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UNITY, ECSTASY, COMMUNION; THE TRAGIC  
PERSPECTIVE OF W. B. YEATS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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May, 1988

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Brooks, John C., Unity, Ecstasy, Communion: The Tragic Perspective of W. B. Yeats. Doctor of Philosophy (English), May, 1988, 321 pp., bibliography, 103 titles.

As a young man of twenty-one in 1886, William Butler Yeats announced his ambition to unify Ireland through heroic poetry. But this prophetic urge lacked structure. Yeats had only some callow notions about needing self-possession and appropriate control of his imagery. As a result, his search for essential knowledge and experience soon led him into occult and symbolist vagueness. Yeats' mind grew flaccid, and his art languished in preciousness for over a decade. Lotos-eating had replaced prophetic fervor.

However, early in the new century, as Yeats neared middle age and permanent mediocrity, he recovered his early zeal and finally found the means to give it artistic shape. Through daily theatre work he had discovered tragedy. And through personal trials he had developed a tragic sense. Hence, an entire tragic perspective was born, one that would dominate Yeats' mind and art the rest of his life.

Locating the contours of Yeats' shift in viewpoint, then, provides the key to understanding the man and his mature work. The present study does just that, tracing the origin, development, and elaboration of Yeats' tragic perspective, from its theoretical underpinnings to its

poetic triumphs. Above all, this study supplies the basic context of Yeats' career: why he took the path he did, and how he wove all that he found along the way into a remarkable fabric.

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It is always inexcusable to lose one's self-possession.

--1908 journal

. . . we must . . . if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and the fervour of a priesthood.

--"Ireland and the Arts" (1901)

All art is in the last analysis an endeavor to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection. . . .

--Preface to Poems 1899-1905

. . . Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images. . . .

--The Trembling of the Veil (1922)

. . . tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man. . . .

--"The Tragic Theatre" (1910)

I have aimed at tragic ecstasy.

--On the Boiler (1939)

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study traces the origin, development, and elaboration of William Butler Yeats' tragic perspective, a group of ideas and attitudes central to his life and work. Through this viewpoint Yeats found, midway in his life, the right structure for an art that could unify Ireland and therefore fulfill his early prophetic goal. At last he could balance his religious impulse to transcend forms and his aesthetic compulsion to create forms. The key was control. Yeats the tragic artist still sought a meeting of natural and supernatural, as did Yeats the magical adept shortly before. But no longer did he share the mystic's desire for final subsumption in the Absolute. In approaching the supernatural during the creative act, an artist must remain self-possessed, focusing eternal light, not being swallowed up in it. The artistic vision is fleeting--a compromise perfection--but is renewable in further imaginative moments and, for others, in repeated perception of works already produced. Thus, to use Yeats' terms, the mystic's "Unity with God" is replaced by "Unity of Being" in both artist during creation and spectator or reader upon experiencing the result. The work of tragic art, then, can bring an entire people into communion,

into "Unity of Culture," like a sacred book. And the artist, in facing, mastering, and transmuting life's sorrows during the creative process, and providing others the prospect of vicarious unity, acts like a priest--or even a redeemer. He becomes the ultimate cultural hero.

Yeats' tragic view emerged during the infancy of the Abbey Theatre. Beginning with essays in Samhain published in December 1904 to commemorate the opening of the Abbey, Yeats developed a theory of tragedy in a series of essays over the next six years. The most important works are "Discoveries" (1906), "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), and "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time" (1910). Modifications continued in later essays (and, to some extent, in letters, journals, and creative works) until about 1917. By then Yeats' theory was set, as was the distinctive ebullient tone that he featured until the end of his life.

Locating the contours of such a tragic perspective in Yeats' succulent, elliptical prose is not easy. More impressionist than thinker, Yeats even at his most direct does not write systematic philosophy. Sometimes he confuses the reader by dressing up old, ordinary ideas in new garb. At other times, like his mentor William Blake, he uses familiar terms in peculiar contexts. And Yeats is usually more dilettantish than trenchant about names and works, preferring anecdote to analysis. Still, a definite pattern exists.

The key elements of Yeats' tragic perspective can therefore be abstracted as follows:

1. Prophetic purpose. Tragic art exists to unite a culture, or even all humanity, into a communion based on universal human qualities. The quality of most concern to Yeats is "personality" (later called Unity of Being and always equivalent to self-possession), an individual's primal wholeness, as distinguished from "character," the accidental accretion on this core. Personality transmits or conducts "passion," the paradigm of emotion. Passion is crucial, for the artist's apprehension of passion (usually sorrow) during an act of contemplation is the beginning of the imaginative process resulting in tragic art. Yeats' division of universal and particular qualities also provides the framework for his distinction between the two kinds of art: "the art of the flood" (tragedy) and "real art" (comedy, concerned with mundane particulars).

2. Ecstatic means. Tragic art accomplishes its mission during a perfect moment of intensity, when personality or Unity of Being emanates as ecstatic emotion ("tragic joy"). In epistemological terms, the extreme sorrow (or other passion) found in the act of contemplation is changed by the artist's imagination (through its exultant device, "style") into an exuberant hybrid emotion. In a later, alternative model, Yeats



describes this process as simply an artist finding or making his "mask" or "anti-self" in defeat or disappointment. In either model the artist achieves self-unity and tragic ecstasy during the creative process, projects his vision into the work (where, for example, the tragic hero in a drama re-enacts the process), and then the perceiver of the work recreates it for himself. Hence, the communion of a race turns on the axis of tragic art.

As seen from eternity, this perfect moment is an intermingling of the natural and the supernatural orders. An artist's eternal opposite, his "Daimon," descends to meet his eager ascent. Self-unity thus evokes an eternal response--an infusion of absolute essence into the human imagination. Unity of Being insures Unity with God after all, but with individuality and volition intact. (Near the end of his life, Yeats would simplify all this by making even eternity a function of the human imagination.)

3. Artistic manner. The artist's imagination, focusing eternal light into communicable images during the tragic process, is a consciously-controlled divine instrument. To use its enormous power properly, the artist must have a sense of his place in a tradition of those like himself, as well as a quality essential to this tradition--"recklessness," an intuitive extravagance

or boisterousness exemplified in the artifice of style, the shaping finger of the artist. With this attitude, which might be called the fertile residue of tragic ecstasy, he continues to transform sorrow into joy in work after work, each triumphant moment providing fuel for the next. Only thus can Unity of Culture take place.

Yeats' tragic view therefore contains his thoughts on being, knowledge, and beauty, as well as giving substance to his prophetic instincts. The present study not only traces the development of this perspective in Yeats' prose of 1904-17, but also examines its origin in Yeats' obsessions of the previous two decades and its pervasive impact to the end of his life. Although initially tied to the theatre and tragic drama, Yeats' ideas on tragedy quickly permeated his thought and work in every area, especially lyric poetry. And through all his trials of body and spirit, through brushes with death and doubt, this tragic perspective remained intact, providing personal ballast, fueling his prophetic mission.

This study, then, is the history of a set of ideas and attitudes that together form a coherent viewpoint. It differs in either emphasis or scope from important earlier scholarship related to the subject. Previous critics invariably have focused too narrowly on Yeats' tragic view, usually choosing but one or at most two genres, thereby missing the full context, the pervasiveness, of his rich perspective.

For example, the first extensive study on Yeats and tragedy, B. L. Reid's William Butler Yeats: The Lyric of Tragedy,<sup>1</sup> concerns Yeats' lyric poetry, ignoring the plays save for isolated lyric passages. Reid also imposes a framework derived from the structure of Greek tragedy on Yeats' idiosyncratic ideas, which is an awkward fit. For one thing, he describes the Yeatsian tragic process wholly in Greek terms: Agon (Suffering), Pathos (Opposition), Threnos (Reconciliation), Anagnorisis (Transmutation), and Theophany (Transcendence).<sup>2</sup> And Reid suggests that the design of the poems as a whole is virtually that of the Dionysus-mystery, forerunner of tragedy.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, he thinks that Yeats' Last Poems collection is a lyric equivalent of the satyr play, the final peripeteia (grief to joy) of the Dionysus ritual that shaped the early Greek tetralogies.<sup>4</sup> Reid's thoughts on Yeats' concept of passion are also interesting. Following the Greek tragic process once more, he categorizes passion as a sequence of Defense ("Promethianism"), Joy (tragic joy), Innocence (catharsis, elevation into peace), and Apocalypse (wild ecstasy).<sup>5</sup> While Reid is very thorough on Yeats' lyrics, offering some stimulating readings, his omission of drama is strange, especially given his emphasis on Greek dramatic structure. And he only partly examines the prose essays that make up Yeats' tragic theory (the 1904 Samhain essays are ignored, for instance). In relating Yeats' ideas to the origins of

tragedy, Reid seems more interested in nudging Yeats into the old pattern than in finding Yeats' own pattern.

While Reid plumbs the tragic depths of Yeats' poetry, Leonard Nathan, in The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats: Figures in a Dance,<sup>6</sup> studies only Yeats' dramatic theory and practice from the nineties on, with close readings of individual plays. Essentially, he says, Yeats saw man's tragic plight as that desire "to achieve identity with the infinite" in the face of cruel supernatural indifference.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Yeatsian drama treats this hopeless human yearning, this peculiar war between the orders. Yeats' efforts to embody this theme in the right metaphorical form is the basis of Nathan's study. According to Nathan, Yeats tried several approaches. The first, derived from aestheticism, excluded the temporal, producing remoteness and elaborate fantasy. In this approach, Nathan believes, symbols were strategically located "like elements of a code that . . . gave the spiritual message to be conveyed by the drama."<sup>8</sup> Yeats then tried tragi-comedy, with an emphasis on the natural, "out of which supernaturally touched heroism might rise to tragic stature without violating probability. . . ."<sup>9</sup> But, Nathan says, this approach tended to absorb the spiritual, which could too easily be seen as merely symbolic of heightened physiological states.<sup>10</sup> The final form of Yeats' tragic drama lay in what Nathan calls (quoting one of Yeats' own phrases) "the theatre's anti-self"--that is, Yeats'

adaptation of the Japanese Noh drama. If Yeats had always sought "to introduce the supernatural seriously and effectively on an actual stage,"<sup>11</sup> the Noh allowed him to make the spiritual order part of the dramatic structure. Nathan's work is lively and persuasive, suffering only by its omission of the lyric poetry in Yeats' tragic equation. Nathan and Reid are therefore critical complements.

James W. Flannery has some particularly insightful things to say about Yeats' tragic vision in his own work on the drama, W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice.<sup>12</sup> As its title indicates, this work largely concerns the daily particulars of theatre craft and management (after all, Yeats was a manager as well as a dreamer). However, Flannery's early chapters on Yeats' tragic beliefs, although brief, are as good as anything written on the subject. Like Nathan, Flannery sees the war between the orders at the core of Yeats' tragic view. He calls this conflict "the fundamental theme" of all Yeats' work, and goes on to say that "tragedy was the dramatic form through which he gave utterance to this vision and theme."<sup>13</sup> Flannery thinks that Yeats conceived of tragic experience on two interwoven levels: on the natural plane, tragedy shows how man conquers despair and faces death through Unity of Being, while on a cosmic scale tragedy demonstrates the intensity and passion necessary for a soul to reach a higher phase on the wheel of incarnations.<sup>14</sup> Flannery stresses

that for Yeats tragedy became not merely an abstraction "but a veritable way of life."<sup>15</sup> To this end, Yeats sought his own anti-self or mask as a means to self-unity, and also tried to model the Irish theatre "in the image of a mask--not the mirror, but the antithetical self of Ireland."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Flannery says, Yeats challenged both himself and his nation with "all that by nature" they were not.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, the prophetic purpose of tragedy is essential to Flannery's view of Yeats--he thinks the plays were meant to evoke mystical experience in the audience.<sup>18</sup> And Flannery believes that Yeats' three unities--of Being, Culture, and Image--are the basis of his prophetic relationship to Ireland: "They may be seen, even in their formative stages, to underlie most of the theories and practices upon which he based the Irish dramatic movement."<sup>19</sup> While Flannery's scope is necessarily limited to drama, his general statements on Yeats' tragic perspective obviously apply, as he indicates, to all areas of Yeats' work, even to his entire way of life.

Another important study, Edward Engelberg's The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats' Aesthetic,<sup>20</sup> deals not with a genre but with the evolution of Yeats' theory of art. One part of Yeats' aesthetic Engelberg calls "the tragic correlative," to which he devotes an excellent chapter. Engelberg sees Yeats' primary task as that of finding an "equipoise" between "the reckless moment of life and the formal moment of art."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Yeats perfected "an aesthetic of

equipoise," composed of reverie, ecstasy, and passion; this synthesis, or Unity of Being, was "salvation."<sup>22</sup> Unity of Being, in turn, was manifested in "the single image,"<sup>23</sup> which Engelberg also calls "an heroic image."<sup>24</sup> To Engelberg tragedy exemplifies this aesthetic--Yeats' tragic process results in complete equipoise.<sup>25</sup> The hero achieves deliverance from tragic circumstance through both ecstasy and joy, which Engelberg differentiates. In the state of conflict is a profound core of passion, from which the hero enters a contemplative reverie called ecstasy. Wisdom beyond struggle results, which in turn produces joy or gaiety, a feeling of release. Thus is a timeless art achieved, an art unified by the internal opposition of action and contemplation--Yeats' Unity of Being. Engelberg's description of this process is superb, offering an interesting contrast to the treatment of the same dynamic in Chapter III of the present study. The only drawback of The Vast Design is, again, one of scope. Engelberg deals almost exclusively with Yeats' prose, only occasionally looking at poems or plays. The vital link between Yeatsian theory and practice is merely intimated.

One final work relating to Yeats' tragic view, Alex Zwerdling's Yeats and the Heroic Ideal,<sup>26</sup> is more peripheral than the others but still important. Zwerdling examines Yeats' idea of heroism as an antidote to life's terrors, identifying four types of Yeatsian heroes: the Irish mythical hero, the aristocrat, the public hero, and the visionary.

The last type includes the artist, and is the part of Zwerdling's book verging closest to Yeats' tragic perspective. In discussing the visionary hero, for example, Zwerdling emphasizes the element of "heroic affirmation."<sup>27</sup> Relating this affirmation to joy ("a kind of love"), he sees the joyous hero himself becoming supremely important in a universe where ultimate reality is "unattainable except in rare and irregular moments of ecstatic communion."<sup>28</sup>

Despite the quality of the above works, a more integrated approach is needed, one paying close attention to all of Yeats' forms of expression. Essays, journals, letters, reviews, and fiction cannot be easily separated from poetry and drama with Yeats. There is a constant interplay of themes and ideas among his various forms. Most of the time, for instance, theory precedes art, with letters often describing the transition. Occasionally Yeats reverses the order. In either case, he never leaves one in the dark about his intentions. Few writers are so revealing of their thoughts, feelings, and imaginative goals. Because of its richness, Yeats' tragic perspective deserves the widest possible scope, the fullest context. It is the basis of his mature art.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>B. L. Reid, William Butler Yeats: The Lyric of Tragedy (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Reid 248.

<sup>3</sup>Reid 245.

<sup>4</sup>Reid 248.

<sup>5</sup>Reid 142-70 inclusive.

<sup>6</sup>Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats: Figures in a Dance (New York: Columbia UP, 1965).

<sup>7</sup>Nathan 3.

<sup>8</sup>Nathan 154.

<sup>9</sup>Nathan 154.

<sup>10</sup>Nathan 154.

<sup>11</sup>Nathan 172.

<sup>12</sup>James W. Flannery, W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976).

<sup>13</sup>Flannery 37.

<sup>14</sup>Flannery 39.

<sup>15</sup>Flannery 37.

- <sup>16</sup>Flannery 16.
- <sup>17</sup>Flannery 17.
- <sup>18</sup>Flannery 41-42.
- <sup>19</sup>Flannery 58.
- <sup>20</sup>Edward Engelberg, The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats' Aesthetic (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1964).
- <sup>21</sup>Engelberg xxvi.
- <sup>22</sup>Engelberg 27.
- <sup>23</sup>Engelberg 4.
- <sup>24</sup>Engelberg 210.
- <sup>25</sup>Engelberg 157-70 inclusive.
- <sup>26</sup>Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York: New York UP, 1969).
- <sup>27</sup>Zwerdling 176.
- <sup>28</sup>Zwerdling 178.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY VISION, EVOCATION, AND DISORDER, 1886-1902

In 1886 Yeats came of age and plotted his life's work. He wanted to be the prophetic voice of Ireland, unifying his race through poetry rich in Celtic myth and folklore and universal in scope. Caught up in the new Irish literary and political nationalism, Yeats clearly understood his mission. He also vaguely realized that some kind of tragic sense was required. Only the poetic means were in question: how best to convey universality. Because of his long interest in Irish folklore (he had personally collected fairy stories from "old men and old women" since his late teens)<sup>1</sup> and his growing fascination with the hermetic tradition, Yeats felt that occult studies and practices held the key to effective prophetic art. Thus, for nearly two decades he followed the path of theosophy and "magic," adapting esoterica to his aesthetic, with the help of contemporary symbolist methods. The result was increasing preciousness and vagueness in his work, as the early prophetic goal became lost in a symbolic hall of mirrors. The curious story of how Yeats first saw his goal, lost sight of it, and then found it again (while retaining the occult view of reality) is the subject of this chapter. Out of his detour into confusion would come a

mature artist, ready to consider tragedy.

Yeats hardly seemed the perfect candidate for prophecy in 1886. He was writing poetry with a diffuse, pre-Raphaelite glow: languid, dreamy lines free of anything tangible. The invariable theme is escape--to green islands, "where dream-fed passion is and peace encloses,"<sup>2</sup> or to fairyland, "for the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."<sup>3</sup> And the year before, Yeats, George Russell ("A. E."), and others had founded the Dublin Hermetic Society, with Yeats as chairman and a theosophical agenda of occult and Eastern thought.<sup>4</sup> An artistic mission seemed far from his mind. Yet, at the very first meeting of the society he had proposed that "whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind were but literal truth."<sup>5</sup> The seed was ready to be planted.

Yeats' association at this time with John O'Leary, the old Fenian leader recently returned from long exile, helped keep his esoteric yearnings focused in behalf of the new literary nationalism. O'Leary lent Yeats books of Irish poets such as Thomas Davis, and encouraged Irish studies, including fairy lore.<sup>6</sup> Such a high sanction gave Yeats the incentive to forge his initial prophetic goal.

With O'Leary's support and the audacity of youth, Yeats announced his prophetic mission in 1886, in an essay on Sir Samuel Ferguson's poetry. He extols poets who go back "to

their old legends . . . seeking the truth about nature and man."<sup>7</sup> The concept (if not the name) of Unity of Being, so important in his later tragic view, appears, perhaps for the first time, as Yeats speaks strongly on the poet's role in a national revival:

Great poetry does not teach us anything--it changes us. Man is like a musical instrument of many strings, of which only a few are sounded by the narrow interests of his daily life. . . . Heroic poetry is a phantom finger swept over all the strings, arousing from man's whole nature a song of answering harmony. . . . It touches all the strings--those of wonder and pity, of fear and joy.<sup>8</sup>

Also present is a version of the astringent courage necessary for tragedy, although the idea of tragic ecstasy is as yet inconceivable:

"The food of the passions is bitter, the food of the spirit is sweet," say the wise Indians. And this faithfulness to things tragic and bitter, to thoughts that wear one's life out and scatter one's joy, the Celt has above all. Those who have it, alone are worthy of great causes.<sup>9</sup>

This passage also suggests the two paths of artist and saint that would later become of cosmic scope in A Vision. While Yeats could not yet write poetry in this mode intimating tragedy, his goal lay far beyond soft pastorals.

In another essay the following year, Yeats again affirmed a tragic basis for significant poetry: "Many poems as delicate and fragrant as rose leaves we soon forget. . . . all the great poems of the world have their foundations fixed in agony. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Specifically, Yeats is reviewing Clarence Mangan's "Nameless," which falls under the "fragrant" class, but many of his own lyrical confections could be substituted. Yet, he does not denigrate such works. Indeed, he allows for the "great lyric," but insists it is quite different from the "great poem." <sup>11</sup>

Yeats is most revealing of this distinction, especially regarding his own work, in two 1888 letters to Katharine Tynan, a fellow poet. In the first letter he honestly evaluates his own extreme lyricism while explaining the difference between prophetic poetry and what he has been writing:

I have noticed some things about my poetry I did not know before . . . it is all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight. . . . it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint--the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge. <sup>12</sup>

The second letter concerns possible remedies:

We both of us need to substitute more and more the landscapes of nature for the landscapes of art. I

myself have another and kindred need--to substitute the feelings and longings of nature for those of art.<sup>13</sup>

Yeats' painful insights into his shortcomings as a potential Irish prophet resulted from the completion in 1888 of The Wanderings of Oisín, his unsuccessful first attempt at nationalistic mythmaking. In Yeats' version of the Oisín myth, the hero journeys through three regions during his quest: an island of eternal youth, the ultimate pastoral; an island of victories, where a chained lady is rescued and an unconquerable demon battled continuously; and an island of forgetfulness, where he does nothing but dream. After a century in each place, Oisín returns to Ireland, only to become instantly old. Yet, he remains strong in spirit. As he had earlier rejected temptations to escape life on both the pastoral and dream islands, he now also rejects St. Patrick's offer of religious repose (much as Yeats' "Heart" rejects Von Hügel many years later in "Vacillation"). Oisín is content to stay as he is, choosing heroic suffering and the inevitable defeat of mortality.

