchiori, p. 21.
\item Ellman, p. 27. \hfill 18Ibid., p. 26.
\item Ideas of Good and Evil, p. 218.
\end{itemize}
Is Nothing one of the characters says, "I am the beggarman of all the ages--I have a notion Homer wrote something about me."^21 Though Yeats grew up in the heyday of the symbolist movement, in later life he worked backward toward the Platonists, to the Greek Mystery religions, and to a systematic study of the Upanishads.~^22 By reading works of Sir John Rhys and of Alfred Nutt, Yeats learned that the ancient myths of Ireland and Greece, of Celtic heliolatry and the Orphic Mysteries, have a common origin. To Yeats this provided a justification for the hypothesis that every cultural achievement in the West has come ultimately from primitive myth.~^23

Although Yeats had read and referred to Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian categories in Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy, Yeats's detailed study of the Dionysiac Mysteries was done through Thomas Taylor's Dissertation. Yeats has also made reference to Taylor's Porphyry, The Select Works of Plotinus, and The Life of Pythagoras.~^24 Yeats's use of the Greek Mystery religions occurs mostly in his later work. However, a study of this single influence does not imply that it was

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^23Seiden, p. 16.

^24Wilson, p. 59.
Yeats's only source, or his most prominent. The purpose of the following chapters is to point out aspects of Yeats's works which do reflect this Greek influence and to show that within Yeats's works there is an important and significant use of the Greek Mystery religions. The Upanishads, Buddhism, Egyptian Theurgy, Platonism, the Jewish Kabbala, and the Neoplatonic tradition of alchemy were all objects of study for Yeats. Through this study, he developed a philosophy whereby he integrated these traditions. The result of his study supported and illustrated Blake's maxim that "All religions are one." In Essays and Introductions Yeats quotes a sentence from Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: "The best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest." Yeats interpreted the sentence as meaning that the wine of old images and emotions must be rediscovered in the water of new experience and sensation. It would seem that Yeats has again concurred with Blake, for Yeats has within his works used the most meaningful ideas from ancient belief and has applied them to present-day experiences.

25 Ibid., p. 16.
CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF RITUAL DEATH AND REBIRTH

Yeats read in the 1890's and 1920's that within every primitive religion which celebrated the revolving seasons there were also rites which celebrated the dramatic death and rebirth of a nature god whose recurrent life cycles were centered in a literal or symbolic ritual murder. In certain of his poems and plays these rites became one of his dominant themes.¹ "Whatever his affection for the myths of Ireland and India . . ., the wellspring of his archaic faith seems to have come, if circuitously, from the Greek Eleusis and the Orphic Mysteries."²

The religion of Eleusis was a synthesis in sixth century B. C. of three originally different cults and festivals. One of the cults was the oldest Athenian festival of Thesmophoria. Its purpose was to celebrate a reborn earth god and to drive evil spirits away from the first fruits. The second cult was organized in honor of Dionysus, a Thracian god of wine and vegetation. Dionysus suffered both an annual murder and an annual resurrection. Through his identification with

¹Seiden, p. 9. ²Ibid., p. 218.
vineyards, Dionysus taught that a man, by means first of physical intoxication and later of spiritual ecstasy, could pass from the human to the divine. The third was brought to Athens by Orpheus and was a religion of spiritual asceticism. The belief was that through mysterious acts of asceticism and purification, men could attain complete union with the godhead and could become both divine and immortal.\(^3\)

It is Dionysus, however, that is considered the fore-runner of the coalescence between the various mystery cults. He was first introduced at Eleusis about the fourth century B.C.\(^4\) Although Orphism advocated an ascetic rule of life that was the exact opposite of the Dionysian license, Orphism represented a more or less reformed Dionysianism.\(^5\) Harold Willoughby in his *Pagan Regeneration* gives as his source for this idea a detailed narration of the myth of Dionysus Zagreus from the work, "Exhortation to the Greeks," by Clement of Alexandria. According to Willoughby, Clement based his passage on a lost Orphic poem.\(^6\) In his version of the myth,

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 220.


\(^6\)Ibid., p. 94.
Persephone bore to Zeus a son who had the form of a bull. This divine son was Dionysus Zagreus, or "the hunter."

Though he was a favorite of Zeus, the jealous Titans lured him away with toys and savagely tore him to pieces. Athena preserved the heart of Zagreus and gave it to Zeus.\(^7\)

When Yeats began his study of the Dionysiac mysteries in detail in 1903, he used Taylor's *Dissertation*.\(^8\) The following is an account of the Dionysiac myth as presented by Taylor: "Dionysus, or Bacchus, while yet a boy, was engaged by the Titans in a variety of sports . . . and among the rest he was particularly captivated with beholding his image in a mirror; during his admiration of which, he was miserably torn in pieces by the Titans." Meanwhile Minerva snatched away and preserved his heart. Then,

Jupiter, perceiving the cruelty of the deed, hurled his thunder at the Titans; but committed the members to Apollo that they might be properly interred. And, this being performed, Dionysus by a new regeneration again emerged, and being restored to his pristine life and integrity, he afterwards filled up the number of the Gods.\(^9\)

According to Wilson, Taylor explained the symbolism in the meaning of the rites in order to illustrate that Platonic theology was derived from the mystery religions. Dionysus

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 95.  
\(^8\)Wilson, p. 59.  
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 60.
is the symbol for the spirit and its descent into matter. He is the principle of the mundane intellect. Minerva is a principle of the intelligible world. She is the guardian who presides over the descent but does not participate in it. Jupiter is the artificer of the universe and Apollo, the source of all union and harmony. The Titans are the Gods associated with matter. The concept behind the story is that the spirit is attracted into matter and diffused into all its parts. Life in the physical world is a curse, and the soul is bound in the body as in a prison. The rescue of Dionysus's soul by Minerva represents man's eventual liberation and resurrection into the spiritual world, or the rescue of man from a merely material existence and its conversion to a life of reason and harmony.

Yeats was apparently much attracted to the theme of ritual murder and rebirth, for the theme is evident in many of the later poems and plays. "Two Songs from a Play," taken from the play, The Resurrection, transports the reader to the temple at Eleusis: "I saw a staring virgin stand/ Where holy Dionysus died,/ And tear the heart out his side,/ And lay the heart upon her hand/ And bear that beating heart away; . . . ."

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10 Ibid. 11 Ibid., p. 61.

Yeats saw the Dionysus and Attis myths as synonymous. He had the Attis legend in mind when he began The King of the Great Clock Tower. Emperor Julian's "Hymn to the Mother of the Gods" was Yeats's source for the Attis myth. Julian recognized the identity of Minerva and Cybele and of Dionysus and Attis as two representatives of spirit descending into matter. Julian relates the Attis myth:

... after being exposed at birth near the eddying stream of the river Gallus, he grew up like a flower, and when he had grown to be fair and tall, he was beloved by the Mother of the Gods. And she entrusted all things to him, and moreover set on his head the starry cap.

According to Julian's account of the myth, Attis descended into the cave and wedded the nymph, representing the union of spirit with matter, with the nymph being the conventional Platonic symbol of the material world. Julian interpreted the nymph as the dampness of matter. Thus, Attis becomes the connecting link between forms embodied in matter beneath the region of the moon and the cause that is set over matter.

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13 Wilson, p. 68.
15 Ibid., p. 461.
16 Wilson, p. 69.
17 Julian, p. 463.
Because the Mother of the Gods is the cause of all generation, she preserves all those subject to generation and decay and loves their generative cause and creative cause. Cybele then caused the madness and castration of Attis. Thus, the death of Attis represents the withdrawal of spirit from the natural world. Attis is considered a demigod. He proceeds from the third creator and is led upwards to the Mother of the Gods, but he also leans and inclines toward matter.

In The King of the Great Clock Tower the King, Queen, and Stroller stand in exact symbolic relation to Zeus, Cybele, and Attis-Dionysus. In the play the Stroller represents the spirit in its fallen condition after its descent into matter. He is in love with and beloved by the Mother of the Gods, represented by Yeats's Queen. The Stroller is a man in the physical world in love with the idea of Heaven. The Stroller tells the King, "A year ago I heard a brawler say/That you had married with a woman called/Most beautiful of her sex. I am a poet./From that day out I put her in my songs,/And day by day she grew more beautiful." The Minstrel loves

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18Ibid., p. 465.  
19Wilson, p. 69.  
20Julian, p. 469.  
21Wilson, p. 72.  
the queen though he has never seen her. Symbolically "the fallen God loves the principle from which he emanated, but from which he has been divorced since his incarnation." Though the Queen loves the Stroller, she must have a part in his death. The King has him executed for his insolence, and the Queen participates in his death by her "tacit acquiescence." Yeats has, in this situation, set up the Attis-motif, symbolizing "the bodily death both Godhead and man must undergo in their separation from the physical world." The Stroller predicts his own resurrection when he says, quoting from Aengus and the Gods who had appeared before him, "'On stroke of midnight when the old year dies,/ Upon that stroke, the tolling of that bell,/ The Queen shall kiss your mouth,....'" Indeed, when the clock strikes midnight, the Stroller is resurrected; the Queen dances with the severed head; and the play ends with the symbolic kiss. The victim-god is liberated and the Great Year again begins its cycle.