Yeats' own quest had been for a work embodying agony and bitterness which could touch all the strings of a race. But he knew he had failed. While his themes in Oisín are close enough to his prophetic goal, his style is still pre-Raphaelite, its soft glow and vague metaphors inappropriate to any real sense of tragedy. In a poem celebrating such

grand themes as heroism and sacrifice, Yeats lingers too long in describing the landscapes of art. While Oisín rejects lotos-eating, his creator seems to enjoy its elaboration:

For neither Death nor Change comes near us,  
And all listless hours fear us,  
And we fear no dawning morrow,  
Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.<sup>14</sup>

Yeats expressed his anguish over this problem in a third letter to Katharine Tynan, written just after completion of Oisín:

I have been I fear somewhat inarticulate! I had indeed something I had to say. Don't know that I have said it. All seems confused, incoherent, inarticulate. Yet this I know, I am no idle poetaster.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of 1888, then, Yeats knew where he wanted to go with his art and what themes it should contain. But he still could not control its expression. Two years of work on the kind of cultural myth encouraged by O'Leary had not brought the prophetic goal of 1886 any closer. Universal themes could hardly be focused in diffuse imagery. Therefore, learning to control his image-making process became crucial for Yeats. With what symbols and images could he convey eternal ideas and evoke an answering song in the heart of a reader? The right formula, he felt, could give him the power to unify a people.



Yeats' desire for control in his art was intimately related to his need for "self-possession." He thought that "heroic self-possession"<sup>16</sup> like Hamlet's would lead to the strength and confidence he needed to write prophetically. As he later expressed it, "I wished to become self-possessed, to be able to play with hostile minds as Hamlet played, to look in the lion's face . . . with unquivering eyelash."<sup>17</sup> Yeats even trained himself to endure strange social situations "for schooling sake."<sup>18</sup> As he learned to calm and control himself through speaking, naturally he sought similar power over his creative faculties through the written word. Surely, Yeats thought, heroic self-possession in a frightening world could translate to an ability to write on heroic themes with stirring yet coherent images. And where better to learn ultimate control of self and art than through organized occult studies?

Theosophy first attracted Yeats' attention. His Dublin Hermetic Society was quasi-theosophist, yet was only a group of dilettantes. But upon his family's move to London in 1887, Yeats came under the spell of Madame Blavatsky's personality and quickly joined her lodge.<sup>19</sup> She distrusted magic and spiritualism, preferring abstract tradition to occult phenomena (once scolding Yeats for attending a séance with Katharine Tynan, where he lost control of himself<sup>20</sup>). Through Madame Blavatsky's books, Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine, Yeats was introduced to the doctrine of correspondences, a

hierarchical cosmology, and the idea of universal opposition and flux. Yeats appreciated these vital concepts but desired above all to practice magic, to invoke and test occult phenomena. In 1888 Madame Blavatsky relented, allowing Yeats and others to study and practice in a new, elite Esoteric Section. Here he learned a thorough system of correspondences and symbols, and studied Emanuel Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme. Some experiments were performed (such as trying to invoke the ghost of a flower), but Yeats was so persistent in pushing for more that he was asked to resign in 1890. His reply to the official who made the request reveals his oft-forgotten practical side: "By teaching an abstract system without experiment or evidence you are making your pupils dogmatic and you are taking them out of life."<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately for Yeats, a few months before this episode he had already joined the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, an order placing great emphasis on ritual and magical practice.<sup>22</sup> Members were encouraged to seek power over the material world and mental processes. A fusion of hermetic, cabalistic, and Rosicrucian beliefs, the Golden Dawn shared most of the assumptions about the universe Yeats had learned from theosophy. And, as always, the ultimate mystical goal of unity with the Absolute was a given. But in the Golden Dawn the individual mattered more than in theosophy. Through study and practice one could advance, grade by grade, up the Sephirothic ladder, towards perfection. The individual

dictated his own ascent. Only at the end would he be subsumed in the Absolute. Until that glorious moment, the initiate was self-controlling, his individuality a vital part of the process. Yeats therefore believed he had found the perfect school to discipline himself and his art. As he said much later, he was "shaped and isolated" by the order, "being at a most receptive age."<sup>23</sup> More importantly, he was incited to "imaginative action."<sup>24</sup>

Yeats found support for his needs from the beginning. As part of the Golden Dawn's neophyte ritual, he heard the injunction, "Fear is failure, so be thou without fear . . . for he who trembles at the Flame and the Flood and at the Shadows of the Air hath no part in God."<sup>25</sup> Here was strong schooling indeed for one aspiring to self-possession. And in the knowledge lectures that came after each initiation ritual, Yeats learned to invoke higher beings through a pentagram ritual, symbolizing the power of spirit over matter.<sup>26</sup> After the 3=8 ritual he learned that thought control is the essential element in magical power, and was then ordered to consciously control his emotions.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the knowledge lectures Yeats was taught to harmonize his being, to find equilibrium.

In 1893 Yeats became an adept through the 5=6 or Adeptus Minor ritual,<sup>28</sup> an elaborate and beautiful Rosicrucian ceremony containing elements that would later be part of his tragic perspective. For instance, after being literally

bound to the Cross of Suffering, Yeats heard that "the Symbol of Suffering is the symbol of strength,"<sup>29</sup> reinforcing his earlier insight in "Clarence Mangan" that agony is the soil for great poetry, and that only great men can write it. Later in the ritual he took an oath, "I accept the Bonds of Suffering and Self-Sacrifice,"<sup>30</sup> which would become for him the virtual credo of the prophetic artist, who suffers and sacrifices in unifying his race. And, near the end of the ceremony, Yeats was told to "comprehend that the evil helpeth forward the Good,"<sup>31</sup> an idea essential to his tragic view (especially vivid in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop").

Much in these Golden Dawn rituals and lectures "shaped" Yeats, reinforcing thoughts and intuitions he had already experienced, giving him others, and opening up a wonderful new quarry for symbols. But one thing influenced him most-- a form of meditation called "skrying."<sup>32</sup> In the early draft of his autobiography, Yeats says he learned this method from MacGregor Mathers, co-founder and leader of the Golden Dawn, and that it "has perhaps been the intellectual chief influence on my life up to perhaps my fortieth year."<sup>33</sup> Essentially, skrying was the evocation of images through meditation upon specific symbols. Yeats' first experience with it always remained vivid in his mind:

. . . I was made to look at a coloured geometric form and then, closing my eyes, see it again in the mind's eye. I was then shown how to allow

my reveries to drift, following the suggestion of the symbol. I saw a desert, and a gigantic Negro raising up his head and shoulders among great stones. There was nothing in the symbol, so far as I could judge, to have called up the result--if it was association of ideas, they were subtle and subconscious.<sup>34</sup>

In rewriting this passage later, Yeats emphasized that he could not control the flow of images and that Mathers told him a mental picture in Mathers' mind would have been enough to trigger Yeats' vision.<sup>35</sup> These two things--the meditator as passive receptor of images and the possibility of one mind projecting a symbol into another mind, thus controlling that mind's imagery--were to be of great interest to Yeats throughout the nineties, for he constantly speculated on the eternal sources of the meditation process.

Yeats soon learned to transmit symbols himself. experimenting with others, he found that "it was enough to give their visions what direction I would if I myself called up the symbol to the mind's eye. My mind would direct theirs directly."<sup>36</sup> He could cause most to "pass into trance and see what I called up as vividly as ever with the eye of the body."<sup>37</sup> And he had a power he was not even aware of at the time: "Looking back now I recognize that these visions often repeated to me my own thoughts. . . ."<sup>38</sup> Even without consciousness of that fact, Yeats in the early nineties knew he

had found a tool of enormous significance. Not only could he still his own mind through skrying--achieving the self-control he had long sought--but now control over others was possible as well, a heady prospect for a naturally shy man and aspiring prophetic poet.

By constant experimentation Yeats refined his powers. His uncle, the eccentric mystic George Pollexfen, was a major collaborator. Yeats would walk along the seashore and successfully send mental symbols to Uncle George walking on a cliff or sandhill, evoking in him "the appropriate vision."<sup>39</sup> And Mary Battle, Pollexfen's "second-sighted" servant, often "echoed" their vision while sleeping.<sup>40</sup> But Maud Gonne received most of his attention: "We worked much with symbols, and she would pass at once into semi-trance and see all very distinctly. I was always seeking to bring her mind by their means into closer union with the soul. . . ."<sup>41</sup> Of course, he was interested in more than experimentation with Maud. Through magic Yeats assumed he could accomplish what so far had eluded him--turn her need of him into love:

She had come [to] have need of me, as it seemed, and I had no doubt that need would become love, that it was already coming so. I had even as I watched her a sense of cruelty, as though I were a hunter taking captive some beautiful wild creature.<sup>42</sup>

Such was Yeats' intensity regarding Maud that he believed he once went to her through astral projection. She had written him that he twice appeared to her one night in Dublin, then quickly disappeared. As it turned out, Yeats had been talking about her to Arthur Symons in London at the time.<sup>43</sup> What else was one to think?

But the strangest episode with Maud occurred in the late nineties, just days after she had explained to Yeats that she was "necessary" to Lucien Millevoye, her French lover, and could not leave him.<sup>44</sup> Their collective vision redefined unrequited love:

. . . we were sitting together when she said, "I hear a voice crying, 'You are about to receive the initiation of the spear.'" We became silent; a double vision unfolded itself. . . . She thought herself a great stone statue through which passed flame, and I felt myself becoming flame and mounting up through and looking out of the eyes of a great stone Minerva.<sup>45</sup>

The artistic implications of both sending and receiving symbols were considerable. Through meditation Yeats began evoking multiple images, with tangible results: "I allowed my mind to drift from image to image, and these images began to affect my writing, making it more sensuous and more vivid."<sup>46</sup> And the power of projecting symbols, already demonstrated to his satisfaction in magical exercises, caused Yeats to reflect

on the next logical step: the long sought-after possibility of uniting an entire nation through poetic images. What he would later call "Unity of Image" began to fascinate him:

Seeing that a vision could divide itself in divers complementary portions, might not the thought of philosopher or poet or mathematician depend at every moment of its progress upon some complementary thought in minds perhaps at a great distance? Is there nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another. . . . Was not a nation . . . bound together by this interchange among streams or shadows; that Unity of Image, which I sought in national literature, being but an originating symbol?<sup>47</sup>

But the transposition of magical evocation to poetic image-making was to bedevil Yeats throughout the decade. Finding his bearings amid the images streaming into his mind was essential. Passive reception of images was hardly conducive to heroic self-possession and artistic control. Yeats could send a triggering symbol to another mind but could not control the influx of answering imagery in even his own mind. This problem led him to speculate endlessly on the creative process, in particular the interchange between one's mind and the supernatural. Understanding the source of imagination might lead him to some control of image influx. But the more



Yeats wrote on the subject, the more his emphasis shifted from the human scale to the Absolute. As he started making little myths to explain imagination, he began thinking that symbols have inherent power, even volition. The prophetic mission of communicating essences became lost in a fascination with essences per se. A corresponding vagueness in Yeats' prose style hurt his cogency, and his poetry remained soft and insubstantial, as his early pre-Raphaelitism evolved into a symbolism derived from occult rituals and related French Symbolist models. Yet, once Yeats found his way out of this miasma, he would adapt the framework behind his speculations to his new tragic perspective. And, less directly, his failure to produce communicable imagery from occult methods would help him find what would work as he began writing essays on tragedy.

Yeats first discussed the imaginative process in the commentary to volume I of his (and Edwin Ellis') Blake edition, completed in 1892.<sup>48</sup> In the section called "The Necessity of Symbolism," he in fact strays far from the mind of William Blake in favor of his own elaborate speculations. To begin with, Yeats declares that the "first postulate of all mystics" is the complete difference between the natural and the supernatural (or mental) realms.<sup>49</sup> He goes on to discuss the hierarchy of the creative process. Natural observations and sensations, it seems, have no real existence outside their symbolic function of informing "the intellectual nature" about

itself.<sup>50</sup> And on an eternal scale the same relationship exists, because the entire universe is but the symbol of the "infinite thought" emanating from the "universal mood we name God."<sup>51</sup> This central mood is also the "poetic genius" that "creates all by affinity."<sup>52</sup> The order of descent is a universal triad in mysticism: "First a bodiless mood, and then a surging thought, and last a thing, and corresponds to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>53</sup> Yeats then mentions analogous triads in Swedenborg, cabalism, and theosophy.

Yeats also speaks of the two poles of the mind in "The Necessity of Symbolism." In the personal mode, consciousness is bound down "as to a fiery centre," while in the impersonal phase "we become vehicles for the universal thought and merge in the universal mood."<sup>54</sup> Consequently, "A reaction of God against man and man against God . . . goes on continually."<sup>55</sup> The genius within man is an impatient lawbreaker, only attaining freedom and peace when it becomes one with the poetic genius or universal mood described earlier. But now comes the usual Yeatsian proviso: the human genius achieves this state without surrendering its nature. Instead, it expands until it "contains that which is the essence of all."<sup>56</sup> Now man sees everything "as with the eyes of God."<sup>57</sup>

Several ideas in this commentary are central to Yeats' beliefs during the nineties or beyond. The "moods" are discussed at length, having also appeared in an article in 1892, where Yeats calls fairies "the lesser spiritual moods" of the

"universal mind."<sup>58</sup> He mentions the moods in many writings at this time, almost to the point of obsession. These ubiquitous entities serve as God and all the angels,<sup>59</sup> as well as fairies and human emotions. Another vital concept is the two poles of the mind, which is the earliest prototype of Yeats' subjective-objective / antithetical-primary division in A Vision.<sup>60</sup> At this time, though, the impersonal pole seems preferable to him, possibly because it parallels the ideal of the magical adept, even including the Golden Dawn's encouragement of self-possession. Perhaps this phase is not so impersonal after all, for Yeats in this commentary never conceives of human genius subsumed by universal thought--a remarkable affirmation of individuality in such a cosmic setting. Thus, the personal pole never actually changes into its opposite as in A Vision; in the nineties he would have it both ways. Finally, the mention of a struggle between God and man previews Yeats' central statement about a war between the spiritual and natural orders in the dedication to The Secret Rose in 1897,<sup>61</sup> a statement that relates closely to his speculations on the imaginative process.

The idea of a struggle between orders must be understood in its proper context as a myth of imagination, Yeats' way of making sense of his evocation experiences. To use a favorite Yeatsian image, it is more a dance than a war, involving cooperation more than conflict, even verging on cosmic symbiosis. For example, in one version of the myth

the artist receives images from the moods or disembodied spirits, who in turn achieve at least tentative form as angels or fairies. A short piece in The Celtic Twilight, written in 1892, presents the earliest form of this scenario:

Images form themselves in our minds perpetually as if they were reflected in some pool. . . . even our educated people pass without great difficulty into the condition of quiet that is the condition of vision. We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be,<sup>62</sup> their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.<sup>63</sup>

In an article the same year, Yeats specifically relates fairies to those "beings," saying that, as "the lesser spiritual moods," they can only "appear in forms borrowed from our limited consciousness."<sup>64</sup>

Several variations of imagination as incarnation appear during the nineties. One, in a manuscript of the unpublished novel The Speckled Bird, provides a stronger link between hovering beings and art:

It is certain that this story . . . has behind it . . . beings and powers who shape it in the minds of poets and artists for the great myths, are images cast upon our minds, from the wars and loves of the beings and powers who have built up

all things, like the shadows cast upon the fields  
by the high clouds.<sup>65</sup>

But the boldest variation appears in Rosa Alchemica (1897),  
in a passage effusive with Paterisms:

. . . the divine powers would only appear in  
beautiful shapes, which are but, as it were, shapes  
trembling out of existence, folding up into a  
timeless ecstasy. . . . The bodiless souls who  
descended into these forms were what men called  
the moods; and worked all great changes in the  
world; for just as the magician or the artist could  
call them when he would, so they could call out of  
the mind of the magician or artist . . . what shape  
they would, and through its voice and its gestures  
pour themselves out upon our world.<sup>66</sup>

In this tale inspired by Golden Dawn ritual, Yeats speaks of  
artist and magician in the same breath, showing the role of  
his creative work at the time as a virtual handmaiden of  
magic--as the very existence of Rosa Alchemica also shows.<sup>67</sup>  
And certainly his obsession with the Absolute, increasing  
since he first became entranced by skrying and urgently  
wished to understand it, nears its crest here. Yeats' ex-  
pression of the double link between the orders is especially  
vivid, for the moods are now capable of embodiment as any-  
thing--words and gestures as well as fairies and angels. The  
moods energize the human imagination and are given form by

it, in effect siring themselves.

A more stylized version of the imagination myth merges the orders without a hint of spirits seeking embodiment. Here the theme is that man must meet the divine halfway by first perfecting himself; only then does a corresponding descent of pure power take place. In 1896, for instance, Yeats writes of how man acquires "spiritual influence" for art: "He must go on perfecting earthly power and perception until they are so subtilised that divine power and divine perception descend to meet them, and the song of earth and the song of heaven mingle together."<sup>68</sup> In 1901, in an impassioned defense of magical tradition for other Golden Dawn members, Yeats sums up the process in terms of an adept's ascent through the Sephirotic grades: "The passing by their means from one Degree to another is an evocation of the Supreme Life."<sup>69</sup> It is "a double link . . . not merely an ascent . . . but a descent that is symbolised by the Lightning Flash among the sacred leaves. . . ."<sup>70</sup> With some changes of emphasis and tone, this abstract version of the myth would become the decisive moment of tragedy in Yeats' later theory. The roots of his tragic perspective thus run very deep in occult practice and the aesthetic speculation it inspired.

One further concept extends Yeats' myth of creativity--the "great memory" (later called Anima Mundi). Although a natural outgrowth of cosmological speculations in his Blake

commentary and very much a part of the Platonic-Neo-Platonic tradition underpinning much mysticism, Yeats' idea of an image reservoir forming a racial memory does not appear until 1900, in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry."<sup>71</sup> By positing the great memory, Yeats avoids animated spirits and heavenly lightning bolts, or any other metaphors for the creative mechanism, instead settling for the serenity of a more detached Platonism:

Any one who has any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning . . . one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has any one, who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day, in some old book or on some old monument, a strange and intricate image that had floated up before him, and to grow dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but part of some great Memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep, but a little foam upon the deep.<sup>72</sup>

Yeats elaborates on this idea in "Magic" (1901), a long essay that sums up a decade of occult investigation. The great memory becomes the terminus of a detailed discussion in which he presents a theory followed by evidence, in the manner of a scientific paper. The opening statement (in

remarkably sober prose) is a distillation of Yeats' evocation practices and mythic speculations:

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed. . . .<sup>73</sup>

Yeats then presents his striking theory, consisting of three doctrines that he believes underlie almost all magical practices:

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.<sup>74</sup>

The first doctrine requires some explanation. The great mind derives from the "universal thought" described in the Blake commentary, the second part of the mystical triad (also called the first emanation of the "universal mood" or God--see p. 29). Yeats' later idea of the Daimon has much the same function. And the belief that minds can flow together comes from his



early experiments with skrying, when Yeats and others exchanged symbols mentally. After many more experiments and much reflection, he had concluded that symbols are of divine origin. As Yeats says later in "Magic," "It was long before I . . . would admit an inherent power in symbols, for it long seemed to me that one could account for everything by the power of one imagination over another, or by telepathy. . . ."75 Finally, one phrase in the first doctrine--"create or reveal a single mind"--causes some confusion, for it seems to leave the door open to a psychological interpretation, belying the reason for the entire essay. But this is just another instance of Yeats' usual caution in print. An article he wrote in 1899 clarifies the context of this doctrine: "A change in thought in the world makes us understand that we are not walled up within our immediate senses, but bound one to another and to some greater life, by a secret communion of thought and emotion. . . ."76 Certainly Yeats' later idea of tragedy as a unifying "art of the flood" grew out of this belief in fluid minds.