The severed head of the Stroller brings to mind Orpheus and John the Baptist. According to Wilson, Yeats had read Coventry Patmore in the 90's. In A Vision Yeats remembers

23Wilson, p. 76. 24Ibid., p. 77.  
25Ibid. 26Collected Plays, p. 400.  
27Wilson, p. 77. 28Ibid., p. 66.
that "Coventry Patmore claimed the Church's authority for calling Christ supernatural love and St. John natural love, and took pleasure in noticing that Leonardo painted a Dionysius like a St. John, a St. John like a Dionysius." In Euripides' Bacchae, which Wilson has quite reasonably assumed that Yeats read, Agave kills Pentheus while possessed by Dionysus and appears at the end of the play in Dionysiac frenzy with his severed head. Orpheus is also dismembered by Thracian women in a Bacchic frenzy. His severed head floats down to Lesbos singing. Taylor had also taught Yeats that Pentheus and Orpheus, lay figures in the likeness of Dionysus, were considered as ritual victims.

When Yeats wrote The King of the Great Clock Tower, he wrote it first in prose, then in verse, and later rewrote it completely as A Full Moon in March. The cast was reduced to a Swineherd, taking the place of the Stroller, and the Queen. The story is a traditional one of the Queen offering her kingdom to the best suitor, who turns out to be a man of humble origin. Wilson feels that the story is, in part, derived from the story of Odysseus and Eumaeus. It has the

30Wilson, p. 68.
31Ibid.
32Ibid.
33Ibid., p. 53.
34Ibid., p. 88.
same theme, however, of the death and resurrection of the 
victim-god. Dionysus and Minerva are referred to in the song 
of the severed head: "Jack had a hollow heart, for Jill/Had hung his heart on high; . . . ."35

"Parnell's Funeral" was published with A Full Moon in 
March. The narrative is of a child slain in a primitive nature 
festival. His death and resurrection symbolize the revolving 
year and the death of the Irish statesman Parnell.36 The 
description of the rite is given in the second stanza:

Rich foliage that the starlight glittered through, 
A frenzied crowd; and where the branches sprang 
A beautiful boy; a sacred bow; 
A woman, and an arrow on a string; 
A pierced boy, image of a star laid low. 
That woman, the Great Mother imaging, 
Cut out his heart.37

The boy represents Dionysus while the woman is identified with 
Minerva. Julian's "Hymn to the Mother of the Gods" is, in 
part, a source for this poem. Yeats calls Minerva "the Great 
Mother." Julian had, as previously pointed out, conceded the 
identity of Minerva and Cybele.38

35Collected Plays, p. 395.  
36Seiden, p. 198.  
37William Butler Yeats, The Collected Poems (New York, 
Julian is again used as a source for the poem "Vacillation." Julian gives a description of the tree of Attis and explains the symbolism of the consecration of the tree to Attis.

For the tree grows from the soil, but it strives upwards as though to reach the upper air, and it is fair to behold and gives us shade in the heat, and casts before us and bestows on us its fruit as a boon; such is its super-abundance of generative life. Accordingly the ritual enjoins on us, who by nature belong to the heavens the harvest of our constitution here on earth, namely, virtue and piety, and then strive upwards to the goodness of our forefathers, to her who is the principle of all life.

Yeats's image of the tree in "Vacillation" is the tree of Julian, the tree of life in the Kabbala, and Peredur's tree, all representing to Yeats variant forms of one archetype. Yeats uses his tree to function as a symbol for that "super-abundance of generative life" and spiritual striving. He says of the tree, "A tree there is that from its topmost bough/is half all glittering flame and half all green/

Abounding foliage moistened with the dew; . . . ." The "foliage moistened with the dew" refers to Julian's interpretation of the nymph with which Attis has descended into the

39Ibid., p. 473.
40Wilson, p. 72.
41Ibid.
42Collected Poems, p. 287.
cave as "the dampness of matter," or, in Platonic symbolism, the material world. The "glittering flame" would be a reference to Yeats's common symbol for spirituality. He says later within the poem, "Look on that fire, salvation walks within." The "superabundance of generative life," or the green, dew-moistened foliage, and the spiritual striving, or the flame, are reconciled in the symbol of the image of Attis hanging on the tree.

And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew,
And he that Attis' image hangs between
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.

In the ritual of Attis it was customary for a priest to hang the god's image on the sacred tree, and in the above verse Yeats represents the poet as performing this act. Yeats identifies the poet, who sacrifices his vital energy for art, with the priest himself, who was castrated in honor of his deity. Summing up the idea, he says, "From man's blood-sodden heart are sprung/ Those branches of the night and day/ Where the gaudy moon is hung./ What's the meaning of all song?/ 'Let all things pass away.'"

43 Julian, p. 463.  
44 Wilson, p. 70.  
45 Collected Poems, p. 290.  
46 Ibid., p. 288.  
47 Ellmann, p. 170.  
According to Seiden, Yeats transforms the drama of "Easter, 1916," "The Rose Tree," and "Sixteen Dead Men" into an Orphic rite. The three poems concern the imprisonment and death of participants in the struggle for Irish Independence. Sixteen men were shot before a firing squad for their part in the Easter uprising. Seiden suggests that the sixteen dead men are alive in Anima Mundi. The martyrs of "Easter, 1916" have been "Transformed utterly" and "A terrible beauty is born." The sacrifice that they have made by their deaths has transformed them utterly and has caused the birth of a "terrible beauty." In "The Rose Tree" the heroes themselves believe that only their sacrificial blood can make the withered Rose Tree (probably a symbol of Ireland) green again. "There's nothing but our own red blood/ Can make a right Rose Tree."

Yeats describes another ritual murder in his poem "Her Vision in the Wood." The speaker of the poem is a woman who is grieved because of her impotent old age. She says,

Dry timber under that rich foliage,
At wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood,
Too old for a man's love I stood in rage
Imagining men. Imagining that I could
A greater with a lesser pang assuage

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49 Seiden, p. 199.  
50 Collected Poems, p. 208.  
51 Ibid., p. 211.
Or but to find if withered vein ran blood,
I tore my body that its wine might cover
Whatever could recall the lip of lover. 52

The mention of wine throughout the poem and the woman's desire to tear her body are reminiscent of the Bacchanals, the women followers of Dionysus, who partook of wine to the point of intoxication in order to produce a spiritual ecstasy. 53 Under the intoxication of wine, the hierophant-like old woman sees a vision in which she believes her lover has been wounded in a sacred rite:

And after that I held my fingers up,
Stared at the wine-dark nail, or dark that ran
Down every withered finger from the top;
But the dark changed to red, and torches shone,
And deafening music shook the leaves; a troop
Shouldered a litter with a wounded man,
Or smote upon the string and to the sound
Sang of the beast that gave the fatal wound. 54

The references to the shining torches, the troop, the "deafening music," and the references in the next stanza to "All stately women moving to a song/With loosened hair or foreheads grief-distraught" 55 certainly brings to mind the

52 Ibid., p. 314.
53 Willoughby, p. 74.
54 Collected Poems, p. 314.
55 Ibid.
pagan procession of some god such as Dionysus or Attis. In the Dionysiac rites, the Bacchanals held their dances at night. The dances were accompanied by weird music of wind instruments and tamborines. The shouting of the Bacchanals, their torches waving in the air, must have given an image of unearthly light. Their dances were characterized by a violent whirling motion of the body and the tossing of the head, reflected in the "loosened hair" of Yeats's women. The devotees were known as maenads and thyiads or "rushing distraught ones," as suggested by Yeats's women who are "grief distraught."  

Yeats has paralleled the woman's vision with the myth of Adonis, the Greek hero who was slain by a wild boar, but who was resurrected once every spring to revisit the world. As Seiden suggests, by the end of the poem Yeats has symbolized all the dying and reborn gods of every ancient myth. Many ancient myths contain the young hero who is killed by a boar. Besides Adonis, Yeats probably had in mind the Irish god Diarmuid O Duibhne who was slain by a boar and who ushers in spring with his resurrection.

Till suddenly in grief's contagion caught,
I stared upon his blood-bedabbled breast
And sang my malediction with the rest.

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56 Willoughby, p. 79.  
57 Seiden, p. 197.  
That thing all blood and mire, that beast-torn wreck,
Half turned and fixed a glazing eye on mine,
And though love's bitter-sweet had all come back,
Those bodies from a picture or a coin
Nor saw my body fall nor heard it shriek,
Nor knew, drunken with singing as with wine,
That they had brought no fabulous symbol there
But my heart's victim and its torturer.59

In the last lines of the poem, the woman recognizes her own lover who is both torturer and victim as love itself is both bitter and sweet.60

Various aspects connected with myths of ritual death and rebirth provided Yeats with several other themes for his poems and plays, such as his theory of personality or his theory of history. These themes will be discussed in the following chapters in detail. Ellman expresses the importance of this ritual atmosphere in the later works:

... the whole atmosphere of the poetry of this period is ritualistic. We tread the sacred wood; the golden bough hangs from the sacred tree; Adonis has just been wounded by a boar; the priest of Attis hangs his god's image from the tree ... .61

From the above discussion, it is already evident that these ancient patterns are both prevalent in the works of Yeats and important to his thoughts.

60 Ellman, p. 173.  61 Ibid., p. 171.
CHAPTER III

THE USE OF THE DIONYSUS LEGEND IN THE
THEORY OF THE PERSONALITY

Yeats expounds his theory of the personality and of the concept of the "Mask" in *A Vision*. These theories, in their relation to the phases of the moon, are reflected in Yeats's poems and plays. Of the many sources from which Yeats has incorporated within his theory the various personality phases, the Greek mystery religions play a considerable role. The most prominent influence seems to be the pagan cult of Dionysus.

In Part Three of *A Vision* Yeats discusses what he calls "The Twenty-Eight Incarnations." In the discussion of Phase Two Yeats relates that if man lives out of phase and desires the mask, he allows the mask to dominate the "Creative Mind." In doing so, man "gives himself to a violent animal assertion and can only destroy; strike right and left."¹ However, if man lives according to phase, the "Body of Fate" can be used to clear up the influence of the mask. In this condition man gives himself up to Nature as the fool in Phase Twenty-Eight

¹*A Vision*, p. 106.
gives himself up to God. The man of Phase Two, living according to phase, is characterized as being innocent. Although no one has ever met a man of this phase or, as Yeats says, no record of such a meeting exists, the man, if met, would be remembered as a form of joy. He would be "A personification or summing up of all natural life. He would decide on this or that by no balance of the reason but by infallible joy, . . . ." Yeats further states that in this phase the ordinary condition is sometimes reversed and, rather than the usual "primary" characteristic of ugliness, the phase is characterized by beauty. "The new antithetical tincture (the old primary reborn) is violent . . . . It forces upon the primary and upon itself a beautiful form. It has the muscular balance and force of an animal good-humour with all appropriate comeliness as in the Dancing Faun." Thus, the man of Phase Two is transfigured and the "bodily instincts . . . become the cup wreathed with ivy." This image which has been created can be a myth, a woman, a landscape, or any illustrated, external expression of the mask. Yeats closes his explanation of Phase Two with the following lines of verse:

\[ \text{Ibid.} \quad \text{Ibid., p. 107.} \quad \text{Ibid.} \]
The Kings of Inde their jewelled sceptre vail,  
And from their treasures scatter pearled hail;  
Great Brama from his mystic heaven groans  
And all his priesthood moans;  
Before young Bacchus' eye-wink turning pale.⁵

The characteristics of the personality of Phase Two are exemplified in the dual nature of the god Dionysus and in his imitators or followers. Dionysus is depicted on the one hand as a god of rapture and joy, the deliverer and healer, while, on the other hand, he is known as the "render of men" and the "eater of raw flesh who delights in the sword and bloodshed."⁶ Yeats explains that if the man of Phase Two lives out of phase, he embraces the mask and thus becomes violent. The mask assumed an important role in the cult of Dionysus. The mask was a representation of the spirit of duality or, of existence and nonexistence.⁷ The cult of Dionysus carried within it the concept of unity of disunity. Within this concept of the meaning of the dual nature of man is the association of life with death. From its mask, Dionysus, or the realization of the reality of life

⁵Ibid.


⁷Ibid., pp. 90-91.
and death, "looks out at man and sends him reeling with amb-
iguity of nearness and remoteness, of life and death in one."\(^8\) Dionysus was supposed to have worn the mask at the ceremony of the mixing of the wines, and colossal masks were not only worn by the followers themselves but used at the cult to represent the god.\(^9\) It was while under the intoxication of wine that the madness and ecstasy emerged from the depths of the Bacchanals, bringing upon them and their cult accusations of having performed human sacrifices and rituals in which a man was torn to pieces.\(^10\) The acts of savagery and madness which overtook the women of Dionysus were reflective of the wildest eruption of the destructive madness which belongs to the reality of Dionysus as much as do the ecstasy and freedom. At the height of the ecstasy at a Dionysian rite, the paradox of duality of nature was to have unmasked and revealed itself as Life and Death, and Dionysus was to have emerged as the divine spirit of reality.

The antithesis to the violent and destructive nature is the image of innocence and joy. The vine was considered the loveliest gift of Dionysus. A drink from the divine spring transcended grief and misery.\(^11\) The theme of liberation,

\(^{8}\)Ibid., p. 140. \(^{9}\)Ibid., pp. 86-88. 
\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 113. \(^{11}\)Ibid., pp. 147-148.
with Dionysus as the liberator, emerges just as the symbolic drinking of the wine brings forth freedom and a breaking away of all violent bonds and orders.\textsuperscript{12}

Yeats's comparison of the beautiful form to a dancing fawn is reminiscent of Dionysus's association with animal life, especially the fawn. The mystic expression \textit{nebrizein}, "to play the fawn," was part of the cult.\textsuperscript{13} In the rites the devotees carried the thyrsus, a wand tipped with a pine or cypress cone and usually intertwined with ivy, and wore the sacred fawn skin over the shoulders. Serpents were twisted in their hair, and they sometimes wore horns on their forehead. It was in this attire that they danced by torchlight to the music of wind instruments and tambourines.\textsuperscript{14} To the devotees, the new Bacchic life was one of joyful self-abandonment, of freedom, and of a return to the simplicities of nature.\textsuperscript{15}

The image of the cup wreathed with ivy as representing the bodily instincts is an appropriate symbol for the idea of unity of disunity. Along with the vine, the ivy is considered a favorite plant of Dionysus.\textsuperscript{16} He is often called

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 149.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Willoughby, p. 72.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 82.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Otto, p. 152.
\end{itemize}
"the ivy-crowned," and the more than life-sized mask of Dionysus in Icaria is wreathed with ivy. Also, the ivy wreath was worn in the cult of Dionysus; in fact, it has been reported that in the Hellenistic period, the initiates tattooed themselves with the mark of the ivy leaf. According to Otto's version of the myth, the ivy appeared simultaneously with the birth of Dionysus in order to protect him from the flames which consumed his mother. The ivy also suggests the twofold nature of Dionysus. Unlike the vine, the ivy blooms in the autumn, producing its fruit in the spring. While the vine thrives on sun and light, the ivy needs little light and warmth. The ivy, with its coolness, had the power to subdue the heat of the wine.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, the image of the cup, which was also associated with Dionysus\(^\text{18}\) and which presumably held the wine, symbolizing the ecstasy, joy, and savagery of life, was subdued by the wreath of ivy, symbolizing, perhaps, reason and stability. With the comparison of the Dionysiac nature and its duality with the antithetical and primary nature of the personality of Phase Two, Yeats has presented his analysis of the possible duality of man and life and has evolved in Phase Two a microcosm of his entire theory of a Unity of Being or, in Dionysiac terms, a unity in disunity.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., pp. 153-155.  
\(^\text{18}\) Willoughby, p. 70.
The sacred veil or mask which the devotees of the cults wore and which Yeats's man of the lunar phase must wear is, in essence, an image of the idealized self or godhead. Walter Houghton calls the concept of the mask Yeats's doctrine of "discipline by conscious imitation." In Yeats's plays the use of the plaster masks, the symbolic stagecraft and costumes, the intonation of the dialogue, the ceremonial songs, and the use of sacred choruses all suggest the pagan religious festivals and rituals. In the Dionysiac rites when the height of ecstasy had been reached, the god was supposed to have unmasked, revealing himself as Life and Death. His unmasking represents the emergence of the divine spirit of reality. Likewise, in A Full Moon in March, the Queen, having allowed the Swineherd to be beheaded, drops her veil. She has said of the Swineherd, "... In spite of all his daring has not dared/ Ask me to drop my veil. Insulted ears/ Have heard and shuddered, but my face is pure." The