Most of "Magic" presents the "data" that led Yeats to more or less inductive conclusions. Mathers, unnamed, is called "the evoker of spirits."<sup>77</sup> Results of the evocation method he taught Yeats are offered: volitional images, symbol projection and group visions, and astral projection. Yeats even hints coyly of stranger examples of "these breakings forth, these loosening of the deep," in his occult diary, but

he will not reveal them.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, Yeats reflects on the imaginative process, which, in its most advanced mythic form, amounts to tapping the great memory:

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers. Whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the magician and the artist . . . they act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. 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. . . .<sup>79</sup>

The great memory enriches the natural order. It brings the human mind to fruition by enlarging and amplifying the work of the great mind (which should be called the great imagination). By backing up one step from spirits knocking on the doors of human consciousness to a way-station of the Absolute, Yeats avoids overtones of a war between the orders. Harmony reigns in this more dignified version of the imagination myth.

"Magic" is the theoretical capstone of what might be called Yeats' "old testament" period, in which his mind is awed by the Absolute and his aesthetic dedicated to revealing cosmic contours and processes. Within two years of 1901 his "new testament" period would begin, in which the Absolute is

revealed indirectly, through the natural order, and the human scale is celebrated. But two more subjects must be examined before this transition in perspectives can be grasped. The ancillary influence (through the Rhymers' Club and Arthur Symons) of Walter Pater and French Symbolism must be assessed. And, finally, Yeats' Celtic order deserves special consideration, for the failure of this grand scheme to unify Ireland through magic and art was instrumental in changing his direction.

This chapter has stressed the role of occult ideas and practices in the growth of Yeats' view of reality and his belief in the necessity of symbolism to express that reality.<sup>80</sup> However, in his usual quest to find support for his most esoteric thoughts, Yeats also embraced the artistic Zeitgeist: related ideas usually grouped under the rubric "aestheticism" (or "decadence," in honor of its more egregious forms). As the name implies, this "movement" assumed that art is the greatest good, that it must be nourished in a cultural hot-house, outside normal life, and, most important, that it must be expressed through emotional, not logical states. All of these factors closely supported Yeats' occult beliefs, as well as some of his lifelong assumptions about art.

Aestheticism began in the 1850's with the French "Parnassian" poets, led by Théophile Gautier, with his idea of "art for art's sake," and Charles Baudelaire, chief precursor of the generation of "Symbolists," the next (and larger) wave

of aesthetes. The main Symbolist poets were Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, with Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and, later, the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck applying these ideas to drama. In England aestheticism largely grew out of native pre-Raphaelite soil,<sup>81</sup> but was given inspiration and form by the French movement. The English school blossomed in the eighties, featuring the ideas of Pater and the personality and manner of Oscar Wilde. Yeats was exposed to both the French and English branches, finding in each support (either in style or substance) for his esoteric themes.

Yeats became immersed in the doctrines and mood of aestheticism mainly through the Rhymers' Club, which he helped establish in London in 1891 after meeting "most of the poets of my generation."<sup>82</sup> Of the club's membership (which included Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Ernest Dowson), the two most influential for Yeats were Lionel Johnson and Arthur Symons. Through Johnson's poetry and personality he found the essence of Pater. And mostly through Symons' direct guidance he discovered the French, especially Villiers and Mallarmé.

The Rhymers embodied the assumptions of aestheticism. The lyric was their path to beauty, which could be achieved only by a refined emotion found exclusively in poems and books of the utmost sensitivity. Therefore, they "looked consciously to Pater" for their philosophy.<sup>83</sup> Of course,

only men of comparable sensibility could hope to appreciate such works and write additional ones. As Yeats said later, "Perhaps our form of lyric, our insistence upon emotion which has no relation to any public interest, gathered together, overwrought, unstable men. . . ." <sup>84</sup> Lionel Johnson fit this description perfectly. A very small man, he had "the delicate strong features . . . of a Greek athlete in the British Museum," features which, Yeats says, "seemed symbolic of the austere nobility of his verse." <sup>85</sup> Johnson preferred his large library to life, and, when drinking, "would become more ascetic, more contemptuous of all that we call human life." <sup>86</sup> His favorite phrase was "life is ritual," expressing "something that was in some degree in all our thoughts," <sup>87</sup> and he referred to the proper lyric as "marmorean." <sup>88</sup> To Yeats, Johnson was the Paterian ideal embodied: ". . . wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake. . . ." <sup>89</sup>

The direct influence of Pater's thought on Yeats is more difficult to assess, because much of what he said Yeats had already found elsewhere. Harold Bloom, in his usual apodictic manner, is certain that Pater is one of the chief "haunters" of Yeats' poetry and thought, along with Blake, Shelley, Balzac, and Nietzsche. <sup>90</sup> In particular, Bloom thinks that the "lonely ecstasy of creative joy" in Yeats' work is nothing more than Pater's "privileged moment." <sup>91</sup> But the germ of Yeats' moment probably came from his father <sup>92</sup>

(as do several of his key ideas to be discussed in the next chapter), and evolved through several influences, of which the immediacy of skrying and Golden Dawn ritual had more impact than Pater's abstract thoughts. In any event, Yeats grew disenchanted with Pater's (and the Rhymers') insistence on passionate aesthetic experience without regard to either the supernatural or natural order. By 1892 he was already disturbed by the effect of such a viewpoint on verse: "Poetry is an end in itself; it has nothing to do with thought, nothing to do with philosophy, nothing to do with life, nothing to do with anything but the music of cadence, and beauty of phrase."<sup>93</sup> Yeats later indicted Pater's viewpoint in the disasters of Johnson and some other Rhymers: "It taught us to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm."<sup>94</sup> But Yeats' strongest criticism comes in a diary entry in 1909, when he was in the affirmative mood of his tragic perspective: "Surely the ideal of culture expressed by Pater can only create feminine souls. The soul becomes a mirror not a brazier."<sup>95</sup>

Pater's style had a much greater impact on Yeats than his ideas. Pater's prose is infamous for its ultra-refinement and balanced cadences--the love of language for its own sake. As Frank Tuohy dryly remarks, he chose "to write English as though it were a dead language."<sup>96</sup> Tuohy believes that Yeats' prose up to 1893 is straightforward, but that

"after the infection of Lionel Johnson and Pater, pretentiousness creeps in," detaching language from content.<sup>97</sup> Actually, the pretense had been there awhile. Pater only helped worsen the problem, until, in *Rosa Alchemica*, Yeats almost out-Paters Pater:

As I thought of these things, I drew aside the curtains and looked out in the darkness, and it seemed to my troubled fancy that all those little points of light filling the sky were the furnaces of innumerable divine alchemists, who labour continually, turning lead into gold, weariness into ecstasy, bodies into souls, the darkness into God; and at their perfect labour my mortality grew heavy, and I cried out, as so many dreams and men of letters in our age have cried, for the birth of that elaborate spiritual beauty which could alone uplift souls weighted with so many dreams.<sup>98</sup>

Bloom thinks that Yeats was always in Pater's school as a prose writer.<sup>99</sup> That is not quite true, though Yeats would always write more elaborately for publication than in letters or journals. With the greater audacity of his tragic view, Yeats would begin to enliven his prose style. While it remained verbose, it was no longer soporific.

Yeats' connection to Pater was not as deep as his link to the French Symbolists, for their fascination with symbols paralleled his own. Symons virtually spoon-fed these works

to him, since Yeats read French poorly. Yet Symons knew that he could teach Yeats little about symbolism per se. As he told Yeats in his dedication to The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899), "You have seen me gradually finding my way . . . in that direction which has always been to you your natural direction."<sup>100</sup> The French showed Yeats provocative ways of using the literary symbol, offering a possible end to his search for a literary equivalent to the powerful occult symbol. Whether a geometric occult symbol or a more sensual poetic one was used, the goal was the same--to evoke for others a vision of unseen reality. In "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900) Yeats equates occult evocation and symbolic art:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art. . . .<sup>101</sup>



Symons and the French thus offered possible direction for a pre-existing, pervasive symbolic bent in Yeats. To place Yeats in the main line of the Symbolistes, as Edmund Wilson and C. M. Bowra have, is at best expedient and at worst simplistic.<sup>102</sup> Yeats himself once cleared up the matter in a letter to his friend Bowra:

I don't think I was really much influenced by French Symbolists. My development was different, but that development was of such a nature that I felt I could not explain it, or even that it might make everyone hostile. . . . My symbolism came from actual experiments in vision, made by my friends or myself, in the society which called itself the Hermetic Students, and continually talked over by myself and my friends. I felt that these investigations were private, and felt also, and indeed still feel, that one can only explain oneself if one draws one's illustrations from accepted schools of thought.<sup>103</sup>

How much influence individual French Symbolists had on Yeats is hard to tell, especially with the lyric poets. Mallarmé and Verlaine, for instance, wrote lyrics almost defying translation. Yet, Yeats knew them only through Symons' translations, which Symons read to Yeats.<sup>104</sup> The equation of influence, then, must also include the translator. In his Autobiography Yeats mentions only Mallarmé as

a vague influence: "I think that those [translations] from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the later poems of The Wind Among the Reeds, to The Shadowy Waters. . . ."105

Of all the French, the dramatist Villiers de l'Isle-Adam undoubtedly had the greatest impact on Yeats.<sup>106</sup> In Axël Yeats found the fusion of occult and aesthetic themes he had sought in his own work. With his weak French he struggled through the published play, apparently without Symons' help. Because of this difficulty, Yeats often mistook opacity for profundity: "Certain passages had an exaggerated importance, while all remained so obscure that I could without much effort imagine that here at last was the Sacred Book I longed for."<sup>107</sup> Then, in 1894, he saw Axël performed in Paris, with Maud Gonne at his side.<sup>108</sup> This must have been one of the highlights of his life. Seeing Axël and Sara choose death instead of spoiling their perfect spiritual love with mere physical passion must have left Yeats reeling in vicarious ecstasy. Although these characters represent ideals more than actual people, no doubt he identified with Axël. Like Villiers' hero, Yeats had studied under a Rosicrucian master, and had often fancied himself a remote hero of ideals. But while Axël chooses not to tarnish perfection with physical love, Yeats had no choice with Maud--his love was limited to the spiritual plane from the start. Yet, he must have found comfort in the illusion that a mystical marriage is better

than a palpable one. Yeats' newspaper review the next day was breathless: "The infinite alone is worth attaining, and the infinite is the possession of the dead. Such appears the moral."<sup>109</sup> And in this context Yeats never tired of repeating Villiers' line, "As for living, our servants will do that for us."<sup>110</sup> Perhaps Joseph Hone should have the final word on Villiers' influence on Yeats: "Axël became Yeats' guide and beacon in his theory and practice of a dramatic art where symbol replaces character, events are allegories and words keep more than half their secrets to themselves."<sup>111</sup>

Certainly Villiers, more than Mallarmé, Pater, or anyone else at the time, provided the model for the first published version of The Shadowy Waters in 1900, a dramatic work that just as surely sums up the creative Yeats of the time as "Magic" does the theoretical Yeats. The Shadowy Waters combines symbols from occult studies, literary tradition, and Irish myth into a bewildering pastiche. As Richard Ellmann says, "One cannot turn a corner in it without finding them perched enigmatically in one's way."<sup>112</sup> Yeats apparently began thinking of it in 1883, finishing a first draft in 1885.<sup>113</sup> The impact of Axël caused extensive revisions in 1894, followed by additional changes in 1896-97 and 1899, reflecting his personal experiences and his work in the Celtic order. Thus, the first edition of The Shadowy Waters represents the influences of Yeats' entire adult life:

the occult, aestheticism, the Romantic tradition, nationalism, and personal experiences. It was his first attempt at prophetic, unifying art since The Wanderings of Oisín. But its failure to communicate universality was even greater than the earlier work's, a distressing sign of the distance Yeats had strayed from his prophetic goal of 1886-87.

The reasons for the failure of The Shadowy Waters to achieve the status of a sacred book are plain enough. First, Yeats overuses symbols to the point of hubris. Most have no dramatic function. Some are simply gratuitous, ornamental. Many are too obscure for any audience save adepts or symbolists. And there are so many symbols that no audience, however expert, can keep track of all of them. Consider the setting alone. The sea has a multitude of traditional meanings, including mystery and infinity.<sup>114</sup> The ship has almost as many. And the ship's sails display three rows of hounds (yes, hounds)--dark ones, red ones, and white ones with red ears, representing to Ellmann the dialectic of "Forgael's death-wish, Dectora's life-wish, and their fusion in 'some mysterious transformation of the flesh.'"<sup>115</sup> Mist and moonlight are also present, with the latter always evocative for Yeats. Forgae and Dectora wear a lily and a rose, respectively, on their breasts, representing (again, to Ellmann) "pure transcendence and passionate embodiment."<sup>116</sup> Finally, the hero has a harp (obviously symbolizing the imagination) given to him by a forest fool. Not a word has been spoken

yet, and already the play is swarming with symbols.

Once the words come, a reader or audience is overwhelmed by further symbols:

Edaine came out of Midher's hill and lay  
Beside young Aengus in his tower of glass,  
Where time is drowned in odour-laden winds  
And druid moons, and murmuring of boughs,  
And sleepy boughs, and boughs where apples made  
Of opal and ruby and pale chrysolite  
Awake unsleeping fires. . . .<sup>117</sup>

Yeats' dreamy language seems even more preposterous than in his early pre-Raphaelite poems. The oft-mentioned boughs seem ready to break under the weight of overripe images. A decade of skrying and aestheticism had further separated his language and content.

The Shadowy Waters also contains a glaring dramatic weakness--all speakers sound alike. Yeats wanted this uniformity for the cumulative lyrical intensity it provided, for what Leonard Nathan calls "the mood that Yeats believed belonged to spiritual reality."<sup>118</sup> Axël had shown him how to create symbolic characters that speak in a common visionary tongue. But in later versions of the play Yeats tried to differentiate his characters more, as he began to value concreteness as a vehicle for spiritual themes.

The most obvious structural problem of the 1900 version is the confused ending. Axël may have been Yeats' chief

model for structuring an occult-symbolist drama, but he utterly failed to create as satisfying an ending. With the passionate deaths of his lovers, Villiers left no doubts of his preference for the infinite. Yeats, on the other hand, settles for passionate ambiguity in his finale. After debating with Dectora on the relative merits of eternal and terrestrial love, Forgael pulls away from her. Eager for infinity, he even tries to interest her in Aibric, his ship-mate. Suddenly she says, "I will follow you / Living or dying."<sup>119</sup> But Forgael will have none of her. Dectora then cuts their ship adrift from the capture ship, embraces him, and rhapsodizes their exit:

Bend lower, O king,  
 O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,  
 O silver fish that my two hands have taken  
 Out of a running stream, O morning star  
 Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn  
 Upon the misty border of the wood,--  
 Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,  
 For we will gaze upon this world no longer.<sup>120</sup>

And the harp begins to play by itself. Is this a Liebestod as in Axël? Or do the lovers sail into eternity with their bodies intact? Yeats' equivocation shows that, however much he desired the Absolute as a mystical symbolist, another part of him could not imagine the loss of the senses, the artist's antennae. Within three years this part of Yeats

would become ascendent and begin embracing experience, reshaping his art along the prophetic lines he had desired in the eighties, with "foundations fixed in agony" (see pp. 16-17).

The failure of the symbolist method in The Shadowy Waters to clearly convey eternal truths was part of Yeats' larger failure to integrate art and the occult in an order of Celtic mysteries, his bold prophetic crusade of 1896-1902. The Irish literary movement was tied to this strange enterprise, in which Yeats sought the Unity of Image needed to bind Ireland into a spiritual communion. Theosophical and Golden Dawn doctrine, magical ritual and evocation, druidism, and a tincture of Christianity were to be united in a new system of rites, exercises, and literature.

When Yeats first envisioned an Irish order is unclear. Ellmann thinks it may have first entered his mind in 1891, when he thought of starting with Maud Gonne "a secret spiritual propaganda for the most profound minds" in Ireland.<sup>121</sup> Instead, Yeats opted for the formation of literary societies, figuring they would affect events more directly. Ultimately this led to his founding of the National Literary Society (with John O'Leary's aid) on May 24, 1892, to publicize Irish folklore, myths, and literature.<sup>122</sup> This popular movement was to pave the way for Yeats' larger goal: the founding of an Irish theatre.<sup>123</sup> He had just finished his first play, The Countess Cathleen, and "thought of a travelling company

to visit our country branches."<sup>124</sup> The fervor of Yeats' national literary dream (structured, as always, by occult principles) is expressed at the end of The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics (1892), in an "Apologia addressed to Ireland in the coming days":

Know that I would accounted be  
 True brother of that company  
 Who sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong,  
 Ballad and story, rann and song;  
 . . . . .  
 Nor may I less be counted one  
 With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,  
 Because to him who ponders well  
 My rhymes more than their rhyming tell  
 Of the dim wisdoms old and deep,  
 That God gives unto man in sleep.  
 For round my table go  
 The magical powers to and fro.  
 In flood and fire and clay and wind,  
 They huddle from man's pondering mind,  
 Yet he who treads in austere ways  
 May surely meet their ancient gaze.  
 Man ever journeys on with them  
 After the red rose bordered hem.  
 Ah, fairies, dancing under the moon,  
 A druid land, a druid tune!<sup>125</sup>



Yeats delivered a more practical version of these sentiments, more in line with his prophetic goal of the eighties, in an essay of the same year. Here he spells out the role of dancing fairies and druid tunes in the combined literary and spiritual revitalization of Ireland:

We have behind us in the past the most moving legends and a history full of lofty passions. If we can but take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems, and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie, we may deliver that great new utterance for which the world is waiting.<sup>126</sup>

As Yeats' absorption in magical evocation and ritual, Irish lore and druidism, and nationalistic literature deepened in the next three years, the vague dream of a Celtic mystery order became more tangible in his mind. Then, in the spring of 1895, while visiting Dr. Douglas Hyde in Roscommon, he found the place to make his dream come true: Castle Rock in Lough Key.<sup>127</sup> This small island was entirely covered by a castle built by "some romantic man" about seventy or eighty years before.<sup>128</sup> The lake was surrounded by romantic wooded hills, and at one end was a stone platform "where meditative persons might pace to and fro."<sup>129</sup> Here Yeats could make an "Irish Eleusis or Samothrace . . . mystical rites--a ritual system of evocation and meditation--

to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty."<sup>130</sup> He meant to make this a holy spot for communication with those "invisible beings" he had so often described, and to "initiate young men and women in this worship, which would unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient world."<sup>131</sup> A "Castle of Heroes" would therefore be a reality.

The attempt to develop a coherent philosophy and suitable rituals for the order preoccupied (and ultimately frustrated) Yeats for at least six years (1896-1902). In the beginning Maud Gonne shared the work with him (one reason for the order existing was, of course, for Yeats to have a pretext to be near her). Mathers' evocation method was to be used--to avoid conscious deliberation.<sup>132</sup> Yeats had earlier found that, while he could not influence Maud's life, he could "dominate her inner being."<sup>133</sup> He once described their work together in a passage clearly showing Yeats' mixture of selfish and prophetic motives concerning the Irish mysteries:

I could therefore use her clairvoyance to produce forms that would arise from both minds. . . . There would be, as it were, a spiritual birth from the soul of a man and a woman. I knew that the incomprehensible life could select from our memories and . . . from the memory of the race itself; could realize of ourselves, beyond personal predilection; all it required, of symbol and myth. I believed

we were about to attain a revelation.