19 Seiden, p. 220.
21 Seiden, pp. 227-228. 22 Otto, p. 121.
23 Collected Plays, p. 394.
24 Ibid., p. 393.
Swineherd wears a half-savage mask on the upper part of his face with the lower part of his face bearded, very much like the representations of the masked Dionysus. With the dropped veil by her side, the Queen holds up the severed head of the Swineherd. The second attendant, representing the head, sings, "I sing a song of Jack and Jill./ Jill had murdered Jack;/ . . . Jack had a hollow heart, for Jill/ Had hung his heart on high;/ The moon shone brightly;/ Had hung his heart beyond the hill,/ A-tinkle in the sky./ A Full Moon in March." The roles of the Queen and the Swineherd represent Minerva and Dionysus. In the unmasking ceremony of the Dionysiac rite, Dionysus becomes "an elemental first principle of being in whose essence lies the reason why he, himself, is called a madman, and why his appearance brings madness with it." As the severed head sings its song, the Queen dances and laughs. The Second Attendant says, "She is laughing. How can she laugh, Loving the dead?" The First Attendant replies, "She is crazy. That is why she is laughing." The realities and the duality which godhead (in Yeats's play the role of the Queen) reveals induced madness. This madness is inherent in

25 Ibid., p. 390.  
26 Ibid., p. 394.  
27 Ibid., p. 395.  
28 Otto, p. 121.  
the nature of the godhead, but transfers itself to the victim-god, Dionysus or the Swineherd, when he becomes aware of the true essence of godhead.

Involved in the theory of personality is Yeats's cyclic theory of history. Each Great Year represented one complete cycle of the historical pattern. In each cycle either the objective type of mind, symbolized by the sun, or the subjective type of mind, symbolized by the moon, dominates. There is no progress within the alternating cycles; rather, there is merely conflict. In The Resurrection Yeats presents the Greek civilization as a subjective manifestation and the Christian, or Hebraic culture, as the objective manifestation. In the play the Greek insists that the personality is essentially pure. There is no sense of shame in himself or in his race. "The Greek thinks of the Gods as entirely self-contained, and of man as equally independent, for in a pagan, subjective cycle the Self seems to be divine." The Greek says to the Hebrew, "When the goddess came to Achilles in the battle she did not interfere with his soul, she took him by his yellow hair. . . . Man, too, remains separate. He does not surrender his soul. He keeps his privacy."

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30 Wilson, p. 63.  
31 Ibid., p. 64.  
32 Collected Plays, p. 369.
The objective cycle is characterized by man's sense of his weakness and dependence. He is essentially impure. He must rely on an external Savior-God for he tends toward annihilation of the Self.33

"Yeats uses the Dionysus legend as a subjective equivalent for the Christian story of the Incarnation."34 The vernal equinox of the Great Year marked the resurrection of Christ, Dionysus, and Attis, with whom Yeats equates Dionysus.35 Yeats discusses this point in A Vision, where he suggests that the fact of Caesar's death at the Ides of March led part of the Roman Empire to believe that Caesar was the Messiah prophesied in the Sibylline books.

Did the Julian House inherit from that apotheosis and those prayers the Cumaean song? Caesar was killed on the 15th day of March, the month of victims and of saviours. Two years before he had instituted our solar Julian Year, and in a few generations the discovery of the body of Attis among the reeds would be commemorated upon that day . . . .36

The Greek in The Resurrection says of the Dionysian followers, "Three days after the full moon, a full moon in March, they sing the death of the god and pray for his resurrection."37 According to Wilson, Yeats saw Dionysiac worship as something different from Christianity in that the subjective

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33Wilson, p. 64.  
34Ibid.  
36A Vision, p. 245.  
37Collected Plays, p. 368.
mind associated God with generative powers and love of the natural world, a concept which Christianity rejects. Their similarity lies in their positions as types of saviors. Dionysus is a victim-god in a subjective, pagan period while Christ is the redeemer in an objective, self-obliterating cycle.38

The Resurrection is set in antiquity at the time of the crucifixion of Christ. In a small room not far from Calvary three philosophers discuss the claims of Jesus to be God. The doubt is voiced that a god or man can be reborn. The risen Christ appears before them, and the Greek walks over to him and touches the beating heart. The Greek cries, "The Heart of a phantom is beating. Man has begun to die. Your words are clear at last, O Heraclitus. God and man die each other's life, live each other's death."39 During the course of the play, a Dionysian festival takes place outside. As the Greek and the Hebrew discuss the festival, they recreate in detail the theory of the Orphic rite. The songs which begin and end the play serve to parallel Christ and Dionysus and their myths.

Dionysus and Christ had died and been reborn under the astrological signs when the moon is next to Virgo, the virgin

38Wilson, p. 67.  
who holds in her hand the star Spica. The first stanza presents the death of Dionysus, linking it to Magnus Annus, or the Great Year.40

I saw a staring virgin stand Where holy Dionysus died, And tear the heart out of his side, And lay the heart upon her hand And bear that beating heart away; And then did all the Muses sing Of Magnus Annus at the spring, As though God's death were but a play.41

The second stanza refers to the prophecy of Virgil in the Fourth Eclogue that Virgo or Astrea, with whom Virgo is associated, would return and bring the Golden Age again. Astrea was the last goddess to leave the world after the Golden Age. The prophecy was often read as the coming of Mary and Christ, with Mary as Virgo and with Christ identified with Spica as the Star of Bethlehem.42 "Another Troy must rise and set,/ Another lineage feed the crow,/Another Argo's painted prow/ Drive to a flashier bauble yet."43 The "bauble" refers to the golden fleece of the Argonauts, probably symbolizing the religious quest which defies the character of an age.44 The remaining lines of the second stanza assert the identity and

parallel between Astrea and Spica; Athena and Dionysus; and Mary and Christ. All merge into the "fierce virgin and her Star."  

The Roman Empire stood appalled:  
It dropped the reins of peace and war  
When that fierce virgin and her Star  
Out of the fabulous darkness called.

Unterecker confirms this reading in suggesting that the design behind the first song is that the fierce virgin and her star anticipate Mary and Christ; Virgo and Spica anticipate Mary and the Star of Bethlehem; Astrea and the Golden Age anticipate Mary and the Christian Age; and the staring virgin (Athena) and Dionysus's heart anticipate Mary and Christ's heart.  

This pattern of associations more readily forms a unity in light of the Orphic belief that purified souls went to the stars and even became stars. The second song occurs at the end of the play. The prophecy and anticipation have been fulfilled with the resurrection of Christ.

In pity for man's darkening thought  
He walked that room and issued thence  
In Galilean turbulence;  
The Babylonian starlight brought  
A fabulous, formless darkness in;  
Odour of blood when Christ was slain

45Ellman, p. 261.  
46Collected Plays, p. 365.  
47Unterecker, p. 186.  
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline.\(^{49}\)

The second stanza of the second song parallels the cycles each man experiences in his life and those historical ones that had been ushered in by death, such as those of Dionysus and Christ.\(^{50}\) The transiency of all cycles, human and historical, is expressed in this stanza.

Everything that man esteems
Endures a moment or a day:
Love's pleasure drives his love away,
The painter's brush consumes his dreams;
The herald's cry, the soldier's tread
Exhaust his glory and his might:
Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.\(^{51}\)

The last two lines project an image of a Dionysian procession with each follower carrying a pine cone-tipped thyrsus or torch to light up the night with its flames. In keeping with this image and subject matter is the poem "Vacillation." Attis is seen in this poem as an antithetical Christ. The fixing of his image on the tree is an antithetical symbol for the crucifixion.\(^{52}\) The pine tree was sacred to Attis and was supposed to have been a natural embodiment of the god. According to the legend, it was under a pine tree that Attis

\(^{49}\)Collected Plays, p. 373.  \(^{50}\)Unterecker, pp. 186-187.

\(^{51}\)Collected Plays, p. 373.

\(^{52}\)Wilson, p. 72.
had mutilated himself. Wilson suggests that both Christ and Attis are reconcilers of opposites, and that Attis in his mutilation is, like Jesus in his martyrdom, the rose on the cross. In Yeats's concern with the reconciliation of opposites, he has attempted to reconcile pagan rituals and beliefs with those of the present-day civilization in order to form some type of unity among all beliefs of both past and present civilization.