Maud Gonne entirely shared these ideas, and I did not doubt that in carrying them out I should win her for myself.<sup>134</sup>

With help from George Russell, Uncle George Pollexfen, William Sharp (and his alter ego, Fiona Macleod), and even MacGregor Mathers and his wife in Paris, Yeats and Maud painstakingly constructed rituals for the Celtic order.<sup>135</sup> Long lists of symbols were arranged into a fabric. Trees corresponded to cardinal points, and Irish gods and heroes were integrated about four talismans--sword, stone, spear, and cauldron.<sup>136</sup> In July of 1898 Yeats began an occult diary, which he kept until March 1901.<sup>137</sup> Many strange visions were recorded in it. For example, Pollexfen and Yeats often "journeyed," via the four talismans, to the realms of earth, fire, air, and water, where they saw various mythic figures. (In one vision Uncle George saw only the lower part of Aengus, while Yeats saw but his arm and shoulder.)<sup>138</sup>

Twelve initiation rituals survive: two each of the opening, stone, cauldron, sword, spear, and spirit.<sup>139</sup> Two examples show that Yeats' early desire for self-possession--the artist's need to remain conscious, distinctive, and balanced--remained a powerful impulse, even in mystical rites. In the initiation of the sword, for instance, Yeats is emphatic about the necessity of imperfection, foreshadowing the spirit of his tragic perspective:

The candidate's mind must become able to blend the two forces together, so as to create completeness, for without Aengus, when in the bower of glass, Etain was but a golden fly, Beauty without the Spiritual Intelligence. But still that union cannot be, still the eternal pursuit must go on, for life would cease to be life without it.<sup>140</sup>

And in the final initiation (spirit) Yeats stresses both unity (the normal occult goal) and distinctness--an attempt at complementarity. All members are to encircle the initiate, each holding a staff in his right hand while grasping his neighbor's wrist in his left. The staves must converge above the candidate's head. The first officer then celebrates unity (the circle) and variety (the staves): "All unite, yet each remains individual."<sup>141</sup>

This emphasis on the individual, stressed even more in the Celtic order than in the Golden Dawn, is not surprising, for the writer was to be the herald of the order's essence and thus the prime agent of Irish unity. All associated works, including Yeats', were "to have a secret symbolical relation to those mysteries."<sup>142</sup> After all, Yeats thought, "Should not religion hide within the work of art as God is within His world, and how can the interpreter do more than whisper?"<sup>143</sup> He hoped

that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set

before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols.<sup>144</sup>

The "De Burgh" manuscript of The Speckled Bird presents a more intriguing variation of this theme. In a fictional setting (here the mystical order is Welsh and English, and is concerned with the Grail myth), Yeats feels no constraints in describing the fruits of genius working through evocation:

. . . I am certain that a delight in making the rites of the myths, beautiful with designs and tapestries and perhaps with mystical songs, for harps and zithers, and the desire to express the innumerable and mystical or passionate stories, and images, that come to us in trances and in the dreams, will soon begin to make poems and pictures, and so soon as anybody with a little genius comes among us, trances and dreams will give him a strange intensity. Men will see in his pictures or in his poems . . . the fanaticism of the saints or of those that fling themselves upon spears.<sup>145</sup>

But poetic drama was to be the central manual of devotion for the Celtic order. The Irish Literary Theatre, forerunner of the Abbey Theatre, was created by Yeats and others in 1899 to present ritualized, symbolic drama in the spirit of the order. Although The Countess Cathleen (subtitled A Miracle

Play was the first production, the central play was to be The Shadowy Waters, once the necessary revisions were completed. By 1897 Yeats had already possessed a clear idea of what he wanted in a mystical theatre and the vital role of The Shadowy Waters in it:

My own theory of poetical or legendary drama is that it should have no realistic, or elaborate, but only a symbolic and decorative setting. A forest . . . should be represented by a forest pattern and not by a forest painting . . . an accompaniment not a reflection of the text. . . . The acting should have an equivalent distance to that of the play from common realities. The plays might be almost, in some cases, modern mystery plays. . . . My "Shadowy Waters" is magical and mystical beyond anything I have done. It goes but slowly however . . . I wish to make it a kind of grave ecstasy.<sup>146</sup>

The most important assumption of Yeats' Celtic order and its dramatic adjunct was the identity of artist and priest, a concept dating back at least to 1885 and the Dublin Hermetic Society (see p. 15). Describing the cultural evolution of drama in "The Theatre" (1901), Yeats leaves no doubt that the new Irish dramatist has a hieratical purpose:

In the first day, [drama] is the art of the people; and in the second day, like the dramas acted of old

times in the hidden places of temples, it is the preparation of a priesthood. It may be . . . that this priesthood will spread their religion everywhere, and make their Art the Art of the people.<sup>147</sup>

In "Ireland and the Arts" (1901) he is downright emphatic about this link:

We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must . . . if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and fervor of a priesthood. . . . We must baptize as well as preach.<sup>148</sup>

In this role the poet-dramatist evokes, through symbols, the divine afflatus and shapes the perceptions of a people as surely as a druid or Catholic priest (recall James Joyce's description of a priest's power in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man). Yeats' conception of this power is often startling; in "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1898) it borders on astounding:

Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has its expression, in colour or in sound, or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians . . . are continually making and unmaking mankind.<sup>149</sup>

The artist's need to create form instead of transcending it would soon be part of Yeats' tragic theory and, later still, the basis of the antithetical tincture in A Vision. But the degree of power the artist holds would be lessened. At end of century, however, Yeats was confident that the Celtic order and its artistic emanations would give him the full power described above, once the rituals were complete and The Shadowy Waters ready for performance.

But it was not to be. Yeats had misjudged the communication process whereby emotions "become perceptible." As discussed earlier (pp. 47-48), the clutter of symbols in The Shadowy Waters led more to the confusing than the making of mankind. And the failure of the Celtic order itself was due to a similar lack of control in developing magical rites. After years of effort and inflated hopes, Yeats gave up that task sometime in 1902. On January 13 he wrote Lady Augusta Gregory that he had "done a great deal of work" on the rites and had "sketched them all out in their entirety."<sup>150</sup> And then no more is heard of them. An honest appraisal had convinced Yeats that the labor was futile. As he later explained it, he had "plunged without a clue into a labyrinth of images," into unintelligibility.<sup>151</sup> Specifically, skrying had produced an uncontrollable chain reaction:

. . . now image called up image in an endless procession, and I could not always choose among them with any confidence; and when I did choose,



the image lost its intensity, or changed into some other image. . . . I was lost in that region a cabbalistic manuscript . . . had warned me of; astray upon the path of the Chameleon, upon Hodos Chameliontos.<sup>152</sup>

During his fourteen-year search for artistic control through occult wisdom after completing The Wanderings of Oisín, Yeats had lost track of the very reason for the quest: to learn how to articulate universal truths in understandable imagery. He had told Katharine Tynan in 1888 of his hope someday to write "poetry of insight and knowledge" through "the landscapes of nature" (see p. 17), which he had failed to do in Oisín, his first attempt to realize the prophetic goal of 1886-87. In fact, throughout the nineties nature was unreal to Yeats, a mere shadow cast by the Absolute. Thus, "the landscapes of art" still littered his poetry, made more fragrant by Pater and the French Symbolists. As he invoked moods, evoked images, and speculated upon essences, he increasingly forgot the needs of his audience. The search for the communicable elements of art--concrete imagery, palpable settings, recognizable speech--was lost in a fascination with the ends of art. Obsessed with the Absolute, Yeats still did not have the tools to reveal it. The Celtic order and The Shadowy Waters--his fondest hopes for a prophetic synthesis of all he had learned--were destroyed by a virtual locust swarm of inchoate images.

However, Yeats' early prophetic vision was still latent throughout this long, impalpable period. His inherent need for self-possession often surfaced, encouraged by Golden Dawn rituals and mind-control practice during skrying, not to mention the sexual fires that burned for Maud Gonne. And his equivocation in the ending of The Shadowy Waters and in Celtic order initiation rites showed his reluctance to quit the earth à la Axël, however tempted. Although preoccupied with magic and symbols during the nineties, Yeats could never be a thoroughgoing saint or aesthete. At core he was always the artist seeking guidance and support, not the magician masquerading as poet.

Yeats had forgotten that to touch all the strings of a race, a poet must be faithful to bitter and tragic things--the fabric of life (see p. 16). Somehow spiritual essences had to be channeled through the material order rather than matter raised to the spiritual order by the smudging of distinctions (including the artist's identity). New, concrete images--life images--were needed. Experience had to be confronted and harmonized, not transcended. Only then could imagery be both universal and understandable.

Early in the new century, pressed by the memory of failed projects and catalyzed by new experiences, Yeats would find the answer: through the structure of tragedy he could contain his unruly soul and call the Irish to glory.

## NOTES

Throughout this study all quotations from Yeats include his original spelling and punctuation, however eccentric. No "sic" interpolations are used.

<sup>1</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (1965; New York: Collier, 1971) 51. Hereafter cited as Autobiography.

<sup>2</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Island of Statues, in The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 669. Hereafter cited as Variorum Poems.

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Stolen Child," Variorum Poems 87.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York: Dutton, 1948) 41.

<sup>5</sup>Autobiography 60.

<sup>6</sup>Ellmann 46.

<sup>7</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson--1," in Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats, vol. I, ed. John P. Frayne (New York: Columbia UP, 1970) 81. Hereafter cited as UP I.

<sup>8</sup>Yeats, "Ferguson" 84. This metaphor is an extended version of one often used by Yeats' father, John Butler Yeats,

to describe Unity of Being. See, for example, Autobiography 128.

<sup>9</sup>Yeats, "Ferguson 87.

<sup>10</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Clarence Mangan," in UP I 118.

<sup>11</sup>Yeats, "Mangan" 118.

<sup>12</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955) 63. Hereafter cited as Letters.

<sup>13</sup>Letters 99.

<sup>14</sup>Variorum Poems 21.

<sup>15</sup>Letters 84.

<sup>16</sup>Autobiography 30.

<sup>17</sup>Autobiography 62.

<sup>18</sup>Autobiography 62.

<sup>19</sup>All facts in this paragraph are from Ellmann (ch. 5) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>20</sup>Autobiography 69-70.

<sup>21</sup>W. B. Yeats, Memoirs: Autobiography--First Draft: Journal, ed. Denis Donaghue (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 24. Hereafter cited as Memoirs.

<sup>22</sup>All facts in this paragraph are from Ellmann (ch. 7) and Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search

for Reality (New York: Macmillan, 1954) ch. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Autobiography 124.

<sup>24</sup>Autobiography 124.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Moore 136. Yeats adapted these words to poetry in "To his Heart, bidding it have no Fear" (1896).

<sup>26</sup>Moore 140.

<sup>27</sup>Moore 141.

<sup>28</sup>Ellmann 96.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Moore 149.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Moore 149.

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in Moore 155.

<sup>32</sup>Moore 63.

<sup>33</sup>Memoirs 27.

<sup>34</sup>Memoirs 27. This experience obviously suggested the setting for the second part of "The Second Coming" (1919).

<sup>35</sup>Autobiography 125.

<sup>36</sup>Memoirs 27.

<sup>37</sup>Memoirs 70.

<sup>38</sup>Memoirs 70.

<sup>39</sup>Autobiography 173.

<sup>40</sup>Autobiography 174.

<sup>41</sup>Memoirs 61.

<sup>42</sup>Memoirs 49.

<sup>43</sup>Memoirs 87. According to Moore (63), astral projection was a "more exacting mode" of skrying, in which one enlarged and then passed through a symbol, projecting oneself into a scene. Yeats reports another such episode in "Magic," in Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 37. Hereafter cited as E & I.

<sup>44</sup>Memoirs 134.

<sup>45</sup>Memoirs 134. The initiation of the spear refers to a ritual in Yeats' order of Celtic mysteries (see pp. 52-60 of this chapter).

<sup>46</sup>Memoirs 28.

<sup>47</sup>Autobiography 176.

<sup>48</sup>William Blake, The Works of William Blake, eds. Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats (1893; rpt., with a new introduction by G. F. Bentley, Jr., New York: AMS, 1979). Yeats wrote most of this commentary, The Symbol System. On the flyleaf of his own copy, he says that "the greater part of 'the Symbolic System' is my writing" (quoted in Bentley's introduction, vol. I: 6). All further references to this commentary will be cited as Symbol System.

<sup>49</sup>Symbol System 236.

<sup>50</sup>Symbol System 236.

<sup>51</sup>Symbol System 239.

<sup>52</sup>Symbol System 241.

<sup>53</sup>Symbol System 241.

<sup>54</sup>Symbol System 243.

<sup>55</sup>Symbol System 243.

<sup>56</sup>Symbol System 243.

<sup>57</sup>Symbol System 244.

<sup>58</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Invoking the Irish Faeries," in UP I 247.

<sup>59</sup>In "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux" (1895), in E & I 197, Yeats calls them angels.

<sup>60</sup>Strangely enough, only Harold Bloom (in Yeats [New York: Oxford UP, 1970]) of the major critics has noticed this. Yeats' first influence in this regard was probably Madame Blavatsky's Isis Unveiled, where the idea of alternating active and passive phases is prominent (Graham Hough, The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats [Totowa: Barnes, 1984] 40).

<sup>61</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Secret Rose (London: Lawrence, 1897). As stated in ch. I, both Nathan and Flannery make much of Yeats' statement throughout their works.

<sup>62</sup>For publication Yeats nearly always tempered his supernatural explanations with such phrases. Other favorites were "as I think" and "as it were."

<sup>63</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, in Mythologies (New York: Macmillan, 1959) 80.

<sup>64</sup>Yeats, "Faeries" 247.

<sup>65</sup>W. B. Yeats, Literatum transcription of the manuscripts of William Butler Yeats's the speckled bird, ed. William H. O'Donnell (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1976) 377. This quotation comes from the "De Burgh" manuscript, c. 1900. Hereafter cited as The Speckled Bird.

<sup>66</sup>W. B. Yeats, Rosa Alchemica, in Mythologies 285.

<sup>67</sup>As Yeats told John O'Leary in an 1892 letter, "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I write" (Letters 211).

<sup>68</sup>W. B. Yeats, "William Carlton," in UP I 394. Robert Browning writes sublimely of such a moment in "Abt Vogler."

<sup>69</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Is the Order of R. R. & A. C. to remain a Magical Order?" in George Mills Harper, Yeats's Golden Dawn (New York: Harper, 1974) 260.

<sup>70</sup>Yeats, "Magical Order?" 261.

<sup>71</sup>Every Yeats scholar is obliged to mention that Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" is a close cousin of Yeats' idea--so noted.

<sup>72</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," in E & I 79.



<sup>73</sup>Yeats, "Magic" 28. Hereafter cited as "Magic."

<sup>74</sup>"Magic" 28.

<sup>75</sup>"Magic" 48.

<sup>76</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Dominion of Dreams," in Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats, vol. II, eds. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1976) 166. Hereafter cited as UP II.

<sup>77</sup>"Magic" 29.

<sup>78</sup>"Magic" 36.

<sup>79</sup>"Magic" 49-50.

<sup>80</sup>Ellmann (54) believes that Yeats derived his symbolism through an extension of his father's theories on the self.

<sup>81</sup>Speaking of himself in the late eighties, Yeats says in Autobiography (76) that "I was in all things pre-Raphaelite."

<sup>82</sup>Autobiography 111.

<sup>83</sup>Autobiography 201.

<sup>84</sup>Autobiography 200.

<sup>85</sup>Autobiography 149.

<sup>86</sup>Autobiography 149.

<sup>87</sup>Autobiography 201.

<sup>88</sup>Autobiography 150.

<sup>89</sup>Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry

(1873; New York: New American Library, 1959) 159.

<sup>90</sup>Bloom 25. Nathan (43-50) also considers Pater's influence.

<sup>91</sup>Bloom 25.

<sup>92</sup>See Autobiography 42-43.

<sup>93</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature," in UP I 248.

<sup>94</sup>Autobiography 201.

<sup>95</sup>Autobiography 323.

<sup>96</sup>Frank Tuohy, Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1976) 71.

<sup>97</sup>Tuohy 71.

<sup>98</sup>Yeats, Rosa Alchemica 99.

<sup>99</sup>Bloom 49.

<sup>100</sup>Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, rev. ed. (1919; New York: Dutton, 1958) xx.

<sup>101</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," in E & I 157.

<sup>102</sup>Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (New York: Scribner's, 1931); and C. M. Bowra, The Heritage of Symbolism (New York: St. Martin's, 1954).

<sup>103</sup>Quoted in Tuohy 84. No date is given.

<sup>104</sup>Autobiography 213.

<sup>105</sup>Autobiography 214.

<sup>106</sup>Both Lloyd Parks ("The Influence of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam on W. B. Yeats," Nineteenth Century French Studies 6 [1978]: 258-76) and Marilyn G. Rose ("Yeats's Use of Axël," Comparative Drama 4 [1970]: 253-64) have explored this connection.

<sup>107</sup>Autobiography 213.

<sup>108</sup>Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats 1865-1939, 2nd ed. (1962; London: Macmillan, 1965) 105.

<sup>109</sup>W. B. Yeats, "A Symbolic Drama in Paris," in UP I 324.

<sup>110</sup>Quoted in Autobiography 203.

<sup>111</sup>Hone 106.

<sup>112</sup>Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1964) 83.

<sup>113</sup>All dates in this paragraph are from Flannery 296.

<sup>114</sup>Nathan 69.

<sup>115</sup>Ellmann, Identity 82.

<sup>116</sup>Ellmann, Identity 82.

<sup>117</sup>Variorum Poems 762.

<sup>118</sup>Nathan 72.

<sup>119</sup>Variorum Poems 768.

<sup>120</sup>Variorum Poems 769.

- 121 Ellmann, Masks 103.
- 122 Ellmann, Masks 104.
- 123 Autobiography 134.
- 124 Autobiography 134.
- 125 Variorum Poems 137-39.
- 126 Yeats, "Hopes and Fears" 250.
- 127 Memoirs 123.
- 128 Autobiography 169.
- 129 Autobiography 169.
- 130 Memoirs 123.
- 131 Memoirs 124.
- 132 Autobiography 170.
- 133 Autobiography 170.
- 134 Memoirs 124-25.
- 135 Ellmann, Masks 123.
- 136 Memoirs 125.
- 137 Ellmann, Masks 125.
- 138 Moore 72.
- 139 Moore 73.
- 140 Quoted in Ellmann, Masks 126.
- 141 Quoted in Moore 75.
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- 142 Memoirs 124.
- 143 Memoirs 124.
- 144 Autobiography 170.
- 145 The Speckled Bird 385.
- 146 Letters 280.
- 147 W. B. Yeats, "The Theatre," in E & I 168.
- 148 W. B. Yeats, "Ireland and the Arts," in E & I 203.
- 149 Yeats, "Symbolism" 157.
- 150 Letters 364.
- 151 Autobiography 170.
- 152 Autobiography 181.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE MAKING OF A TRAGIC THEORY, 1902-10

In 1902-03 Yeats emerged from the symbolic bogs and recovered his prophetic vision of 1886. The failure of the Celtic order and The Shadowy Waters had broken his bondage to image evocation. And from the resultant collapse of the mystical Irish Literary Theatre immediately arose the more substantial Irish National Theatre Society in late 1902. In this revitalized setting, Yeats plunged into practical theatre work, operating under a group mandate to link drama to the experiences of an audience. As a result, he developed a more concrete view of art than before--a tragic view. With this new outlook, Yeats began creating a theory of tragic art that would pervade his mind and undergird his work until the end of his life. His desire for self-possession could now be focused, his prophetic instincts directed. In fact, Yeats believed that the realization of his early prophetic goal was finally at hand: through the shape and temper of tragedy he could communicate the ineffable on a human scale, unifying his race. This chapter traces Yeats' change in perspective and the development of his tragic theory.

The formal expression of Yeats' tragic perspective coincided with the opening of the Abbey Theatre, the new

playhouse which also became the common name of the Irish National Theatre. With two essays in the 1904 issue of Samhain, published in conjunction with the birth of the Abbey in December,<sup>1</sup> Yeats began elaborating his theory. From these and from such later key works as "Discoveries" (1906), "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), and "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time" (1910), a dynamic aesthetic emerged, structure by his almost total absorption in daily theatre matters, from managing the company to writing and staging plays.<sup>2</sup> With the needs of an audience constantly in mind, he was forced to think of more fibrous symbols and more distinct settings. As Yeats said at the outset of the Irish National Theatre Society, "Our movement is a return to the people. . . . The play that is to give them a quite natural pleasure should tell them either of their own life, or of that life of poetry where every man can see his own image. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

If the theatre provided Yeats with his conceptual approach to tragedy, two other factors in the pivotal years 1902-03 helped give him his characteristic tragic manner, which might be called a refined pugnacity. The first was his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche in 1902. Nietzsche's impact on Yeats was simply profound. As soon as Yeats read Thomas Common's Nietzsche anthology (lent to him by John Quinn), he was overwhelmed. He wrote Lady Gregory about it in September: "I have read him so much that I have made my

eyes bad again. I have not read anything with so much excitement since I got to love Morris's stories which have the same curious astringent joy."<sup>4</sup> Yeats' marginal annotations in the Common anthology are quite revealing of Nietzsche's influence on his latent thought as well as manner. One such comment affirms his revitalized prophetic mission along the lines of his original 1886 statement: "A sacred book is a book written by a man whose self has been so exalted (not by denial but by an intensity like that of the vibrating vanishing string) that it becomes one with the self of the race."<sup>5</sup> In another annotation Yeats reiterates his idea of the basic division in man first stated in the Blake commentary (see p. 29), which would eventually lead to the primary-antithetical poles of A Vision:

Night	{ Socrates Christ }	one god	night--denial of self in the soul turned towards spirit, seeking knowledge.
Day	{ Homer }	many gods	day --affirmation of self, the soul turned from spirit to be its mask and instrument when it seeks life. <sup>6</sup>

Yeats leaves no doubt that in 1902 he is now of the party of Homer (and Nietzsche), seeking life.



A second, more personal factor hastened Yeats' swoop upon life and his new direct manner by giving him the emotional depth necessary to feel as well as think in tragic terms. For in February 1903 Maud Gonne married John MacBride. Yeats received Maud's letter containing the news one night just before he was to give a lecture. Stunned and reeling in confusion,<sup>7</sup> he still gave the lecture (which was considered excellent), although he could not recall a single word afterward.<sup>8</sup> Yeats then wandered the streets all night.<sup>9</sup> Maud's marriage had exploded his fondest illusion: that she had spurned his many marriage proposals because of a higher patriotic calling. How easy it had been for him to soothe his longing with the notion that, after all, no man could have her--she was married to Ireland. Now all that was changed. At nearly thirty-eight, Yeats was experiencing, for the first time, life unfiltered by self-deceit, theory, or symbol. Now his soul as well as his art was being tested in the tragic dimension. If he could triumph over this circumstance by maintaining self-possession and by turning pain into art, he would be worthy of Homer and Blake and Nietzsche.

With his usual extreme self-consciousness, Yeats carefully monitored his own internal transition to a tragic perspective in several letters of 1903-04. Their Nietzschean tone and content almost jump off the page. For example, to Lady Gregory in January 1903 he asserts that "my work has got

far more masculine. It has more salt in it."<sup>10</sup> For George Russell on May 14, 1903 he describes the change in his work according to Nietzsche's famous categories:

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 to 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. . . . The Greeks said that the Dionysiac enthusiasm preceded the Apollonic and that the Dionysiac was sad and desirous, but that the Apollonic was joyful and self-sufficient.<sup>11</sup>

And the very next day Yeats writes John Quinn on the same subject:

I have been in a great deal better health lately, and that and certain other things have made me look upon the world . . . with somewhat more defiant eyes. . . . I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively. I think I have got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in another letter to Russell a year later, Yeats assails some of his earlier works as insubstantial:

In my Land of Heart's Desire, and in some of my lyric verse of the time, there is an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly. . . . I have been fighting the prevailing decadence for years, and have just got it under foot in my own heart--it is sentiment and sentimental sadness, a womanish introspection.<sup>13</sup>

Defiance, masculinity, self-sufficiency, joyfulness, and the need to create form--these letters ring the changes within Yeats. At mid-life his soul was ripening, after eighteen years of fitful growth. The insight and knowledge Yeats had yearned for in that 1888 letter to Katharine Tynan (see p. 17) were his at last. And he was ready to explain himself through tragic theory.

The first theoretical statements--the 1904 Samhain pieces--are like an abstract of ideas developed at length in the later essays. Yeats stresses the direct, sensual perception of life. Most importantly, he features the core concepts of his tragic view: passion, personality, and the decisive moment (his term "tragic joy" is used here for the first time). The idea that an opposition is necessary to produce this moment is also intimated. Yeats explores the vital role of the artist and his use of tradition and "recklessness" to create tragic art. Finally, he hints at the

division of the arts along distinctly tragic and comic lines.

One Samhain essay, appropriately called "First Principles," emphasizes the tradition of great artists turning to concrete experience for material. Citing Cervantes, Boccaccio, and the Greek dramatists, Yeats imagines that they wrote at a time when life had fewer distractions, before men became obsessed with abstractions and practicality, before constant change began to warp values. Indeed, Yeats thinks, "Everything that their minds ran on came on them vivid with the colour of the senses, and when they wrote it was out of their own rich experience, and they found their symbols of expression in things that they had known all their life long."<sup>14</sup> Bemoaning the lot of the modern artist, Yeats asks how one can create like the ancients when "innumerable considerations of external probability or social utility destroy the seeming irresponsible creative power that is life itself?"<sup>15</sup> Then, in a passage remarkable for showing how his spiritual obsessions of the nineties served his new perspective, Yeats gives his discussion an exalted context:

Every argument carries us backwards to some religious conception, and in the end the creative energy of man depends upon their believing that they have, within themselves, something immortal and imperishable, and that all else is but as an image in a looking-glass. So long as that belief is not a formal thing, a man will create out of

a joyful energy, seeking little for any external test of an impulse that may be sacred, and looking for no foundation outside life itself.<sup>16</sup>

Later in "First Principles" Yeats devotes a section to the "creative energy of man" mentioned above, featuring that constant term "passion" and its role in the process leading to the ecstatic moment. This advanced version of the imagination myth is more concrete than earlier versions involving the moods or the great memory (see pp. 30-37), but is a natural descendent of them. Yeats begins by saying that what attracts him to drama is the "moment of intense life," present in both farce and tragedy.<sup>17</sup> (He would never again relate such a moment to comedy.) During this moment an action is isolated and reduced to the simplest form possible without "losing the sense of its place in the world."<sup>18</sup> This action, whether only bodily activity, as in the "less important kinds of drama" (presumably farce), or an activity of the characters' souls, as in the "more important kinds" (presumably tragedy), is "an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the purpose of drama is to present this great moment, the apotheosis of passion:

If the subject of drama or any other art were a man himself, an eddy of momentary breath, we might desire the contemplation of perfect characters; but the subject of all art is passion, and a passion can only be contemplated when separated

by itself, and aroused into perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law, that is the expression of the whole whether of Church or Nation or external nature. . . . If we were not certain of law we would not feel the struggle, the drama, but the subject of art is not law, but the praise of life, and it has no commandments that are not positive.<sup>20</sup>

Later, in "Poetry and Tradition," Yeats would elaborate on contemplation and opposition in the tragic process. In Samhain, of course, he does not yet link passion and the intense moment to tragedy alone. But it is significant that his two examples of the moment in this section are Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Cleopatra, tragic figures in the midst of great internal struggle. Above all, the idea of art as affirmative and life-giving that is expressed here would run through all his writings on tragedy.

In an earlier part of "First Principles," while discussing the artist's role in creating the tragic moment, Yeats joins passion to tradition. He distinguishes the artist by his "delight in beauty," which can be conveyed in its highest form only "after he has purified his mind with the greatest writers of the world."<sup>21</sup> Yeats thus introduces one of his enduring themes--the vital role of tradition in the creative process. But this tradition of great art must only be a foundation for the artist's own imaginative direction, else

his work will not seem alive.<sup>22</sup> Newness is the key. If the artist is a dramatist, for instance, his characters must be new and immediate, Yeats says, for the "spirit of life is not in them in its fullness" if they could have existed before the day of their creation.<sup>23</sup> Art at its best is not "a deliberate creation, but the creation of intense feelings, of pure life; and every feeling is the child of all past ages and would be different if even a moment had been left out."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Yeats defines passion as a pure essence living successively in the art of every age--primordial feeling given new life and context by each work of art--and the central subject of all creativity. And the artist's reverence for the genealogy of passion clears his mind for its further transmission.

Another essay from the 1904 Samhain, "The Play, the Player, and the Scene," continues this line of thought by introducing two more elements to the tragic process: "personality" and "tragic joy," as well as another aspect of the tragic manner--"recklessness." Personality arises from the soul, man's link to the Absolute:

We, who are believers, cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself, and seeing it there we cannot do other than rejoice in every energy, whether of gesture, or of action or of speech, coming out of the personality, the soul's image, even though the very laws of Nature seem . . . unimportant in comparison. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Personality is primal wholeness, an ideal if fleeting balance of an individual's faculties, what Yeats would later call Unity of Being. It is like an electrical conductor of passion, which flows through it as pure energy. Six years later, in "The Tragic Theatre," Yeats would introduce a contrary to personality--"character," the accretion of externals on the primal core. Both ideas derived from his father, John Butler Yeats, who constantly harped on the distinction.<sup>26</sup>

The product of that moment when passion flares from opposition and personality breaks free is a hybrid emotion--tragic joy, first named in this essay:

The arts are at their greatest when they seek for a life growing always more scornful of everything that is not itself and passing into its own fullness, as it were, ever more completely as all that is created out of the passing mode of society slips from it; and attaining that fullness, perfectly it may be--and from this is tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy--when the world itself has slipped away in death.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, in "The Play, the Player, and the Scene" Yeats introduces that most memorable element of the artist's tragic manner--recklessness. Speaking of the miserable state of contemporary theatre art, he insists that those like himself have but one remedy: "to rediscover an art of the theatre



that shall be joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant, and altogether reckless."<sup>28</sup> This attitude appears repeatedly in substance, if not always name, in much of Yeats' future work, both prose and poetry. No longer would he swoon in the twilight, waiting for the moods.

In the 1904 Samhain essays Yeats thus lays the foundation of a new aesthetic for himself and for the Abbey Theatre. Time and the tides of theatre work would cause him to refine and expand these ideas. "Discoveries," "Poetry and Tradition," "The Tragic Theatre," and "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time" document the result: a reasonably coherent theory of tragedy.

"Discoveries" (1906) is actually a collection of very short pieces sharing a common focus: a celebration of life and personality, and how an artist must imbue both himself and his work with them in order to achieve a communal art. Yeats opens his discussion with the clarion call of the prophetic artist: "If we poets are to move the people, we must reintegrate the human spirit in our imagination."<sup>29</sup> He even goes into into some detail on how the people--the non-artists--can be moved. The key to communication is the moment of passion. But it must be tethered to daily life:

I have always come to this certainty: what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life,

intonations that show them, in a book or play, the strength, the essential moment of a man who would be exciting in the market or at the dispensary door. They must go out of the theatre with the strength they live by strengthened from looking upon some passion that could, whatever its chosen way of life, strike down an enemy, fill a long stocking with money or move a girl's heart. . . . An exciting person, whether the hero of a play or the maker of poems, will display the greatest volume of personal energy, and this energy must seem to come out of the body as out of the mind. We must say to ourselves continually when we imagine a character: "Have we given him the roots . . . of all faculties necessary for life?" And only when one is certain of that may one give him the one faculty that fills the imagination with joy.<sup>30</sup>

Reintegration, of course, means rediscovering person-ality. One of the difficulties in achieving that, Yeats believes, concerns the very nature of published literature. He thinks the rise of the printed word encouraged the abstracting of essences, which separates mind from matter and thus destroys wholeness:

In literature, partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to normal man, we have

lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man--blood, imagination, intellect, running together--but have found a new delight in essences, in states of mind, in pure imagination, in all that comes to us most easily in elaborate music.<sup>31</sup>

Literature can therefore go in two directions, either seeking essences by soaring "upward into ever-growing subtlety . . . and what seems literature becomes religion," or seeking personality by settling "downward, taking the soul with us until all is simplified and solidified again."<sup>32</sup> If we prefer the latter, Yeats thinks, "we must have the soul tight within our bodies," for it is used to a more rarefied beauty; and "if it begin to slip away we must go after it. . . ."<sup>33</sup>

This discussion of the two ways of art was close to Yeats' heart, for it was his own story. During the nineties he had soared into magical realms and symbolist poetry. Now he was trying to build his life and art on solid earth. Yeats' testimony in "Discoveries" about these circumstances is his most insightful, much more balanced than in his letters of 1903-04 (see pp. 76-78). In the nineties, he says, he had not yet learned of the "sweetness" in those who know their personality, "who have become the joy that is themselves."<sup>34</sup> Instead, he had strayed innocently into caring only for "impersonal beauty."<sup>35</sup> One day Yeats knew that he was "seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always

out of reach. . . ."36 Now he knows that "we are only permitted to desire life."<sup>37</sup> While we must, as artists, "deceive" our mistress (life) by creative embellishment, by rising "out of common interests," the ascent should only be "so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole."<sup>38</sup> In other words, art is more than life but is always rooted in it. That way both the artist and his creation will be unified and close to the people.

Yeats has another way of presenting the paths of art (and of himself) in "Discoveries": an extended metaphor of the saint and the poet. If one substitutes "magical adept" for "saint," the image contains in a nutshell Yeats' history and impulses from 1886 to 1906 (as well as previewing the structure of A Vision):

If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him . . . but be content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in momentary heroic passion. . . . Is it that all things are made by the struggle of the individual and the world, of the unchanging and

the returning, and that the saint and the poet are over all, and that the poet has made his home in the serpent's mouth?<sup>39</sup>

Yeats concludes "Discoveries" with a plea for unity between body and soul. He writes of a golden age when "art was struck out of personality" and "holy and common things" were virtually one.<sup>40</sup> Art moved effortlessly between passion and contemplation of the divine, and a man could plough on the slope of a holy mountain.<sup>41</sup> But the communality of that "unbroken day" is long past.<sup>42</sup> The tragic artist must try to heal this disunity, so that once again there can be "a Shelley and a Dickens in the one body."<sup>43</sup> The last sentence of the essay is one of Yeats' most inspired, a vision of restored wholeness, of infinite gradation between the orders:

I am orthodox and pray for a resurrection of the body, and am certain that a man should find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor, and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so gradual a change that he may never discover, no, not even in ecstasy itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from Primum Mobile, Supernal Eden, Yellow Rose over all.<sup>44</sup>

The second of the major essays on tragedy, "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), features Yeats' most detailed treatment of the tragic process, emphasizing the artist's creative

power. The precise nature of the opposition necessary to spark the ecstatic moment (only hinted at in 1904)--sorrow found in contemplation and the artifice of "style"--is central to this essay, as is the moment itself.

Section II of "Poetry and Tradition" begins with Yeats' view of the artist's affirmative nature, which is fearless, joyous, and always seeking beauty. A poetical prologue sets the proper tone:

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 proud, majestic multitude.<sup>45</sup>

Yeats quickly identifies the leaders of this proud multitude, those responsible for "all beautiful things": the aristocrats, producing beautiful manners; the peasants, making beautiful stories and beliefs; and the artists, creating all other beauty.<sup>46</sup> Each produces beauty through courage--aristocrats because of social rank, peasants from having nothing to lose, and artists because of recklessness.<sup>47</sup> Those not attuned to beauty, Yeats believes, have little of intrinsic value, for they are tied to the belief that everything must have utility, preferring the functional stalk to the lovely, useless flower.<sup>48</sup> Above all, they fear the exuberance of any maker of beauty such as the artist, who follows "that commandment that we can do almost what we will, if we do it gaily. . . ." <sup>49</sup>

Thus, Yeats links "gaiety" (or joy) with fearlessness as part of the artist's makeup, by-products of that recklessness so vital to tragic art.

At this point Yeats also joins artistic gaiety to tradition. He believes the artist must go back to Renaissance courts to find those kindred souls "who understand that life is not lived, if not lived for contemplation or excitement."<sup>50</sup> They would understand that gaiety is integral to life, for only when one is joyous over a thing can it be surmounted and the mind made "clear enough for strength."<sup>51</sup>

So far in "Poetry and Tradition" Yeats has described the artistic temperament--its creative recklessness, its exuberance and courage in any circumstance. In Section III this affirmative power (manifested as style) becomes the key element in producing that higher gaiety--tragic joy. But first Yeats must clearly define its opposite: the sorrowful things found in contemplation (later called "the great irremediable things"<sup>52</sup>), which at this point in the essay seem beyond the artist's power to change in any way. Citing "raging fire" and "destructive sword," intense love like that of Tristan and Iseult, and noble death as examples of such imponderables, Yeats agrees with Blake that they are "portions of eternity, too great for the eye of man. . . ."<sup>53</sup> But gaiety frees us from all lesser things, such as "sullen anger, solemn virtue, calculating anxiety, gloomy suspicion, and prevaricating hope."<sup>54</sup> In the last sentence of Section II,

he sums up these two areas of existence and man's ability to cope with them:

Because there is a submission in a pure sorrow, we should sorrow alone over what is greater than ourselves, nor too soon admit that greatness, but all that is less than we should stir us to some joy, for pure joy masters and impregnates; and so to world end, strength shall laugh and wisdom mourn.<sup>55</sup>

Section II thus clarifies somewhat the opposition necessary for tragic reconciliation: joyous "strength" on the one hand (the artist's power) and sorrowful "wisdom" on the other, beyond amelioration. This limitation of artistic strength seems to contradict the spirit of the Samhain essays, not to mention the earlier part of "Poetry and Tradition." But the contradiction is only apparent. Evidently, Yeats has exaggerated the separation of the contraries so as to set them in high relief, for in Section III he shows the artist's exuberance mastering even great sorrow, transforming it into the sublime hybrid joy first described in 1904.

Section III of "Poetry and Tradition" is perhaps the most important part of Yeats' tragic theory. It contains his most extensive description of the tragic process, featuring "style" as the embodiment of imagination. Style completes the formula, serving as the catalyst, the tincture of extravagance able to change the atoms of sorrow into a



new pattern.

Yeats begins the section with a statement on style, while again equating the arts with that aristocratic manner he so much admires:

In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things, and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion or dullness.<sup>57</sup>

Style is therefore the cutting edge of the artist's power to shape experience--recklessness made coherent. Yeats assigns the writer a Shelleyan function in the use of style. He is "the creator of the standards of manners in their subtlety, for he alone can know the ancient records and be like some mystic courtier who has stolen the keys from the girdle of time."<sup>58</sup> This romantic statement fully updates and reaffirms Yeats' prophetic goal of the eighties. With style he finally has that control over universals he had sought since that time, the tangible proof of the self-possession underpinning imagination.

Later in Section III Yeats defines style more precisely. He regards it as the touch of extravagance, or irony, or surprise set to a work after all logical, structural elements are in place, which "leaves one, not in circling necessity, but caught up into the freedom of self-delight."<sup>60</sup> Style is

nothing less than "a secret between a craftsman and his craft, and is so inseparable in his nature that he has it most amid overwhelming emotion, and in the face of death."<sup>61</sup> In short, it answers the artist's prayers in his time of greatest need--during his sorrowful meditation upon imponderables. Through style he has some power over nature and circumstance, helping him first unify his own soul, then project unity to the artwork, especially to the dramatic persona during the tragic moment.

Yeats now comes to the crux of "Poetry and Tradition" and of his tragic theory: the actual process of creating tragic art. Tragic joy arises from the interpenetration of the artist's sorrowful perception of existence and the shaping device of his imagination--style. Yeats describes this synthesis in a central passage:

This joy [style], because it must be always making and mastering, remains in the hands and tongue of the artist, but with his eyes he enters upon a submissive, sorrowful contemplation of the great irremediable things, and he is known from other men by making all he handles like himself, and yet by the unlikeness to himself of all that comes before him in a pure contemplation. It may have been his enemy or his love or his cause that set him dreaming, and certainly the phoenix can but open her young wings in a flaming nest; and if his

mistress brag of the song or his enemy fear it, it is not that either has its praise or blame, but that the twigs of the nest are not easily set afire. The verses may make his mistress famous as Helen or give a victory to his cause, not because he has been either's servant, but because men delight to honour and to remember all that have served contemplation.<sup>62</sup>

The crucible of tragic art is the act of contemplation, a mournful, even awesome meditation upon unchangeable things. The result is a groundswell of passion within the artist. (usually sorrow, but Yeats later includes the possibility of other passions). The somewhat cryptic description that follows the word "things" refers to the artist's ability to shape painful emotion into some form suitable to his reckless nature, through the "making and mastering" joy of his style. Contemplation is like dreaming, where all strong emotions are removed from their contexts and dissolved into other forms, limited only by the unconscious. The imagination of the artist--the phoenix with young wings--cannot affect the growth of beauty from sorrow (or any other feeling) unless that emotion is present in the first place. Thus, Yeats again stresses the necessity of opposition. The new wings can begin flapping only in a flaming nest--the fire sparked by opposed elements. The resulting "song" (the product must be lyrical, uplifting) is not tied to praise of

mistress, blame of enemy, or love of cause per se--only the work itself binds the artist--but is merely a tribute, a creative remembrance of the initial motivating force, now "shaped" into a triumphant image.

Tragic joy results from the artist's mastery of passion within himself. He then projects his self-possession or personality into the work: "That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate."<sup>63</sup> His "shaping joy" (style) keeps the sorrow pure during the transposition, allowing that fullness of passion described in 1904, where the world slips away and "tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy"<sup>64</sup> result. For example, Yeats says, Shakespeare's tragic figures "speak out of an ecstasy that is one-half the self-surrender of sorrow, and one-half the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world."<sup>65</sup>

Yeats offers Timon and Cleopatra as specific illustrations of this tragic moment. He thinks their words move us because their sorrow (a pure sorrow) is directed not at their own singular fates of tomb and asp, "but for all men's fate."<sup>66</sup> This universal quality of the moment celebrates personality and passion. The sorrow is pure because it is not the circumstantial emotion of Timon or Cleopatra, which accompanies character, but part of passion, the universal emotion flowing through personality, locus of human community. The bonding of people through tragic reconciliation thus begins to be a

constant idea in "Poetry and Tradition," reaffirming Yeats' oldest prophetic instincts, and becoming the obvious goal of tragic art.

Section III continues with a superb general passage on the moment of perfection:

. . . the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent imagery, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity.<sup>67</sup>

The full richness of this passage becomes evident only when one recalls its links to Yeats' former obsession with magic. For instance, one version of his myth of imagination--the "double link" variation (see p. 32)--is an obvious forerunner of the above. And, of course, rose and cross imagery permeates Golden Dawn ritual, especially in the Rosicrucian Inner Order.<sup>68</sup> Whatever its mystical connections, this description of tragic perfection embodies Yeats' insight in "Discoveries" that the soul must be tight within the body and not soar into numinosity (see p. 86). In "Poetry and Tradition" his perspective is firmly rooted.