53 Willoughby, p. 117.
54 Wilson, p. 72.
CHAPTER IV

ORPHIC COSMOLOGY AND THE CYCLIC
THEORY OF HISTORY

In the structure of the Great Wheel, the twenty-eight spokes represent both the twenty-eight incarnations through which man must live and also the twenty-eight basic phases of each cycle of world history. One historical revolution should take approximately two thousand years, with each revolution beginning and ending with chaos and violence.\(^1\) In Book Five, entitled "Dove or Swan," of \textit{A Vision} Yeats says of civilization,

\begin{quote}
A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some great tragic person, some Niobe who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes towards the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation—-the scream of Juno's peacock.\(^2\)
\end{quote}

The Orphic cosmology was one of several sources from which Yeats derived and assembled his pattern of the cyclic periods. The basis of the Orphic system of cosmology is the doctrine of alternate manifestations and re-absorptions. Each civilization was to terminate at the end of the two thousand years

\(^1\)Unterecker, p. 27.  \(^2\)\textit{A Vision}, p. 268.
period. It was believed that when the cycle had run its course, it was again renewed. Each cycle was referred to as the Great Year (Magnus Annus). Proclus's interpretation of Orpheus reveals that the end of the Great Year is seen when Cronus takes his revenge on the Olympian gods and retakes his kingdom. This act symbolizes the chaos attending the termination and entrance of each cycle. According to Wilson, Yeats had met with the passage in Plato's Statesman which describes the terror existing at the end of the cycle. The principle of Yeats's alternating gyres coincides with the Orphic theory of the alternating cycles. Yeats also borrows from Empedocles, whom he discusses in A Vision. Yeats quotes Empedocles:

'When Discord has fallen into the lowest depths of the Vortex . . . Concord has reached the centre, into it do all things come together so as to be only one, not all at once but gradually from different quarters, and as they come Discord retires to the extreme boundary . . . in proportion as it runs out Concord in a soft immortal boundless stream runs in . . . . Never will boundless time be emptied of that pair; and they prevail in turn as that cycle comes round, and pass away before one another and increase in their appointed turn.'

Commenting on this passage, Yeats remembers, "It was this Discord or War that Heraclitus called 'God of all and Father

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4Ibid., pp. 125-126.
5Wilson, p. 149.
6A Vision, p. 67.
of all, some it has made gods and some men, some bond and some free,' and I recall that Love and War come from the eggs of Leda."^7

The Orphic mysteries were based on the conception of cyclical rebirths with the symbol of rebirth being a sacred great wheel on which each spoke was associated with phases of the imaginary moon. The rites that were performed were based on the antinomies of good and evil, and body and soul.8 More important to this discussion is the representation of a mystic Eros who was known in Orphic theogony as Phanes Protogonos. He represented the soul and mind, the force and energy of the universe, and finally the representation of the antinomies and their resolution.9 He is known as Metis, Phanes, and Erikapaios, interpreted respectively as meaning Counsel, Light, and Lifegiver.10 Representing the antinomy of human things to man, he is considered both Lord of Life and Death and Lord of Discord and Misrule.11 This triple god, commonly known as Eros, was born from the egg. The Orphic World Egg is described in The Birds of Aristophanes when the chorus tells of a time when there existed only Chaos, Night, and black Erebos:

7Ibid. 8Seiden, p. 220. 9Ibid. 
10Harrison, p. 647. 11Ibid., p. 656.
At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, dark Erebus, and deep Tartarus. Earth, the air and heaven had no existence. Firstly, black-winged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light.\(^\text{12}\)

According to the Orphic creation of the world, the egg broke in two with the upper half of the membrane containing the intellectual cosmos, and the lower half containing the sensible world. Winged Eros, the Lord of Love and Discord, presides over the Heaven which lies between.\(^\text{13}\) The connection between the Orphic egg and Leda is confirmed by Harrison:

"In the sanctuary of the ancient Maidens Hilaira and Phoebe at Sparta there hung from the roof suspended by ribbons an egg, and tradition said it was the egg of Leda."\(^\text{14}\)

Yeats's theories of the antinomies which accompany the historical annunciation of every Great Year are inherent in the Orphic system of the Cosmos: the wheel of Rebirth, a winged Eros, and the Orphic egg of Leda. In "Dove or Swan" Yeats remembers the Orphic cycles and their creations:


\(^{13}\)Mead, p. 107.

\(^{14}\)Harrison, p. 648.
I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War. But all things are from antithesis, and when in my ignorance I try to imagine what older civilization that annunciation rejected I can but see bird and woman blotting out some corner of the Babylonian mathematical starlight.  

The annunciation refers to the rape of Leda by Zeus who, disguised as a swan, had in conception "begotten not only Helen, but the whole consequence of Helen: the fall of Troy, the death of the Greek heroes." The rape of Leda led to the birth of Helen, the destruction of Troy, and to the disintegration of early Greek civilization. In the sonnet "Leda and the Swan," Yeats has described the union of male and female in sexual embrace to symbolize both the universal antinomies and their resolution. Seiden accepts the version of the myth which asserts that the union of Leda and Zeus produced not only Helen, but the twins Castor and Pollux. "The rape of Leda . . . produced Helen and the twins Castor and Pollux. Woman and man, unity and vision, and love and war." Regardless of which version of the myth is applied, within the egg of Leda are embodied the opposites of love and war. At the climax of the poem, the primal embrace of god and mortal

15 _Vision_, p. 268.  
16 _Unterecker_, p. 188.  
17 _Seiden_, p. 237.  
18 _Ibid._
embodies past and present and originates the whole rise and fall of classical antiquity. "A Shudder in the loins engenders there/The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead."^20

The Player Queen (1922) anticipates the bird and woman symbolism which Yeats used in "Leda and the Swan" (1923). Decima, the player queen, is an actress in a troupe of strolling players who usurps the throne of the reigning queen. Decima sings of her mother's prophecy that she, Decima, would become a queen: "'When she was got', my mother sang,/ 'I heard a seamew cry,/I saw a flake of yellow foam/That dropped upon my thigh.'"^21 Decima compares herself to Leda: "Any bird or brute may rest/An empty head upon my breast."^22 In the course of her dance, Decima identifies herself with both Leda and Pasiphaë.

    Shall I fancy beast or fowl?  
    Queen Pasiphaë chose a bull,  
    While a passion for a swan  
    Made Queen Leda stretch and yawn,  
    Wherefore spin ye, whirl ye, dance ye,  
    Till Queen Decima's found her fancy.^23

The image of Leda and her swan must have been an important one to Yeats, for he made random references to the myth

19Ibid.                                      20Collected Poems, p. 248.
21Collected Plays, p. 259.                   22Ibid., p. 265.
23Ibid., p. 264.
throughout his poems. In "His Phoenix" the poet sings of a queen in China or Spain who is so praised "That she might be that sprightly girl trodden by a bird."\(^{24}\) The last stanza of "Lullaby" relates the annunciation:

Such a sleep and sound as fell
Upon Eurotas' grassy bank
When the holy bird, that there
Accomplished his predestined will,
From the limbs of Leda sank
But not from her protecting care.\(^{25}\)

The tale is again referred to in "Among School Children," but in a rather harsher tone. The poet says,

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy--
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.\(^{26}\)

Plato's conception of the egg to which Yeats refers in the last lines was that the egg or sphere symbolized the whole. After Zeus had split man in half, "the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together . . . longing to grow into one . . . ."\(^{27}\) Yeats applies this idea in his conception of the Unity of Being of both man and history. Man

\(^{24}\)Collected Poems, p. 173. \(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 304.

\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 249.

puts on his mask in order to create a whole self, and the primary and antithetical cycles of history must return to its opposites. Because Eros or Phanes presides between the divine and the sensible worlds, male and female in love must seek to regain their opposites or their other halves. In "A Man Young and Old" Yeats reminisces of a past love affair in which the lovers sought their halves:

We sat under an old thorn-tree
And talked away the night, . . .
And when we talked of growing up
Knew that we'd halved a soul
And fell the one in t'other's arms
That we might make it whole; . . . .28

The idea is again voiced in the poem "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" where Crazy Jane tells the Bishop, "'But Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement;/For nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent.'"29

As all civilizations must give way to their alternate manifestation, the antithetical Greek civilization ended its cycle to make way for the fulfillment of a new annunciation. The annunciation which ushered in the primary civilization is told by Yeats in the poem "The Mother of God." For Yeats, Zeus's incarnation balanced with that of the incarnation of

29Ibid., p. 298.
the Holy Ghost as a dove. Mary's experience, like Leda, was one "of terror at the violent arrival of the god." In the poem, Mary says,

The Three-fold terror of love; a fallen flare
Through the hollow of an ear;
Wings beating about the room;
The terror of all terrors that I bore
The Heavens in my womb.

A question is posed in the last lines of "Leda and the Swan" where the poet asks, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"

Likewise, Mary asks, "What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,/This fallen star my milk sustains,/This love that makes my heart's blood stop/Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones/And bids my hair stand up?" The image of the "fallen star" recalls the associations made between Christ and Dionysus, and Athena and Mary in "Two Songs from a Play."