Yeats concludes this vital part of the essay with yet another reference to tradition. Continuing with the imagery

of the above passage, he believes no new artist has ever plucked the "red rose" or found the "trysting-place" (which amounts to "the understanding of himself, to the mastery of unlocking words"<sup>69</sup>) who has not studied the masters, including "ancestral memory" of the tradition.<sup>70</sup> Yet, even the knowledge and instinct of tradition will be unavailing, Yeats says, unless the artist has recklessness.<sup>71</sup>

While "Poetry and Tradition" centers on the process of creating tragic art, and thus on the artist himself, "The Tragic Theatre" (1910) concentrates on the completed work, especially stage tragedy. Here Yeats develops his two categories of art, based on the clear distinction between comedy and tragedy, with a corollary treatment of "character." Most importantly, he gives the theme of community its fullest expression.

Ostensibly, "The Tragic Theatre" begins as a reply to the printed criticism of John M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows. Yeats feels the play was judged by "dogmas"--the theatrical conventions necessary to the dramatic effect, what he also calls "wheels and pulleys."<sup>72</sup> He believes the critics missed the point of tragedy in general (because they fail to see the need for extravagance beyond mere mechanics), and of this play in particular, whose climactic moment he considers exemplary. But Synge's drama is only a point of departure for a broad discussion of tragedy.

Yeats selects one scene from Act III as an example of the great moment when the dramatic figure achieves unity. As discussed earlier, the persona's attainment is symbolic of the artist's own self-balancing, a dynamic displacement. The decisive scene in Deirdre of the Sorrows shows the heroine and her lover returning to Ireland to face almost certain death, so that their love might endure. On the edge of an open grave meant for both of them, they quarrel, thereby losing the bond they were ready to die for. At this point Deirdre exclaims, "Is it not a hard thing that we should miss the safety of the grave and we trampling its edge?"<sup>73</sup> To Yeats, that is her cry "at the outset of a reverie of passion that mounts and mounts till grief itself has carried her beyond grief into pure contemplation."<sup>74</sup> The familiar elements of Yeats' tragic theory are here raised to a high pitch. Deirdre's grief, impure because circumstantial, becomes so intense that she achieves the suspension from life which is "pure contemplation." In this state, her grief is a pure passion, made tangible by personality. Synge's style has brought the tragic figure to fullness and ecstasy, to the moment of wisdom (which is now transcendent, no longer tied to mourning as in "Poetry and Tradition"):

Up to this the play had been a master's unfinished work, monotonous and melancholy, ill-arranged, little more than a sketch of what it would have grown to, but now I listened breathless to sentences

that may never pass away, and as they filled or dwindled in their civility of sorrow, the player, whose art had seemed clumsy and incomplete, like the writing itself, ascended into that tragic ecstasy which is the best that art--perhaps that life--can give. And at last when Deirdre, in the paroxysm before she took her life, touched with compassionate fingers him that had killed her lover, we knew that the player had become, if but for a moment, the creature of that noble mind [Synge] . . . and we too were carried beyond time and persons to where passion . . . becomes wisdom. . . .<sup>75</sup>

One of the critical dogmas especially irritating to Yeats says that a play, to work on a stage, must contain definite character, and that the dramatic climax must always be a contest between characters.<sup>76</sup> But great drama, Yeats insists, operates on the level of personality, not character. Indeed, he believes that the great periods of drama show a reduction in character, with a corresponding increase in lyric feeling.<sup>77</sup> The implication is that any age which stresses character is artistically degenerate. Yeats concludes that only in comedy is character always present. By contrast, passions and motives replace character in such tragedies as those by Corneille, Racine, and the classical dramatists.<sup>78</sup> In the 1904 essays Yeats does not clearly label bodily



activity as exclusively comedic, merely saying that such activity is part of a less important kind of drama. In "Poetry and Tradition" he focuses entirely on tragic art, implying that anything not universal belongs to comedy. But now, in "The Tragic Theatre," he directly contrasts comedy and character with tragedy and personality.

Yeats makes a clear distinction between tragedy and comedy, even renaming them. Tragedy becomes "an art of the flood," a poetical art, "because it takes delight in the moment of exaltation, of excitement, of dreaming."<sup>79</sup> It is of the flood because it always seeks to join people together in a communion of personality: ". . . tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and . . . it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house."<sup>80</sup> Comedy, on the other hand, is now "an art that we call real, because character can only express itself in a real world."<sup>81</sup>

Comedy, the art of the "real" and of character, never penetrates to the ground of feeling where the individual becomes the multitude. In Yeats' view, comedy offers only individual pathos, not communal passion. He states this limitation more vividly in a 1909 journal entry, which also serves as a gloss on passion itself. Written just after the premiere of Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows, it begins as a review of the leading actress' performance, but quickly touches on deeper subjects:

Molly had personal charm, pathos, distinction even, fancy, beauty, but never passion. . . . Pathos she has, the nearest to tragedy the comedian can come, for that is conscious of our presence and would have our pity. Passion she has not, for that looks beyond mankind and asks no pity, not even of God. It realizes, substantiates, attains, scorns, governs, and is most mighty when it passes from our sight.<sup>82</sup>

Comedy is allied to self-doubt and passive emotion, tragedy to self-possession and transcendent passion. Comedy contrives an emotional climate and manipulates an audience. Tragedy effortlessly draws an audience into community.

The phenomenon of an audience identifying with the player on stage is, of course, central to the unifying role of tragic art. Yeats implies it in "Discoveries" (see pp. 84-85) and "Poetry and Tradition" (see pp. 95-96), and states it more directly in the 1905 Samhain:

The greatest art symbolizes not those things we have observed so much as those things that we have experienced and when the imaginary saint or lover or hero moves us most deeply, it is the moment when he awakens within us for an instant our own heroism, our own sanctity, our own desire.<sup>83</sup>

The projection of the artist's own struggle to his work now goes one step further and enters the soul of the perceiver

of art, who recreates the passion and reconciliation for himself. Personality links artist and viewer together about the creative axis of tragic art. Yeats says it most simply in "The Tragic Theatre": "It is always ourselves that we see upon the stage."<sup>84</sup>

Yeats concludes "The Tragic Theatre" with his most ambitious metaphors for distinguishing tragedy and comedy, while stressing once more the universal quality of tragedy:

Certainly we have here the Tree of Life and that of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which is rooted in our interests, and if we have forgotten their differing virtues it is surely because we have taken delight in a confusion of crossing branches. Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself.<sup>85</sup>

"J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time" (1910) is the last of Yeats' important essays on tragedy. And it is a fitting conclusion, summarizing the key ideas of the earlier works with grand intensity, as if it were meant to be the last word on the subject. Remembering his friend Synge seemed to bring Yeats to an even higher pitch than usual.

Each of the major tragic elements is here. For instance, Yeats frames the tragic opposition more stridently than before, much like his idea of the warring orders in the late nineties (see p. 30):

I think that all noble things are the result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy, of invisible warfare, the division of a mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.<sup>86</sup>

While Yeats may be speaking of Synge's trials, he is also thinking of himself, just as he is when he describes his friend in Nietzschean terms:

He loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy. . . . The food of the spiritual-minded is sweet, an Indian scripture says, but passionate minds love bitter food.<sup>87</sup>

The last sentence above is a paraphrase of a speech in Yeats' very first statement on tragic art in 1886 (see p. 16). Twenty-four years later he has figuratively rounded the circle, tragic theory fulfilling early hopes.

Yeats also discusses the tragic moment--the fruit of opposition--in more heated terms in this essay. He speaks

of "the orgiastic moment when life outleaps its limits."<sup>88</sup>  
 And tragic joy is given perhaps its ultimate expression in  
 a passage that sums up the entire tragic process:

There is in the creative joy an acceptance of  
 what life brings, because we have understood the  
 beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death  
 for what it takes away, which arouses within us,  
 through some sympathy perhaps with all other men,  
 an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh  
 aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of  
 our exaltation, at death and oblivion.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time"  
 contains some of Yeats' finest statements on the prophetic  
 goal of tragedy. Speaking from the point of view of the  
 audience for a change, he sees the mission of art much like  
 Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi:

The imaginative writer shows us the world as a  
 painter does his picture, reversed in a looking  
 glass, that we may see it, not as it seems to eyes  
 habit has made dull, but as we were Adam and this  
 the first morning. . . .<sup>90</sup>

Of course, art must universalize Adam's perceptions, pre-  
 paring his soul for the double link of the orders:

All art is the disengaging of a soul from place  
 and history, its suspension in a beautiful or  
 terrible light to await the Judgment, though it

must be, seeing that all its days were a Last Day, judged already.<sup>91</sup>

However, even personal enlightenment must defer to the ultimate goal of communion:

Only by the substantiation of the soul . . . whether in literature or in sanctity, can we come upon those agreements, those separations from all else, that fasten men together lastingly . . . Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, and all who travel in their road define races and create everlasting loyalties.<sup>92</sup>

With a ripened tragic perspective giving fiber to his being, Yeats now feels that he, too, travels on that prophetic road, ready to define and unify his race.

But theory is one thing, practice another. How well did Yeats the exultant essayist transmit these ideas to art? Because he wrote very few lyric poems during this period, any judgment must be made from his dramas. The essential question must be: how well does Yeats portray and communicate the tragic moment to an audience? Do his characters display the unity, the grandeur, he has admired in Shakespeare's and Synge's tragic figures?

The first play showing signs of Yeats' tragic view is Where There Is Nothing, written in collaboration with Lady Gregory<sup>93</sup> in 1902, the year Nietzsche entered his life. To be sure, the protagonist, Paul Ruttledge, seems almost

absurdly Nietzschean in seeking "the lawless unity"<sup>94</sup> of nothingness, where God is. He thinks the world "must be consumed in a moment inside our minds,"<sup>95</sup> for "death is the last adventure, the first perfect joy. . . ."<sup>96</sup> Such fragmentary thoughts are intimations of the great moment which would soon be spelled out in Yeats' theory. But here, as in many later plays, Yeats is better in presenting a character's anticipation of ecstasy than his achievement of it. What becomes apparent is that tragic reconciliation is a lyrical concept, more accessible in description than in action. Certainly Paul Ruttledge's actual death is less interesting than his heated speculation about it. His last words are quite tepid: ". . . remember always where there is nothing there is God."<sup>97</sup> A later revision of the play, The Unicorn from the Stars (1908), has more vivid descriptions of ecstasy but changes nothing substantive about the hero (now called Martin Hearne).

Two plays of 1903 continue this trend of better description than drama. On Baile's Strand has one fine lyrical speculation on the tragic moment, complete with the necessary opposition:

I think that all deep passion is but a kiss  
 In the mid battle, and a difficult peace  
 'Twixt oil and water, candles and dark night,  
 Hill-side and hollow, the hot-footed sun,  
 And the cold sliding slippery-footed moon,  
 O brief forgiveness between opposites. . . .<sup>98</sup>

And The Hour Glass contains a promising statement by the "Wise Man": ". . . only amid spiritual terror or only when all that laid hold on life is shaken can we see the truth."<sup>99</sup> But in the end he can only parrot Paul Ruttledge: ". . . all, all is plain now. We sink in on God, we find Him in becoming nothing--we perish into reality."<sup>100</sup>

In The King's Threshold (1904), the hero, Seanchan, confidently describes tragic joy early in the play:

. . . when all falls  
 In ruin, poetry cries out in joy,  
 Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,  
 The victim's joy among the holy flame,  
 God's laughter at the shattering of the world.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, his words during his denouement seem contrived, mechanical:

I need no help.  
 He needs no help that joy has lifted up  
 Like some miraculous beast out of Ezekiel.  
 The man that dies has the chief part in the story,  
 And I will mock and mock that image yonder,  
 That evil picture in the sky--no, no!  
 I have all my strength again, I will outface it.<sup>102</sup>

And Seanchan's final words are simply ludicrous: "King! King! Dead faces laugh."<sup>103</sup>

Deirdre, completed in 1906, is Yeats' version of the legend that so moved him in Synge's slightly later play.



Famous for her great passion, Deirdre would seem the perfect subject for a dramatic presentation of the tragic moment. And certainly her heroism in Deirdre is more integral to the action, less forced, than that of Yeats' previous protagonists. Her controlled passion as she turns to her lover, Naoise, is sweet and affecting:

Bend and kiss me now,  
 For it may be the last before our death.  
 And when that's over, we'll be different;  
 Imperishable things, a cloud or a fire.  
 And I know nothing but this body, nothing  
 But that old vehement, bewildering kiss.<sup>104</sup>

But once again it is a description of the tragic still point, rather than its enactment, that one remembers from Deirdre. Naoise's tale of the tragic heroism of two earlier lovers facing a similar end is a marvelous illustration of that self-possession Yeats had so long revered and would soon describe in "Poetry and Tradition" as equivalent to artistic style:

What do they say?  
 That Lugaidh Redstripe and that wife of his  
 Sat at their chess-board, waiting for their end.  
 They knew that there was nothing that could save  
 them,  
 And so played chess as they had any night  
 For years, and waited for the stroke of sword.

I never heard a death so out of reach  
 Of common hearts, a high and comely end

. . . . .

those two,

Because no man and no woman have loved better,  
 Might sit on there contentedly, and weigh  
 The joy comes after. . . .<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps the best way of judging the impact of Yeats' tragic view on his drama is to compare the 1906 version of The Shadowy Waters with the 1900 version examined in the last chapter. As this play was the centerpiece of his symbolic-magical obsession of the nineties, its failure to communicate much of anything save shadows contributed to Yeats' shift in perspective. But even with a new interest in life and a desire to solidify his symbols, Yeats did not revise the 1900 version until 1905, after he saw a production of it in London in June.<sup>106</sup> Yeats then moved quickly to "convert" the play to his new viewpoint. The differences between the two versions may be taken as an accurate gauge of the creative impact of Yeats' tragic theory, for the changes are in tone and detail, not structure. Fortunately for future scholars, Yeats also wrote several letters on the revisions, providing very helpful glosses.

In the first letter, to Arthur Symons in September 1905, Yeats confesses that his 1900 play was too full of "inherently poetical" things which do not arise out of the action.<sup>107</sup>

As a result, "there was no internal life pressing for expression through the characters."<sup>108</sup> To John Quinn a week later, he mentions remedies. Yeats says he has changed "the very temper of the thing" through more common language, making it "a simple passionate play" for the less-educated members of the audience.<sup>109</sup> These changes mesh with Yeats' theory of communal art, as he soon makes clear to Quinn: "I believe more strongly every day that the element of strength in poetic language is common idiom, just as the element of strength in poetic construction is common passion."<sup>110</sup>

The key letter at this time, to Florence Farr (who staged the July production of the 1900 version), deals with the hero, Forgael, and the importance of the tragic moment. After all, the reason for these changes is, ultimately, personality:

I am making Forgael's part perfectly clear and straightforward. The play is now upon one single idea--which is in these new lines--

"When the world ends  
The mind is made unchanging for it finds  
Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible joy,  
The flagstone under all, the fire of fires,  
The root of the world."

There are no symbols except Aengus and Aedane and the birds--and I have into the bargain heightened all the moments of dramatic crisis--sharpened every knife edge.<sup>111</sup>

The 1906 version of The Shadowy Waters is definitely an improvement. As Yeats states above, the symbols are less frequent and less difficult. And Forgael has a more distinctive, a more human voice. He is now more hero than escapist, more Zarathustra than Axél:

. . . nothing matters

But laughter and tears--laughter, laughter, and  
tears;

. . . every man should carry his own soul  
Upon his shoulders.<sup>112</sup>

In line with his tragic theory, Yeats has shifted the emphasis from the external to the internal plane (although, of course, a continuum always exists between the orders). Yet, herein lies the problem of the 1906 revision: Yeats has given a heroic, psychological dimension to a play that still has the structure of his old dispensation, that of escape from the world into the Absolute. Even as Forgael speaks of laughter and tears and of bearing the weight of his own soul, he still sails on in search of the supernatural. The basic plot thus resists all possible revisions to a tragic mode. Yeats knew this, for in the above letter to Florence Farr he says that The Shadowy Waters is even now "only right in its highest moments--the logic and circumstances are all wrong."<sup>113</sup>

Even an abbreviated "acting version" of the play the next year<sup>114</sup> made no more headway. The play begun in Yeats' boyhood was never to be the sacred book he had hoped it would be.

Thus, as Yeats' tragic theory matured during the years 1904-10, he was finding it very difficult to express its essential lyricism in the physical terms of drama. Normal voice sounds and body movements were too tangible, too direct for the tragic mood. Hence, Yeats would soon begin experimenting with aural and visual rituals on stage to symbolize profound states. Indirection and stylization would become his dramatic stock in trade.<sup>115</sup> Yet, none of Yeats' plays would ever match the power of his lyric poems to express tragic nuance. The "image of human perfection"<sup>116</sup> he wished art to convey was best communicated on the silent page of a poem, where each reader's mind could imagine any permutation, not just the arbitrary one shown on a stage.

Yeats seemed to recognize the pre-eminence of the lyric form in the years following 1910, because he would begin writing powerful poems reflecting both the ideas and the spirit of his essays on tragedy. And even his theory would undergo slight refinement in essays and journals. First he would weave his emerging concept of the "mask" into the dynamics of the creative act. Then, after seriously investigating spiritualism starting about 1912, Yeats would begin adapting his discovery of the eternal "anti-self" or "Daimon" to the process. He would find a way to bring the occult directly into his art again, but without losing his reckless self-possession. The double link of the orders would be stronger than ever--with the artist in control.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Flannery 120.

<sup>2</sup>Nathan discusses the influence of this theatre work in his third chapter; Flannery alludes to it throughout his study.

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Samhain: 1902," in Explorations (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 96.

<sup>4</sup>Letters 379.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Otto Bohlmann, Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats (Totowa: Barnes, 1982) 116. In addition to this book-length study, the following writers examine the Yeats-Nietzsche connection with some insight: Ellmann, Identity 91-98; Donald S. Thatcher, Nietzsche in England 1890-1914 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970) 139-73; and Erich Heller, The Disinherited Mind, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1975) 330-47.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Bohlmann 84.

<sup>7</sup>"Reconciliation" (1910) recalls the impact of that moment:

Some may have blamed you that you took away  
The verses that could move them on the day

When, the ears being deafened, the sight of the  
eyes blind

With lightning, you went from me. . . .

(Variorum Poems 257)

<sup>8</sup>Ellmann, Masks 159-60.

<sup>9</sup>Moore 41.

<sup>10</sup>Letters 397.

<sup>11</sup>Letters 402.

<sup>12</sup>Letters 403.

<sup>13</sup>Letters 434.

<sup>14</sup>W. B. Yeats, "First Principles," from "Samhain: 1904,"  
in Explorations 148-49. Hereafter cited as "First."

<sup>15</sup>"First" 150.

<sup>16</sup>"First" 151.

<sup>17</sup>"First" 153.

<sup>18</sup>"First" 153.

<sup>19</sup>"First" 154. This distinction between tragedy and  
comedy, here only a vague value judgment, is thoroughly  
treated in "The Tragic Theatre."

<sup>20</sup>"First" 155. Compare Nietzsche's declaration in Section  
821 of The Will to Power, a copy of which Yeats owned (see  
Thatcher [157] for the list of titles by Nietzsche in Yeats'

library): "Tragedy does not teach 'resignation'--To represent terrible and questionable things is in itself an instinct for power and magnificence in an artist: he does not fear them--There is no such thing as pessimistic art--Art affirms" (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; ed., with commentary, by Walter Kaufmann [New York: Random, 1967] 434-35).

<sup>21</sup>"First" 152.

<sup>22</sup>"First" 152.

<sup>23</sup>"First" 152.

<sup>24</sup>"First" 152. As Yeats said in a later (1909) journal entry, "Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned" (Autobiography 332).

<sup>25</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Play, the Player, and the Scene," from "Samhain: 1904," in Explorations 170. Hereafter cited as "Play."

<sup>26</sup>Some of J. B. Yeats' written comments are remarkably close to his son's adaptations. For example, he describes personality as "a man brought into unity by a mood, not a static unity, (that is character) but alive and glowing like a star, all in harmony with himself" (quoted in Ellmann, Masks 20). At times he goes overboard with enthusiasm for



personality, far beyond anything written by his son: "Personality is neither right nor wrong--for it is divine . . . it is one with our very selves, and with the all pervasive Divine . . ." (quoted in Ellmann, Masks 20). J. B. Yeats also speaks of "emotion" in a way that suggests it is the precursor of his son's version of passion: ". . . the intellect of man as man, and therefore of an artist . . . should obey no voice except that of emotion, but I would have a man know all emotions. . . . have all these roused to their utmost strength and to have all of them roused. . . . the least awakening of feeling is a harmony, in which every chord of every feeling vibrates" (quoted in Ellmann, Masks 15). The last sentence, another definition of personality, closely matches W. B. Yeats' description of Unity of Being in Autobiography: "My father, from whom I learned the term, preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly" (128). Obviously, then, personality is the early term for Unity of Being, the more precise term for wholeness. To be sure, once Yeats started using the later name (around 1917), he hardly ever mentioned personality again. However, neither father nor son used terms with great precision or consistency. Like the quantum physicist, a Yeats scholar must rely on waves of probability.

On the whole subject of the elder Yeats' ideas and influence on his son's thought, see Ellmann, Masks 13-20,

54, 237, and 247. On the relationship of personality and Unity of Being, see Flannery 58-59.

<sup>27</sup>"Play" 169-70.

<sup>28</sup>"Play" 169.

<sup>29</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Discoveries," in E & I 264. Hereafter cited as "Discoveries." Yeats says much the same thing in "The Return from the Stars" (1908), an unpublished piece: ". . . we are re-uniting the mind and soul and body of man, to the living world outside us" (quoted in Ellmann, Identity 296).

<sup>30</sup>"Discoveries" 265-66.

<sup>31</sup>"Discoveries" 266.

<sup>32</sup>"Discoveries" 266-67.

<sup>33</sup>"Discoveries" 267.

<sup>34</sup>"Discoveries" 271.

<sup>35</sup>"Discoveries" 271.

<sup>36</sup>"Discoveries" 271.

<sup>37</sup>"Discoveries" 272.

<sup>38</sup>"Discoveries" 272.

<sup>39</sup>"Discoveries" 287-88.

<sup>40</sup>"Discoveries" 295.

<sup>41</sup>"Discoveries" 295.

42 "Discoveries" 296.

43 "Discoveries" 296.

44 "Discoveries" 297.

45 W. B. Yeats, "Poetry and Tradition," in E & I 251.

Hereafter cited as "Tradition." These lines are adapted from an injunction in the Golden Dawn neophyte ritual, which Yeats had already turned to poetry in "To his Heart, bidding it have no Fear" (1896). See p. 22 and accompanying note.

46 "Tradition" 251

47 "Tradition" 251.

48 "Tradition" 251.

49 "Tradition" 252.

50 "Tradition" 252.

51 "Tradition" 252.

52 "Tradition" 254.

53 "Tradition" 252.

54 "Tradition" 252.

55 "Tradition" 252-53.

56 Yeats' term "recklessness" may be his translation of Baldassare Castiglione's familiar sprezzatura, for at the end of Section III he comments on the "'recklessness' Castiglione thought necessary in good manners . . ." (256).

57 "Tradition" 253.

58 "Tradition" 253.

59 In two journal entries in Memoirs, Yeats has very succinct views on style. In one entry he calls it "emotional nobility" (263), while in the other he mentions "moral radiance" as "that thing which is to life what style is to letters . . ." (258). To the latter statement should be added the following: "I have had to learn how hard . . . is that purification from insincerity, vanity, malignity, arrogance, which is the discovery of style" (W. B. Yeats, "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time," in E & I 319; hereafter cited "Synge").

60 "Tradition" 254.

61 "Tradition" 254.

62 "Tradition" 254-55.

63 "Tradition" 255.

64 "Play" 170. Compare Nietzsche's brilliant description of the transference of self-unity in The Will to Power (Section 852): "Those imposing artists who let a harmony sound forth from every conflict are those who bestow upon things their own power and self-redemption: they express their innermost experience in the symbolism of every work of art they produce-- their creativity is gratitude for their existence" (451).

65 "Tradition" 254.

66 "Tradition" 255.

67 "Tradition" 255.

68 See Moore 145-55.

69 "Tradition" 256.

70 "Tradition" 256.

71 "Tradition" 256.

72 W. B. Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre," in E & I 238.

Hereafter cited as "Theatre."

73 John M. Synge, The Complete Plays of John M. Synge  
(New York: Vintage, 1960) 259.

74 "Theatre" 239.

75 "Theatre" 239.

76 "Theatre" 239.

77 "Theatre" 239.

78 "Theatre" 240. Compare the following journal entry  
(1909): "Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character,  
it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion  
. . ." (Autobiography 318).

79 "Theatre" 242.

80 "Theatre" 241.

81 "Theatre" 243.

<sup>82</sup>Autobiography 355. A slightly later journal entry (1910) clarifies Yeats' great interest in the quality of the acting, for he sees the dramatic figure as a vital symbol of the imagination: ". . . all dramatic characters in emotional or poetical work are creators" (Memoirs 248).

<sup>83</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Samhain: 1905," in Explorations 196.

<sup>84</sup>"Theatre" 241.

<sup>85</sup>"Theatre" 245.

<sup>86</sup>"Synge" 321.

<sup>87</sup>"Synge" 326-27.

<sup>88</sup>"Synge" 325.

<sup>89</sup>"Synge" 322.

<sup>90</sup>"Synge" 339. Interestingly enough, Yeats exactly reverses this perspective (while keeping the image of Adam) in a 1908 address:

We . . . are Adams of a different Eden, a more terrible Eden perhaps, for we must name and number the passions and motives of men. There, too, everything must be known, everything understood, everything expressed. . . . Mankind must be seen and understood in every conceivable situation. There is no laughter too bitter, no irony too harsh for utterance, no passion too terrible to be set

before the minds of men.

(W. B. Yeats, "British Association Visit to the Abbey Theatre," in UP II 369-70)

<sup>91</sup>"Synge" 339.

<sup>92</sup>"Synge" 341. In a journal entry written earlier in 1910, Yeats says the same thing more plainly:

A nation can only be created in the deepest thought of its deepest minds--the literature that makes it (and this making takes a long time)--who have first made themselves fundamental and profound and then realized themselves in art. In this way they rouse into national action the governing minds of their time. . . . They create national character. Goethe, Shakespeare, Dante, Homer have so created, and many others in less degree. (Memoirs 248)

<sup>93</sup>See Flannery (291-92) on their collaborations.

<sup>94</sup>W. B. Yeats, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 1125. Hereafter cited as Variorum Plays.

<sup>95</sup>Variorum Plays 1158.

<sup>96</sup>Variorum Plays 1160.

<sup>97</sup>Variorum Plays 1164.

<sup>98</sup>Variorum Plays 478.

<sup>99</sup>Variorum Plays 622.

- <sup>100</sup>Variorum Plays 634.
- <sup>101</sup>Variorum Plays 266-67.
- <sup>102</sup>Variorum Plays 309.
- <sup>103</sup>Variorum Plays 310.
- <sup>104</sup>Variorum Plays 375-76.
- <sup>105</sup>Variorum Plays 373.
- <sup>106</sup>Flannery 298. As Yeats told Arthur Symons on August 3, 1905, "I let them play it in London . . . that I might find out what was wrong" (Letters 459).
- <sup>107</sup>Letters 460.
- <sup>108</sup>Letters 460.
- <sup>109</sup>Letters 462.
- <sup>110</sup>Letters 462.
- <sup>111</sup>Letters 454. The lines quoted by Yeats are the same as in the published play except "hope" replaces "joy" and "root" is made plural (Variorum Poems 227).
- <sup>112</sup>Variorum Poems 235.
- <sup>113</sup>Letters 454.
- <sup>114</sup>Flannery 296.
- <sup>115</sup>Natalie Crohn Schmitt says that Yeats' plays do not have action in any usual sense but instead "express being--



a moment of timelessness," and that the best "have the density of poetry" ("Dramatic Multitude and Mystical Experience: W. B. Yeats," Educational Theatre Journal 24 [1972] 149). Warren Leamon believes that Yeats never found "a compromise between what his age demanded (character and action) and what his imagination demanded (action frozen in image)" ("The Romantic as Playwright," Western Humanities Review 36,ii [1982] 103). Thus, Leamon says, "he wrote plays which stand as monuments to the Romantic movement in lyric poetry but remain outside the mainstream of tragic vision which has given the Western theatre its most enduring plays" (107-08). In a similar way, Yeats' fiction could not reconcile narrative and the visionary moment. As Edward Hirsch says, "The transcendental moment itself interrupts causality and stops the very flow and momentum of narrative. . . . in Yeats's case narrative was ultimately incompatible with absolute vision" ("A War between the Orders: Yeats's Fiction and the Transcendental Moment," Novel 17 [1983] 65).

<sup>116</sup>W. B. Yeats, Preface to Poems 1899-1905, in Variorum Poems 849.

## CHAPTER IV

### MASK, DAIMON, AND REFINED THEORY, 1911-17

The center of Yeats' tragic theory is the great moment of personality or unity in artist, artwork, and audience. In the years following his major essays on tragedy, Yeats continued focusing on the tragic process and its moment in journals, essays, plays, and poems. Two important variations of these key ideas emerged: "mask" and "Daimon." The mask doctrine is a simpler model of the creative process described in "Poetry and Tradition," while the Daimon concept updates Yeats' earlier imaginative myth of the moods, internal struggle projected on an absolute scale. Mask and Daimon are also dynamic complements, redefining the double link between the natural and supernatural orders. As such, they suggest free will and determinism, or even "God helps those who help themselves," for the Daimon, as an individual's external (and eternal) opposite, comes only to one who has already found his internal opposite or mask. These ideas, as well as their earlier equivalents, appear in both substance and manner in Yeats' best work throughout the period. Mask, Daimon, and the reworked tragic model, then, are the subjects of this chapter.

The idea of the mask was deeply rooted in Yeats' background. The shy boy living in his dreams naturally imagined himself strong. Hamlet, Yeats tells us, "was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself."<sup>1</sup> At the start, then, the mask was a psychological shield, a pose of extroverted strength making social life possible. For most people, a social self only expedites natural inclinations; for Yeats, a loner and escapist, it alone made possible an external life.

In this battle to master social fright as a young man, Yeats was profoundly influenced by a widespread obsession in the eighties and nineties with the dual or split self.<sup>2</sup> Of those so obsessed, Oscar Wilde (a personal friend) undoubtedly had the greatest effect on him. In The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), for instance, Wilde echoes Yeats' view of the mask as armor when he characterizes Dorian's thoughts on his portrait: "What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything."<sup>3</sup> But Wilde also sees the mask as essentially an aesthetic creation. Form of any kind, it seems, is an improvement upon nature. As one speaker exclaims in "The Critic as Artist" (1890), "In every sphere of life form is the beginning of things. . . . Yes, form is everything. It is the secret of life."<sup>4</sup> The image in art and the image of self presented in society are one. The artist makes himself

as surely as he makes characters and metaphors. And the mask is a beautiful deception that triggers revelation: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."<sup>5</sup> If Wilde's viewpoint proved escapist and shallow in his own life, his yoking of mask and image would prove instrumental in Yeats' later theory.

A second, simultaneous influence was the use of masks in Golden Dawn rituals and practices. Here the mask, as image of the higher self or god to which the initiate aspired, was physically symbolized. As early as the Theoricus or 2=9 ritual, for example, masks of Osiris, the Lion, the Eagle, and the Ox appeared.<sup>6</sup> Animal heads as functional masks were worn by officers to symbolize the "god-form" each represented.<sup>7</sup> And each initiate had to make small cardboard gods in bright colors as meditation aids.<sup>8</sup> Physical masks were thus constantly present to Yeats the magical adept. Also, less tangibly, the aspirant had to learn to stand outside himself and sense how his mask or assumed behavior appeared to others.<sup>9</sup> The Golden Dawn therefore gave Yeats a ritualistic parallel to Wilde's linked mask and image, as well as providing him a discipline for monitoring his growing self-possession.

During the nineties Yeats' natural bent toward mask-making slowly matured under such influences. He wrote constantly on the split self, projecting his inner struggle

into opposed fictional characters, such as John Sherman and William Howard in the novel John Sherman (1891) and Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne in the long tales Rosa Alchemica, The Tables of the Law, and The Adoration of the Magi (all 1897). Yeats also further refined his public face, continuing to defeat shyness with what he called the "necessary technique of seeming."<sup>10</sup> However, Yeats seldom used the word "mask," and was far from creating any doctrine. His theory of the mask evolved slowly. Additional influences early in the new century finally helped bring it to a focus.

The first of these new influences was Nietzsche, catalyst of much in Yeats' tragic perspective. As might be expected, the philosopher's thoughts on masks are dynamic, giving dramatic power to the emotional and artistic facets of the mask Yeats had found in Wilde. Nietzsche's major statements on the subject are in Beyond Good and Evil. Here, for example, he provides another reason for making a personal mask beyond simply evading pain--the fear of misinterpretation:

Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely shallow, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche also places masks in a tragic dimension:

The spiritual haughtiness and nausea of every man who has suffered profoundly . . . his shuddering certainty . . . finds all kinds of disguises necessary to protect itself against contact with obtrusive and pitying hands and altogether against everything that is not its equal in suffering.

Profound suffering makes noble; it separates.<sup>12</sup>

And Nietzsche believes strongly that art and artifice come from a single creative force. He calls the need for dissimulation

that continual urge and surge of a creative, forgiving, changeable force: in this the spirit enjoys the multiplicity and craftiness of its masks, it also enjoys the feeling of its security behind them: after all, it is surely its Protean arts that defend and conceal it best.<sup>13</sup>

Nietzsche's famous Übermensch--idealized man--is the proper mask for all who affirm their own individuality. As life itself tells Zarathustra, "I am that which must always overcome itself."<sup>14</sup> Others seek escape from such personal responsibility in religion. Zarathustra sneers at this: "Behind a god's mask you hide from yourselves in your 'purity'; your revolting worm has crawled into a god's mask."<sup>15</sup> In Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche calls this kind of person "objective" and "without substance and content, a 'selfless' man."<sup>16</sup> Thus, to Nietzsche there are two kinds of people

and two kinds of masks--a framework obviously significant to Yeats much later when writing A Vision (i.e., primary and antithetical people, true and false masks). The immediate impact of Nietzsche on Yeats in 1902 was discussed in the last chapter. Yeats' marginal annotation quoted there (p. 75), on the self-soul opposition, is even more germane to the mask concept. In the "night," Yeats says, the soul denies self and turns to the spirit--Zarathustra's description of the god's mask. But in "day" Yeats interprets Nietzsche as follows:

Day	{Homer}	many	day	--affirmation of
		gods		self, the soul
				turned from spirit
				to be its mask and
				instrument when it
				seeks life. <sup>17</sup>

While his syntax is confusing, Yeats apparently means that soul turns from spirit to a new, dynamic mask--self. Yeats thus interprets Nietzsche correctly, quickly adapting the latter's idea of the creative, affirmative mask to his own germinating doctrine, just as he infused his essays on tragedy with a Nietzschean spirit. One might even say that Yeats used Nietzsche himself as a mask<sup>18</sup> as he struggled to a new perspective and left his escapist days behind.

The second new influence on Yeats' mask doctrine was the theatre. Just as theatre work provided him a matrix for

his essays on tragedy, so did the problem of representing the tragic moment on a stage force Yeats to focus his scattered ideas on the mask into firm principles. In order to elevate personal emotion into a communal experience, he needed to symbolize universality in physical terms. In an early experiment (related to the Celtic order), the chanting of lines was to symbolize elevation. Through proper rhythm, "that subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire,"<sup>19</sup> the trained Yeatsian actor could sound the communal chord. By 1902 Yeats thought of all art as "monotony in external things for the sake of an interior variety . . . an aceticism of the imagination."<sup>20</sup> (Flannery is correct in calling this form of declamation "a kind of vocal mask."<sup>21</sup>) Yeats also sought the proper rhythmic movement for the body on stage. His ideal in the early Abbey Theatre was something like a Greek statue in motion--minimal movement in the service of cadenced speech. Yeats outlined his desires in 1904 in "The Play, the Player, and the Scene": "That we may throw emphasis on the words in poetical drama . . . the actors must move . . . slowly and quietly, and not very much, and there should be something in their movements decorative and rhythmical. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

At this point Yeats found a kindred thinker in Gordon Craig, illegitimate son of the actress Ellen Terry. Through a book, On the Art of the Theatre (1905), and constant practical experimentation in Germany and Italy, Craig had



evolved concepts of theatrical production that fascinated Yeats.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Craig had created movable screens for scenery that Yeats later used to advance his universal ideals: ". . . Mr. Craig's screens, where every line must suggest some mathematical proportion, where all is phantastic, incredible, and luminous, have no nationality."<sup>24</sup> Craig also imagined an Übermarionette, a stylized, symbolic figure as beautiful as a Greek statue. Acting could thus be made entirely symbolic. The actor's face would be covered by a mask, thereby freezing personal expression into an idealized image. In Craig's words, the figure would be clothed "with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit."<sup>25</sup> Around 1907-09, when Yeats' goal of rhythmic verse-speaking in the Abbey had collapsed and audiences seemed indifferent to his high ideals, Craig's actual and theoretical innovations helped revitalize his interest in the theatre.

By early 1910 Craig had provided Yeats with a set of scale-model screens to play with. The latter was thrilled by the freedom he would now have:

Henceforth I can all but "produce" my play while I write it, moving hither and thither little figures of cardboard . . . allowing the scene to give the words and the words the scene. I am very grateful for he has banished a whole world that wearied me and was undignified and given me forms and lights upon which I can play as upon some stringed instrument.<sup>26</sup>

Yeats was also eager to use Craig's masks. Writing to Lady Gregory in October 1910 about an upcoming production of The Hour-Glass with designs by Craig, Yeats is excited about "putting the Fool in a mask," and above all wishes "the Abbey to be the first modern theatre to use the mask."<sup>27</sup> Eventually the Fool would wear a Craig mask, which, according to a later note by Yeats, "makes him seem less a human being than a principle of mind."<sup>28</sup>

In 1909-10 the various strands of the mask idea--mask as emotional shield, as imaginative expression, as theatrical symbol--products of instinct and influence, began to be woven into consistent doctrine in Yeats' journal. For example, he sees his early goal of self-possession as willfully dramatic:

There is a relation between discipline and the theatrical sense. If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves. . . . Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of arduous full life.<sup>29</sup>

Yeats repeats this viewpoint more personally in a later entry: "All my moral endeavour for many years has been an attempt to re-create practical instinct in myself. I can

only conceive of it as of a kind of acting."<sup>30</sup>

This journal also contains Yeats' first statement joining mask and artistic image. As Wilde and Nietzsche before him, he believes that making a mask is the same as making art:

I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed.<sup>31</sup>

Yeats unequivocally connects this process to his tragic theory when he equates it to the attainment of personality and style: "Style, personality--deliberately adopted and therefore a mask--is the only escape from the hot-faced bargainers and the money-changers."<sup>32</sup> Finding one's anti-self, therefore, is but another way of describing the tragic process found most strikingly in "Poetry and Tradition," in which style transforms sorrow into joyous personality. One 1909 journal entry speculates on these alternate models of the one process:

A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men. It has . . . ecstasy, which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen, perhaps, by all those that still live. The masks

of tragedy contain neither character nor personal energy. They are allied to decoration and to the abstract figures of Egyptian temples. Before the mind can look out of their eyes the active will perishes, hence their sorrowful calm. . . . is not ecstasy some fulfilment of the soul in itself, some slow or sudden expansion of it like an overflowing well? Is not this what is meant by beauty?<sup>33</sup>

Here Yeats is still uncertain about complex states. As he says in the same entry, "I feel this but do not see clearly, for I am hunting truth into its thicket. . . ." <sup>34</sup> But a year later, in "The Tragic Theatre," he is more certain that the mask, identical to personality or overflowing soul (tragedy, of course, is the art of just such a flood), is indeed beauty, symbolized as ideal form:

If the real world is not rejected, it is but touched here and there . . . if we are painters, we shall express personal emotion through ideal form, a symbolism handed by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks . . . and so it is that in the supreme moment of tragic art there comes upon one that strange sensation as though the hair on one's head stood up.<sup>35</sup>

Archetypal form is the key to evoking a communal response from an audience.

As his thoughts on the tragic moment and ideal form developed, Yeats moved easily between his alternate models for explanations. For example, his script for a 1911 speech features the language of the tragic essays. Here, speaking of the Shakespearean tragic figure in the "supreme moment," Yeats trumpets the communal effect of the universal image:

All humanity is there one man. Shakespeare expresses something that is common to all, something that is like a liquid that can be poured into vessels of every shape. . . . in tragedy . . . there is a need for surroundings where beauty, decoration, pattern--that is to say, the universal in form--takes the place of accidental circumstance.<sup>36</sup>

But in a 1915 draft of The Player Queen, Yeats describes ideal form according to the mask:

. . . no one finds their genius [until] they have found some role, some image, that gives them a pose towards life, that liberates something within them. . . . Only by images . . . do we make the eternal life become part of our ephemeral life.<sup>37</sup>

The last passage also involves Yeats' idea of the "Daimon" (called "genius" here), which, in the years between 1912 and 1915, began appearing as eternal complement to the mask doctrine. The word "genius," Latin equivalent to the Greek-derived "Daimon," served Yeats in its more modern

sense as well, for the joining of mask and Daimon resulted in his most sophisticated version of the imagination myth.