With the poem "The Second Coming" Yeats makes his own prophecy of the beginning of another Great Year. As early as 1896 Yeats had characterized in "The Adoration of the Magi" another annunciation. The end of the Christian cycle must end in violence and turbulence, just as all cycles must.

\[^{30}\text{Seiden, p. 236.}\quad ^{31}\text{Unterecker, p. 187.}\]
\[^{32}\text{Collected Poems, pp. 286-287.}\quad ^{33}\text{Ibid., p. 248.}\]
\[^{34}\text{Ibid., p. 287.}\quad ^{35}\text{Unterecker, p. 185.}\]
One of the three old men of the story had fallen asleep reading Virgil's *Fifth Eclogue* when a voice spoke through him saying that a dying woman would give them secret names that would "so transform the world that another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleaguer Troy."\(^{36}\) The dying woman lives in a poor section of Paris "where women with pale faces and untidy hair" look out of their windows at the three searching magi. This picture of decadence seems to anticipate the grotesque object of "The Second Coming." Juno's peacock is again heard as one of the old men crows like a cock, and a voice speaks through his lips:

\[\ldots\text{I am Hermes the Shepherd of the Dead, I run upon the errands of the gods, and you have heard my sign. The woman who lies there has given birth, and that which she bore has the likeness of a unicorn and is most unlike man of all living things, being cold, hard and virginal. It seemed to be born dancing; }\ldots\ldots\]

The dissatisfaction with Christianity which will come at the end of the cycle was prophesied again in the short poem "The Magi": "\ldots\text{I can see in the mind's eye,} /\text{In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones}/ \ldots\text{And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,} /\text{Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,} /\text{The uncontrollable mystery}\]


\(^{37}\text{Ibid., p. 312.}\)
on the bestial floor." The Magi in "The Adoration of the Magi" discuss the waning of the Christian cycle. "Perhaps Christianity was good and the world liked it, so now it is going away and the Immortals are beginning to awake." The coming of the beast of "The Second Coming" represents the closing of the Christian cycle and the beginning of an antithetical civilization amidst anarchy and chaos.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

In the introduction to The Resurrection Yeats wrote of the beast, "... I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing ecstatic destruction?" The image which Yeats produces in the poem itself, however, gives no indication of ecstasy or joy. Rather, it is "A shape with lion body and the head of a man,/A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, . . . ." The beast appears more like

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38Collected Poems, p. 144.
39Mythologies, pp. 313-314.
a corrupted Dionysus who promises a harsh, pagan cycle. The poet expresses a feeling of terrible uncertainty as he asks, "... 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 toward Bethlehem to be born?" In A Vision Yeats remarks of the coming cycle, "How work out upon the phases the gradual coming and increase of the counter movement, the antithetical multiform influx: Should Jupiter and Saturn meet,/O what a crop of mummy wheat!"

In the closing lines of A Vision, he speculates as to what form one should expect the godhead of the new civilization to assume.

Shall we follow the image of Heracles that walks through the darkness bow in hand, or mount to that other Heracles, man, not image, he that has for his bride Hebe, "The daughter of Zeus, the mighty, and Hera, shod with gold"?

In Yeats the dance and dancer frequently serve as images of the whirling gyres and of the turbulent, chaotic ecstasy which accompanies the violent cyclic changes occurring in the historical pattern. "Yeats's interest in the dance seems very clearly to hearken back to ancient ritual." According to D. J. Gordon, Arthur Symons had referred to the dance-hall dancers as "maenads of the decadence."

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century, the image of the dancer played a prominent role in the verses of poets. Loie Fuller, an American dancer in the Folies Bergère in the 1890's, most particularly captured the imagination of Yeats. She danced in a whirl of shining draperies which were so manipulated that the spectators' concentration was entirely on the illuminated folds of silk. Yeats refers to her and the image which she and her dancers project in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen:"

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
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.

He again refers to her dance in "Byzantium" where he says, "And all complexities of fury leave,/Dying into a dance,/An agony of trance,/An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve." The "agony of trance," the "barbarous clangour of a gong" recalls the ecstasy implicit in the dancing maenads of the Dionysian cult. The name "Maenad" represents a state of mind and body. The drinking of the wine, the animal attire which

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50 *Harrison*, p. 388.
the women wore, and the strange-sounding music served to inspire the violent whirling motions and the wild tossing of the head of the women-worshippers as they sought to induce the divine possession of their minds and bodies by their godhead Dionysus. At the height of their ecstasy the maenads fell into a trance where, amidst previous pandemonium, there existed a sudden, deathly silence. It was at this moment that the god revealed himself as Life and Death. "The dance in Yeats synthesizes an allegory: the pulse of life and the stillness of death stop time with the momentary hesitation of great intensity." The dancer at the height of her dance transcends thought and is poised on the threshold of reality. In "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" the dancer has achieved perfection through movement.

0 little did they care who danced between,  
And little she by whom her dance was seen  
So she had outdanced thought.  
Body perfection brought, . . . .

In his discussion of "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time," Yeats quotes from Synge's The Aran Islands:

In a moment I swept away in a whirlwind of notes. My breath and my thoughts and every impulse of my body became a form of the dance, till I could not distinguish between the instrument or the rhythm and my own person

51Willoughby, pp. 78-79. 52Otto, p. 121. 53Engelberg, p. 141. 54Collected Poems, p. 196.
or consciousness. For a while it seemed an excitement that was filled with joy; then it grew into an ecstasy where all existence was lost in the vortex of movement. I could not think that there had been a life beyond the whirling of the dance.\(^{55}\)

The whirling of the dancer also symbolizes for Yeats the whirling of the gyres "with amoral abandon; right and wrong; good and evil; past and future."\(^{56}\) In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" he says that like the dancers, "So the Platonic Year/Whirls out new right and wrong,/Whirls in the old instead;..."\(^{57}\) "A Prayer for my Daughter" has the poet imagining "That the future years had come,/Dancing to a frenzied drum,/Out of the murderous innocence of the sea."\(^{58}\) In "The Gyres" Yeats alludes to Empedocles' theory. Yeats says, "Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;/Empedocles has thrown all things about;/Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;/We that look on but laugh in tragic joy."\(^{59}\)

With the coming of old age, the individual cycle of each man must come to an end. The warning cry of Juno's peacock sounds the coming reversal of the gyres. Yeats says in "The Tower," "The death of friends, or death/Of every brilliant eye/That

\(^{55}\)Essays and Introductions, p. 332.


\(^{58}\)Ibid., p. 216.

\(^{59}\)William B. Yeats, Last Poems and Plays (New York, 1940), p. 3.
made a catch in the breath--/Seem but the clouds of the sky/
When the horizon fades;/Or a bird's sleepy cry/Among the
deepening shades." In "A Man Young and Old," the old man
expresses a longing for death:

Were I but there and none to hear
I'd have a peacock cry,
For that is natural to a man
That lives in memory,
Being all alone I'd nurse a stone
And sing it lullaby.61

60 Collected Poems, pp. 230-231.
61 Ibid., p. 261.
CHAPTER V

ORPHIC ESCHATOLOGY AND THE THEORY OF THE SOUL

Yeats's theory of the soul in life and in death is inherent in his poetry, his plays, and his major philosophical work, A Vision. In his system of life and death, "Platonism is beyond doubt Yeats's primary source; his Return can be traced to a text in Plato and to the Orphic Mysteries and the ethical theory behind his shiftings he himself refers to Plotinus; . . . ."¹ Yeats had known Porphyry as early as 1895, but had made little use of his writings until the 1920's, when he began to use them copiously in his works.² Besides reading Porphyry, who was steeped in Orphism, Yeats studied the prominent anthropologists, most of whom were preoccupied with the Mysteries of Eleusis. Between 1890 and 1910, he belonged to the Golden Dawn, a society whose members tried to imitate Orphic belief and practice.³

Yeats presents the theory of human existence as a wheel which ceaselessly turns and provides no possibility of final

¹Wilson, p. 143.  
²Ibid., p. 33.  
³Seiden, p. 223.
stasis or continued peace. Orpheus transformed the idea that new souls are old souls reborn in endless succession into a wheel or cycle of ceaseless purgation. The prayer of the Orphic initiate was to be able to "Cease from the Wheel and breathe again from ill." It was from physical rebirths that the Orphics wished to escape. In "Chosen" the woman, the speaker of the poem, has chosen the endless, agonizing cycle in the material world. Yeats expresses in the poem "On Woman" this idea of the maddening circle of rebirth:

But when, if the tale's true,
The pestle of the moon
That pounds up all anew
Brings me to birth again--
To find what once I had
And know what once I have known,
Until I am driven mad,
Sleep driven from my bed,
By tenderness and care,
Pity, an aching head,
Gnashing of teeth, despair;
And all because of some one
Perverse creature of chance,
And live like Solomon
That Sheba led a dance.

After death, the soul must live backward through time. In Platonism and Orphism, the soul had a pre-natal existence. The soul begins its descent, falling from the milky way,

4Wilson, p. 206. 5Harrison, p. 589.
6Ibid., p. 591. 7Willoughby, p. 99.
8Wilson, p. 206. 9Collected Poems, p. 168.
and descending through the symbolic zodiacal signs to gather
certain characteristics for the stay upon earth. Thus, after death, the soul returns through the gate of Capricorn and the zodiacal signs, shedding these attributes. After this, the soul returns to its source. In the poem "Chosen" the souls of the lovers appear to be on the starting point of the milky way. The speaker says,

The lot of love is chosen. I learnt that much
Struggling for an image on the track
Of the whirling Zodiac.
Scarcely did he my body touch,
Scarcely sank he from the west
Or found a subterranean rest
On the maternal midnight of my breast
Before I had marked him on his northern way,
And seemed to stand although in bed I lay.

Yeats took the idea of the soul circling, as do the planets around God, because it cannot find peace at any point within its cycle, and because of its desire to find its source, or God. Plotinus says in "The Heavenly Circuit,"

The Soul exists in revolution around God to whom it clings in love, holding itself to the utmost of its power near to Him as the Being on which all depends; and since it cannot coincide with God it circles about Him .... For since God is omnipresent the Soul desiring perfect union must take the circular course: God is not stationed.

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11 Ibid.  
12 Collected Poems, pp. 312-313.  
13 Wilson, p. 208.  
In "The Wild Swans at Coole" the poet refers to the cyclical rebirths in nature and mankind. Remembering when he first counted the swans on the lake on Lady Gregory's estate, he says,

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamourous wings.  

As in this poem, Yeats frequently uses the bird as a symbol for the soul after death and as a symbol for God. Yeats knew that in Babylonian Hades, souls wore a feathered dress; in ancient Egypt the **ba** or soul was thought of as a bird; and in Homer the souls of the dead "twitter." The idea of the soul as a bird persists in the Greek Mystery religions, the Kabbala, and in Indian and Japanese legend. In "Byzantium" the soul is a mechanical bird which can, after it has reached the summit of perfection, either accept another incarnation or renounce the material world. The poet says,

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.\(^9\)

Included within the idea of cyclical rebirths is the symbolism of the spool or spindle. Yeats's sources for the use of this symbol are the Greek Mystery religions and Plato's Myth of Er where the three fates weave the destinies of men on "the spindle of necessity." The thread on the spool represents the reincarnated soul.\(^1\) In Plato's myth the souls of men in heaven between incarnations choose the lots that will be their future destinies.\(^2\) In "Chosen" it is the lot of love which the woman has chosen for her destiny. She says, "I struggled with the horror of daybreak,/I chose it for my lot!"\(^2\) In "His Bargain" Yeats uses Plato's spindle as an image:

Who talks of Plato's spindle;
What set it whirling round?
Eternity may dwindle,
Time is unwound,
Dan and Jerry Lout
Change their loves about.
However they may take it,
Before the thread began
I made, and may not break it
When the last thread has run,
A bargain with that hair
And all the windings there.\(^2\)

\(^9\)Collected Poems, p. 286. \(^1\)Wilson, p. 81.


\(^2\)Collected Poems, p. 313. \(^2\)Ibid., pp. 302-303.
A reference is again made in "Byzantium" where the poet says, "For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth/May unwind the winding path; . . . ."\textsuperscript{24} In the Musicians' opening song of\emph{The King of the Great Clock Tower} the First Attendant says that every lover lacks thought or words:

\begin{quote}
No thought because no clock, no clock because
If I consider deeply, lad and lass,
Nerve touching nerve upon that happy ground,
Are bobbins where all time is bound and wound.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The Second Attendant replies, "O never may that dismal thread run loose; . . . ."\textsuperscript{26} The lovers are subject to no change because their bodies are spools on which all time is wound like a thread.\textsuperscript{27} In "The Fool by the Roadside" Yeats uses the symbol of the spool and the theory of the soul living from age to youth. He says, "When all works that have/From cradle run to grave/From grave to cradle run instead;/When thoughts that a fool/Has wound upon a spool/Are but loose thread, are but loose thread; . . . ."\textsuperscript{28}

The belief of the progression of the soul after death from age to youth is expressed by Yeats in his \emph{Autobiography}:

\begin{quote}
When we are dead, according to my belief, we live our lives backward for a certain number of years, treading
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 285. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{25}\textit{Collected Plays}, p. 398.

\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{27}\textit{Wilson}, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Collected Poems}, p. 254.
the paths that we have trodden, growing young again, even childish again, till some attain an innocence that is no longer a mere accident of nature, but the human intellect's crowning achievement.29

According to Wilson, Yeats had learned in Taylor's Dissertation that in Orphic theology souls, while under the government of Saturn, who is pure intellect, progress from age to youth.30 This theory is the basis for the poem "Shepherd and Goatherd" written to commemorate the death of Lady Gregory's son Robert. The poem is done in the Greek pastoral convention with the goatherd and shepherd singing their expressions of sympathy with Lady Gregory in her bereavement.31 The shepherd's song is that of the natural life, but the goatherd's song is of the life after death. He sings of Robert Gregory,

'He grows younger every second . . .
He unpacks the loaded pern
Of all 'twas pain or joy to learn,
Of all that he had made . . .
Knowledge he shall unwind
Through victories of the mind,
Till, clambering at the cradle-side,
He dreams himself his mother's pride,
All knowledge lost in trance
Of sweeter ignorance.'32

29 Autobiography, p. 320.
30 Wilson, p. 201.
31 Ibid., p. 200.
32 Collected Poems, p. 165.
Those who occupy heaven in Yeats's "News for the Delphic Oracle" are referred to as "Innocents" who "re-live their death." \(^{33}\)

The souls who relive their lives, or examine their past, are doing so in the state which Yeats calls the "Dreaming Back." His theory of the vehicles of the soul is explained in \textit{A Vision}. These three vehicles of the soul correspond closely with the three states of the soul in Orphic theosophy. In Orphism the ethereal body was the essence of the soul which resided in a state of bliss in the stars; the aerial body was the purgatorial dress or the state in which the soul suffered punishment of its sins after death; the terrestrial body was the soul which inhabited the body or husk while on earth. \(^{34}\) In \textit{A Vision} Yeats says that the "Passionate Body," or nature, must completely disappear before the "Spirit" can occupy the "Celestial Body." \(^{35}\) In order to purge itself of all emotion and passion, the soul occupies the second state, which Yeats calls the "Dreaming Back." Within the dreaming back, corresponding to the Orphic aerial body or purgatorial state, the soul relives by means of painful dreams those "events that had most moved it." \(^{36}\)

\(^{33}\textit{Last Poems and Plays}, p. 59.\)
\(^{34}\textit{Mead}, p. 162.\)
\(^{35}\textit{A Vision}, p. 224.\)
\(^{36}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 226.\)
"Return" the spirit "must live through past events in the order of their occurrence, because it is compelled by the celestial body to trace every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself."

This aspect of Yeats's theory is expounded in the play Purgatory. The form of the play is based on the Japanese Noh. The story is an account of a vision seen by a beggar and his son. The old man and the boy revisit the ruined house where the beggar was born. The vision which they encounter is the ghost of the beggar's mother, who is imprisoned in the dreaming back. The mother had, by marrying a drunken, worthless groom, shamed herself and her family. The consequences of her transgression has been the pollution of the family line. The beggar tells his son that she must relive her sin.

The souls in Purgatory that come back
To habitations and familiar spots . . .
Relive
Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times; they know at last
The consequences of those transgressions . . . .

37Ibid.
38Wilson, p. 138.
39Collected Plays, p. 431.
In order to cut short her dream, the beggar kills his son, thinking that by ending the family line, he can release her from her meditation. But he cannot. She must purify her own mind of all the pleasure and remorse as she relives the night of her marriage. The old beggar realizes his error as the play closes: "Twice a murderer and all for nothing,/And she must animate that dead night/Not once but many times!"40

F. A. C. Wilson believes that in Yeats's theory of life after death, Yeats's most commonly employed imagery is from Homer's "Book of the Dead" (Book XI) from The Odyssey.41 There are references to the shades in Hades and to the blood-pool from which they must drink to communicate with the living. In "Fool by the Roadside," the poet says, "When cradle and spool are past/And I mere shade at last ...."42 In the section "Her Courage" of "Upon a Dying Lady" Achilles is presented as one of many shades "Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death."43 A shade whose mouth has no moisture or breath summons the poet in "Byzantium":

Before me floats an image, man or shade, Shade more than man, more image than a shade; ... A mouth that has no moisture and no breath Breathless mouths may summon; ... 44

40Ibid., p. 436.  41Wilson, p. 146.
42Collected Poems, p. 254.  43Ibid., p. 182.
44Ibid., p. 285.
In his introduction to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* Yeats discusses the shades, giving Achilles as an example. He says, "When Achilles came to the edge of the blood-pool (an ancient substitute for the medium) he was such a shade."\(^{45}\) In the same selection he presents a poem wherein he remarks,

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... \text{If spirits seem to stand}
\text{Before the bodily eyes, speak into the bodily ears,}
\text{They are not present but their messengers.}
... \text{We question; it but answers what we would}
\text{Or as phantasy directs--because they have drunk the blood.}^{46}\]

In *A Vision* Yeats uses a most fitting quotation for his illustration of the world of shades. The quotation is one in which Cornelius Agrippa attributes to the words of Orpheus: "The Gates of Pluto must not be unlocked, within is a people of dreams."\(^{47}\)

The thirteenth book of *The Odyssey* concerns that part of Odysseus' journey where he stays in a cave on the coast of Ithaca. In his "Cave of the Nymphs" Porphyry interprets this narrative as a myth of the return of the soul.\(^{48}\) Yeats, who knew and loved this essay in Taylor's translation, uses its symbolism in several poems.\(^{49}\) "The Delphic Oracle Upon


\(^{47}\) *A Vision*, p. 23. \(^{48}\) *Wilson*, p. 211.

\(^{49}\) *Ibid.*
Plotinus' is based on the verse-oracle which was delivered to Amelius after the death of Plotinus. He begins the poem, "Behold that great Plotinus swim, Buffeted by such seas; ..." The sea on which Plotinus travels is the Platonic symbol for life. "Bland Rhadamanthus beckons him" is a reference to a rather common theory derived from Orphic eschatology that Rhadamanthus was one of the three Judges in Hades. The salt, representing material concerns, blocks his eyes so that he can only glimpse the Golden Race, or Heaven. The last stanza enumerates the people who inhabit Yeats's Heaven.

"News for the Delphic Oracle" also contains Porphyry's symbolism. The Delphic Oracle is sent news from Heaven or "the resort of perfection." The "golden codgers" of the first line refer to the Golden Race mentioned in "The Delphic Oracle Upon Plotinus." He says that in this resort, "There the silver dew, /And the great water sighed for love, /And the wind sighed too." The "silver dew" is the food for Heaven, or the nectar mentioned in the oracle. The nymphs which are referred to in the last stanza are the nymphs which occupy

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50 Ibid., p. 213.  
51 Collected Poems, p. 309.  
52 Wilson, p. 213.  
53 Harrison, pp. 609-610.  
54 Wilson, p. 215.  
55 Ibid., p. 217.  
56 Last Poems and Plays, p. 59.  
57 Wilson, p. 219.
Porphyry's cave. They represent all generated souls. Porphyry says of them, "Souls, therefore, proceeding into generation, are the nymphs called Naiades." This is reminiscent of the nymph for which Attis descended into the cave. In Julian's "Hymn to the Mother of the Gods," he says, "And the nymph is to be interpreted as the dampness of matter; . . . ." Yeats's reference to the "silver dew" and the "great water sighing for love" connects the idea of the generative powers. The Mother of the Gods is described by Julian as "the cause of all generation." The Mother as child-bearer is echoed in Yeats's poem "The Crazed Moon":

> Crazed through much child-bearing  
The moon is staggering in the sky;  
Moon-struck by the despairing  
Glances of her wandering eye  
We grope, and grope in vain,  
For children born of her pain.

In his essay Porphyry says that the moon, who presides over generation, was called a bee. The honey-bees in Porphyry's cave are those souls seeking their source, "For this insect loves to return to the place from whence it came, and is eminently just and sober." The honey of the bees represents

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59 Julian, p. 463.
60 Ibid.
61 Collected Poems, pp. 278-279.
62 Porphyry, p. 184.
63 Ibid.
"the pleasure arising from copulation." Porphyry relates that in Orpheus, Saturn is ensnared by Jupiter through honey, and the Goddess Night advises Jupiter to make use of honey as an artifice. Harrison also reports honey as being the nectar of gods and men and relates that in Orphic ritual, milk and honey were used as a sacrament. The bees and their honey appear in Yeats's poem "The Stare's Nest by my Window" from "Meditations in Time of Civil War": "The bees build in the crevices/Of loosening masonry, and there/The Mother birds bring grubs and flies./My wall is loosening; honey-bees,/Come build in the empty house of the stare." In "Among School Children" the poet says, "What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap/Honey of generation had betrayed, ...." "Blood and Moon" depicts Goldsmith as "deliberately sipping at the honey-pot of his mind, .... "

The poem "Byzantium" presents much of the symbolism which Yeats frequently uses in his theory of life and death. Byzantium seems to represent the Platonic heaven, the resort of perfection, Elysium, or any artifice of eternity. The

64 Ibid., p. 183.
65 Ibid., pp. 182-183.
66 Harrison, pp. 595-596.
67 Collected Poems, p. 236.
68 Ibid., p. 250.
69 Ibid., p. 274.
gong of the cathedral warns of the nearness of death: "Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song/After great cathedral gong; . . . . " The gong was used in the Byzantium church in the place of bells, and in the Orphic mysteries the descent of the soul into Hades was symbolized by the beating of a gong. In the drama enacted at the rites of the Demeter cult, the hierophant sounded the gong to symbolize the cry of Persephone as she descended into Hades. For Seiden, "Byzantium" with its "ideas and images, ghosts and visions, and theurgical ecstasy" evokes "an Orphic rite of spiritual rebirth." The spirit, riding on the back of the traditional dolphin, journeys toward God: "Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,/Spirit after spirit!" The images and symbolism which Yeats has projected in his works illustrate his theories of life after death, of the spiritual rebirth of souls. These theories have been derived from traditional sources to provide for Yeats the Unity of Being which he sought. The cyclic patterns of historical periods and of man's life on earth are projected into the soul's cyclic pattern after death. Like the inevitable gyring of nature and

70 Ibid., p. 285.
71 Wilson, p. 231.
72 Ibid., p. 234.
73 Willoughby, p. 48.
74 Seiden, p. 229.
75 Collected Poems, p. 286.
history, the soul of man in death seeks its source and cannot rest until its cycle is completed.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In Orphic belief the initiate participated in acts of asceticism and purification so that he could attain divinity and immortality. The symbolic story of the murder and resurrection of the god Dionysus represents man's historic striving to be liberated from the curse of material existence and to find unity and harmony within the spiritual world. This theme greatly attracted Yeats, as it has many poets and philosophers, for the characters who people many of Yeats's poems and plays participate in a ritual drama of death and rebirth. The atmosphere of many of the works suggests a drama of sacrifice, hierophants who see visions, and the ecstasy which attends the communion with divinity.

Yeats's philosophical work, *A Vision*, provides the key to many of the images and themes of the later poems and plays. In developing *A Vision* Yeats unified many traditional religions and beliefs. The Greek Mystery religions played an important role in this unification. The dual nature of Dionysus is used to illustrate the personality of Phase Two of the twenty-eight incarnations of man. Dionysus and Attis
as resurrected gods are presented as Greek equivalents for the resurrected Christ. The Orphic egg becomes Yeats's symbol for the antithesis inherent in all civilizations. The turbulence with which each of Yeats's cycles begins and terminates is the same turbulence inherent in Orphic cycles.

One of the most significant contributions of the mystery religions, and especially the Orphic theosophy, to Yeats's theory of the soul is that of the fate of the soul after death. The progress of the soul on the ceaselessly-turning wheel of human existence is the Orphic wheel of purgation where old souls are reborn in endless succession. The various aspects of Yeats's theory of the soul are steeped in the ancient myths of Greece. Many of the elements of the Greek Mystery religions are used within Yeats's works in a unified theme, such as the theme of ritual murder and rebirth or the theories of the soul. But many references to the symbolism and other characteristics of the Greek cults are made throughout the poems and other works of Yeats.

Yeats's study and use of the Greek Mystery religions are in keeping with his lifelong fascination with myths of the past, the spiritualism which seems inherent in the literature of every country, and a long oral and written history of visitations from what appears to be those souls returning to purge themselves of past transgressions. Yeats's
associations with such personages as Madame Blavatsky and such societies as the Golden Dawn provided him with many sources, most of which he must have incorporated within his writings. Yeats's experiences in these societies and his personal experiences served to cast an atmosphere of mystery and fascination over his work. The Greek Mystery religions have indeed contributed to this atmosphere. The influence of the Greek Mystery religions was not only to provide Yeats with subject matter and symbolism, but to project the atmosphere of the past in the present, an atmosphere which seems to prevail in Yeats's creative work and which seems to have characterized his personal life.
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