Yeats was drawing upon ancient tradition with the Daimon concept. The belief in beings intermediate between man and the Absolute is firmly grounded in both Greek and Judaic culture, all the way back to Homer.<sup>38</sup> Yeats probably discovered the idea in the patchwork doctrine of the Golden Dawn, which was largely made up of the mystical offspring of Greek and Hebrew thought: Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, and Cabalism.

Each initiate in the Golden Dawn took a name. Yeats, appropriately enough, chose "Demon est Deus Inversus" or "D.E.D.I.," reflecting a fascination with his own dual nature. It also fit perfectly the order's major goal of training each initiate to rise gradually toward a spiritual state in which, during a visionary moment, union with the Absolute could occur. To this end, the individual had a guide--an inner Daimon or Holy Guardian Angel, an emanation from the Astral Light (that eternal part of each person equivalent to a soul or great memory).<sup>39</sup> Through ritual practice each member learned to invoke his Daimon, who in turn guided him up the Sephirotic ladder toward the moment of union.<sup>40</sup> The moment itself was symbolized by the Cabalistic double image of a serpent winding up the Tree of Life while a lightning bolt strikes the leaves--the classic image of the double link between the orders (see p. 33).

In his writings of the nineties, Yeats does not mention the Daimon by name. However, the moods or incarnating spirits, focus of his usual imagination myth at the time, certainly act like the guardian Daimon of the Golden Dawn and, as will be seen shortly, like the Daimon of the much later Per Amica Silentia Lunae. While writing his essays on tragedy, Yeats did not refer to tutelary spirits by any name. The idea of spirits descending into the human imagination did not mesh with his tough Nietzschean tone of 1902-10, although the double link is implied in the tragic moment. But Yeats' interest in spiritualism at the end of this period would change that, in a personal way.

In his constant quest for paths to eternity, Yeats occasionally flirted with spiritualism as an obvious shortcut. He attended his first seance in the late eighties, against Madame Blavatsky's orders (see p. 20). In the late nineties, stimulated by the supernatural tinge of the folklore gathered with Lady Gregory in the Irish countryside, Yeats began attending seances regularly, apparently with Constance Gore-Booth in London.<sup>41</sup> As he later characterized it, to the ancient beliefs of the peasants he "noticed many analogies in modern spiritism and began a more careful comparison. . . ." <sup>42</sup> He was merely "comparing one form of belief with another . . . discovering a philosophy."<sup>43</sup> But his most serious involvement with mediums and their messages began in 1909, peaking in 1912-14.<sup>44</sup> During this latter

period a control named "Leo Africanus" identified himself as Yeats' opposite. This strange episode brought the dormant Daimon concept to the forefront of Yeats' mind.

Yeats first encountered Leo Africanus in a confused sitting of May 3, 1909. There Leo told him cryptically, "I am your guide."<sup>45</sup> But no further mention of this control was made until a breakthrough seance on May 9, 1912. This sitting was directed by the American medium Etta Wriedt, who did not go into trance at all, preferring to have voices speak through a metal telescope trumpet while she conversed with her own controls.<sup>46</sup> Yeats recorded the results in both a seance report and a journal entry. The latter is more succinct about what ensued:

Then there came a very loud voice through the trumpet. It had come for "Mr. Gates." Or so the medium heard the voice. I said that was me. Then the voice said, "I have been with you from childhood. We want to use your hand and brain." "You possess key," or "you are a key mind," I forget which. "I am Leo the writer--writer and explorer" [historically, an Italian geographer].<sup>47</sup>

In his seance report Yeats says that the voice seemed to speak in a strong, possibly contrived Irish accent, but that one of the sitters told him it was much like his own (the medium said that the control had to get its "means of expression" from Yeats' mind).<sup>48</sup> While fascinated, Yeats was



also quite skeptical, as he always tried to be in his quasi-scientific approach to spiritualism. He did not doubt that some control had spoken, but was it actually his Daimon guide? He thought it "possible that Leo may turn out to be a symbolic being," one of those controls "who give themselves names of great antiquity . . . [selecting] by some process of unconscious affinity from the recorded or unrecorded memories of the world a name or career that symbolizes their nature."<sup>49</sup>

Yeats communicated with Leo sporadically in 1912-14, all the while trying to allay his doubts through test questions.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, he sought corroborative evidence of spiritual presences. He investigated the automatic scripts of Elizabeth Radcliffe in 1913, and was satisfied of their supernatural origins.<sup>51</sup> Yeats also studied ectoplasmic manifestations in Paris and the bleeding oleograph of the Sacred Heart at Mirabeau in 1914.<sup>52</sup> More importantly, he read widely in spiritualist sources. Later in 1914 he rediscovered Swedenborg's Spiritual Diary and began a thorough reading of Henry More, the seventeenth century Platonist.<sup>53</sup> Swedenborg's ideas helped Yeats structure his tentative conclusions about hovering spirits, especially Daimons. The important essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" (1914) was the result. A general description of the mingling orders is perhaps the highlight of this work. One passage is particularly strong:

. . . out of the celestial world, immediately beyond the world of form, fall certain seeds . . . that exfoliate through us into forms, elaborate scenes, buildings, alterations of form that are related by "correspondence" or "signature" to incomprehensible realities.<sup>54</sup>

Yeats also uses Swedenborg to corroborate his growing Daimon concept:

Swedenborg has written that we are each in the midst of a group of associated spirits who sleep when we sleep and become the dramatis personae of our dreams, and are always the other will that wrestles with our thought, shaping it to our despite.<sup>55</sup>

The relationship with Leo Africanus reached its climax in 1915. On July 22, in Yeats' own rooms, Felicia Scatcherd invoked Leo through automatic writing.<sup>56</sup> Yeats' recollection of the message three weeks later provides an outline of their relationship and announces a new means of communication:

He was drawn to me because in life he had been all undoubting impulse. . . . I was doubting, conscientious and timid. His contrary and by association with me would be made not one but two perfected natures. He asked me to write him a letter addressed to him . . . giving all my doubts about spiritual things and then to write a reply as from

him to me. He would control me in that reply so that it would be really from him.<sup>57</sup>

The two "letters" (which comprise the "Leo Africanus" manuscript) were apparently written within a few months of the July session.<sup>58</sup> Yeats' letter to Leo traces the history of their kinship and tells what he has discovered about the historical Leo Africanus. He also vents most of his doubts, fears, hopes, and knowledge about the spirit world and those who communicate with it. For instance, near the end Yeats again expresses the fear that Leo is not his eternal opposite and guide but merely one of the disembodied spiritual horde, a kind of ghostly con-man "perpetually compelled to personify itself, & create or discover biographies. . . ." <sup>59</sup>

The second letter, Yeats writing as Leo, is a tour de force if there ever was one. Keep in mind that this is not automatic writing but something like first person narrative fiction,<sup>60</sup> or, more precisely, stream-of-unconsciousness. Certainly those authors most important to Yeats on spiritual matters--Blake and Boehme from the nineties, Swedenborg and More most recently--are mentioned, with Leo even using More's term "Spiritus Mundi." Whether viewed as supernaturally inspired or as spontaneous gurglings of Yeats' imagination (roughly the same thing anyway in his complementary perspective), this second letter provides a crude sketch of Yeats' spiritual concerns for the past thirty years, as well as a very rough preview of Per Amica Silentia Lunae.

Specifically, Leo's letter includes the usual statement of Daimonic purpose and an overview of the eternal scheme:

. . . now for your good & my own I have chosen to linger near, your contrary mind. . . . All living minds are surrounded by shades, who are the contrary will which presents before the abstracted [?] mind & the mind of the sleeper ideal images. The living mind could [not] exist for a moment without our succour, for god does not act immediately upon the mind but through mediatorial forms.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, these thoughts closely parallel Yeats' views in "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places." Such vital statements abound in this strange narrative.

Yeats' earlier ideas reverberate throughout Leo's discussion of the source of images and forms. Henry More's Spiritus Mundi, it seems, functions as a cosmic reservoir of archetypal images,<sup>62</sup> like Yeats' great memory in "Magic" (and the soon-to-be-preferred term "Anima Mundi" of Per Amica Silentia Lunae). One such passage joins psychoanalytic and Platonic metaphors in the cause of a vast commonality:

[Henry More believed that] the imagination [of] the unborn but gave an impulse towards form completed by "Spiritus Mundi" which is perhaps that world, your century has named the unconscious. . . . The Spiritus Mundi is indeed the place of images & of all things [that] have been or yet shall be, & all

these begin with you & are taken in daily by mens eyes. . . . When we die [we] have nothing but our memories . . . those memories our punishment and our reward arrange & measure, & transform in pattern. We are not indeed solitary for we can share each memory like souls drifting together-- & build a common world. . . .<sup>63</sup>

An even more interesting echo of earlier ideas seems to suggest the tragic moment. This central experience is here described in absolute terms, as viewed from eternity:

You are in the presence of the dead more than you know because you are never out of it [Spiritus Mundi]. At some moment of crisis, your movements are automatic almost unconscious, & your mind is visited perhaps by alert scruples & compunctions. Instinct but made the assertion, & [a] more remote spirit bound to [your] mind by some ligature of sympathy; who knowingly or unknowingly has folded you up into the thought.<sup>64</sup>

Toward the end of the letter, the Daimon's role is more clearly defined. Leo insists that only because he is "in all things furthest from your intellect & your will" can he function as Yeats' interlocutor.<sup>65</sup> However, Yeats was unconvinced and disappointed in this entire exercise. As he replied to Leo in a final postscript, "I am not convinced that in this letter there is one sentence that has come from

beyond my own imagination. . . . no thought that has not occurred to me in some form or another for many years. . . ."66

But Yeats still believed in the Daimon concept, for he would now begin to gather his thoughts and instincts into a sweeping view of the Daimon and its interrelationship with the mask and tragic ecstasy. The result, Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1917), is probably his finest prose work.

Per Amica Silentia Lunae, containing two related but distinct essays ("Anima Hominis" and "Anima Mundi"), is a delicious buffet serving up nearly every Yeatsian obsession from childhood through May 1917. Everything important is here: occult cosmology, evocation, war/double link between the orders, Daimon and mask, and the dynamics of tragic art. In other words, Per Amica is a grand synthesis, an intellectual and spiritual abstract of Yeats to date. A Vision would later do the same thing in much greater detail, but with often formidable obscurity. Per Amica is more personal, more approachable. While occasionally difficult, it is a graceful blend of art and theory.

"Anima Hominis" ("the soul of man") celebrates the tragic process in its later model--the artist finding his mask in disappointment, thereby unifying his soul in a visionary moment (which also includes a visit from his Daimon). Early in the essay Yeats stresses opposition as the prerequisite of tragic art. While "happy art" conveys fulfillment in hollow images, "when its lineaments express

also the poverty of the exasperation that set its maker to the work, we call it tragic art."<sup>67</sup> Of course, the more urgent opposition is internal, and its resolution through the mask brings the exquisite moment:

We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric,  
but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. . . .  
we sing amid our uncertainty. . . . The other self,  
the anti-self or the antithetical self . . . comes  
but to those who are no longer deceived, whose  
passion is reality. . . . for the awakening, for  
the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition  
offers us a different word--ecstasy.<sup>68</sup>

Yeats constantly hammers at this theme of defeat or disappointment as the necessary goad to achieving self-unity and therefore tragic art. He even becomes rhapsodic about it:

He can only create the highest imaginable beauty  
who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only  
when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall  
we be rewarded by that dazzling, unforeseen, wing-  
footed wanderer. . . . He is of all things not  
impossible the most difficult. . . .<sup>69</sup>

But this is only the natural perspective, one-half of the double link. There still must be the supernatural descent, the lightning bolt, to complete the moment. Thus, Yeats now brings the Daimon into the picture, more coherently than in "Leo Africanus":

. . . the Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts. Because the ghost is simple, the man heterogenous and confused, they are but knit together when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads, and of that only.

The more insatiable in all desire, the more resolute to refuse deception or an easy victory, the more close will be the bond, the more violent and definite the antipathy.<sup>70</sup>

Daimon and man are joined in a sublimely ambivalent relationship, like many human lovers. The orders are therefore simultaneously at war and at peace with one another, in eternal syncopation. Struggle and opposition cut across dimensions. As the mask or voluntary anti-self is "of all things not impossible the most difficult to achieve,"<sup>71</sup> so too, on the other plane, does the Daimon or involuntary anti-self "ever set us to the hardest work among those not impossible. . . ." <sup>72</sup> But only when one first helps himself by finding his mask will his Daimon come at all. Self-unity invokes eternal response. The double link is contingent upon human volition, and is played out in the human imagination: ". . . we meet always in the deep of the mind, whatever our work, wherever our reverie carries us, that other Will."<sup>73</sup>



Despite its treatment of the abstract Daimon concept, "Anima Hominis" still mostly concerns tragic art and the role of the tragic artist. Hence, much of its temper and imagery comes from Yeats' tragic theory of the previous decade. For example, the striking comparison of saint and poet in "Discoveries" (see pp. 87-88) reappears, with the renewed emphasis that the way to eternity goes through experience:

. . . I have thought much of the difference between the winding movement of Nature and the straight line . . . the mark of saint or sage. I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning. . . . Only when we are saint or sage, and renounce experience itself, can we, in imagery of the Christian Cabbala, leave the sudden lightning and the path of the serpent and become the bowman who aims his arrow at the center of the sun.<sup>74</sup>

Although Yeats long before had chosen the artist's path, he remains fascinated by the saint's direct leap into eternity, still feeling that pull deep within his own nature. While committed to experience and tragic art, he still must search for the ultimate perspective, the divine scheme underlying

human passion and imagination. The second part of Per Amica Silentia Lunae, "Anima Mundi" ("the soul of the world"), serves this need, ambitiously previewing A Vision.

Bolstered by his reading of Henry More, Yeats in "Anima Mundi" sums up a line of thought begun in the Blake commentary--the hierarchy of the creative process. In The Symbol System he described it as a universal mystical triad consisting of a central bodiless mood emanating as a thought, which in turn condenses into a thing (see p. 29). Then, throughout the nineties, Yeats created several variations of a myth about creativity, involving moods, the double link, and the great memory. The tragic creative process, in either its elaborate model (as in "Poetry and Tradition") or its simpler model (finding one's mask), was an extension of this myth to a stricter human scale. By adding the Daimon to the tragic process in "Anima Hominis," Yeats reopened the upper end of the hierarchy, in effect updating the moods and the double link. Now, adapting More's Neo-Platonic structure and terms, he reintroduces (and expands) the great memory as Anima Mundi (apparently identical to Spiritus Mundi, More's other term mentioned in "Leo Africanus").

Early in the essay Yeats reviews his earlier evocation practices, his belief in a great memory, and especially his perplexity about images that "showed intention and choice."<sup>75</sup> The answer, he now thinks, is a dynamic hierarchy beginning in Anima Mundi. Yeats shuffles his metaphors constantly

here, calling Anima Mundi "a vast luminous sea" (346), "the condition of fire" (357), "the general cistern of form" (351), "this general soul" (351), "a great pool or garden" (352), and (an exact translation) "the soul of the world" (351). Whatever called, the concept seems the same as the Absolute or One, the sum of both the great memory and "the great mind" of the "Magic" essay (see p. 35), and very much like the bodiless mood of The Symbol System. Yeats now describes the imaginative hierarchy as the four elements revered by mystical tradition:

From tradition and perception, one thought of one's own life as symbolized by earth, the place of heterogeneous things, the images as mirrored in water, and the images themselves one could divine but as air; and beyond it all . . . certain aims and governing loves, the fire that makes all simple.<sup>76</sup>

Late in "Anima Mundi" Yeats connects Daimons to the hierarchy. As residents of eternity, they function like personifications of Anima Mundi. Each Daimon, for instance, uses "his mediatorial shades" to bring a man constantly to choices, to the most difficult challenges possible.<sup>77</sup> With familiar imagery Yeats describes a Daimon's "descending power" as "sudden lightning," for "we perceive in a pulsation of the artery, and after slowly decline."<sup>78</sup> And all coherence comes from the Daimon: ". . . always it is an

impulse from some Daimon that gives to our vague, unsatisfied desire, beauty, a meaning, and a form all can accept."<sup>79</sup>

Here Yeats also introduces the idea that a Daimon might be drawn to a nation instead of an individual. In either case "it shapes into its own image the antithetical dream of man or nation."<sup>80</sup>

Near the end of the essay Yeats gives substance to these rarefied ideas by telling of personal moments of illumination. These mostly involve the more serene, vicarious ecstasy of perceiving art, yet they illustrate the same dynamics as primary tragic joy: interplay of mask and Daimon, the sudden infusion of images, and communal feeling:

At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened some book of verse. . . . everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs. . . . It seems as if the vehicle had suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that the images from Anima Mundi, embodied there and drunk with that sweetness would . . . burn up time.

It may be an hour before the mood passes. . . . plainly, when I have closed a book too stirred to go on reading, and in those brief intense visions of sleep, I have something about me that, though it makes me love, is more like innocence. I am in the place where the Daimon is, but I do not

think he is with me until I begin to make a new personality, selecting among those images . . . yet as I write the words "I select," I am full of uncertainty, not knowing when I am the finger, when the clay.<sup>81</sup>

The major themes of Per Amica Silentia Lunae are also present in Yeats' poetry and drama of 1911-17. His lyric poetry, dormant most of the previous decade, made a stunning comeback, becoming the major creative vehicle for the ideas and exuberant spirit of his tragic theory. But in his plays Yeats continued to have difficulty communicating tragic states. Still, his discovery of Japanese Noh drama in 1914-15 helped him personally reshape Western drama in the bold attempt to depict tragic spirituality. (Yeats' new structure had little effect on other dramatists, however.)

Lyrics about Yeats' personal epiphanies mark the early part of the period. While not as elaborate as the private moment in "Anima Mundi" or as heroic as the perfect moments of his earlier tragic theory, they show Yeats apparently practicing what he preached. In "Friends" (1911), for example, thoughts of Maud Gonne produce a surprisingly gentle response:

And what of her that took  
 All till my youth was gone  
 With scarce a pitying look?  
 . . . . .  
 Being wakeful for her sake,

What eagle look still shows,  
 While up from my heart's root  
 So great a sweetness flows  
 I shake from head to foot.<sup>82</sup>

"The Cold Heaven" (1912) presents a much more intense experience. Once again Yeats is thinking of Maud, this time with the anguish from confronting irremediable things in contemplation. But the pain of recognition must come before the joy of reconciliation:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven  
 That seemed as though ice burned and was but the  
     more ice,  
 And thereupon imagination and heart were driven  
 So wild that every casual thought of that and this  
 Vanished, and left but memories, that should be  
     out of season  
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long  
     ago;  
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,  
 Riddled with light. . . .<sup>83</sup>

Most poems of this time, though, bristle with affirmation. While many may not convey specific ideas of the tragic process, they embody something more immediate--that reckless spirit a tragic artist must have. A good example is "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing" (1913). This poem, addressed to Lady Gregory, urges the use of her

traditional aristocratic manners in the face of defeat:

Bred 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.<sup>84</sup>

As part of the tradition of beauty, the aristocrat is equivalent to the artist. He is equally fearless amid adversity. But instead of creating art, he uses beautiful manners-- becoming, in effect, a work of art. And, like tragic art, these manners are exultant.

"The Peacock" (1914) shows this same affirmation, but this time concerning the artist himself. The joyous imagination surmounts even mortality:

What's riches to him  
 That has made a great peacock  
 With the pride of his eye?  
 The wind-beaten, stone grey  
 And desolate Three Rock  
 Would nourish his whim.  
 Live he or die  
 Amid wet rocks and heather,  
 His ghost will be gay

Adding feather to feather  
 For the pride of his eye.<sup>85</sup>

"Her Courage," part of a series called Upon a Dying Lady (1912-14), has the exuberant tone that matches its theme--tragic joy. Yeats pays his dying friend the ultimate tribute by imagining her in a paradise of heroes who have laughed at death:

When her soul flies to the predestined dancing-  
 place  
 (I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I  
 made  
 Amid the dreams of youth) let her come face to face,  
 Amid that first astonishment, with Grania's shade,  
 All but the terrors of the woodland flight forgot  
 That made her Diarmuid dear, and some old cardinal  
 Pacing with half-closed eyelids in a sunny spot  
 Who had murmured of Giorgione at his latest breath--  
 Aye, and Achilles, Timor, Babar, Barhaim, all  
 Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of  
 Death.<sup>86</sup>

Yeats apologizes rather humorously for having to use the speech of The Wanderings of Oisín to symbolize paradise. And the use of such imagery does seem a parody of his early poetry. Yet humor suits the mood of such a sweet-natured poem.



At the core of tragic exultation is a celebration of life. "Discoveries" set the tone in 1906, but many other examples abound, as the past two chapters show. Perhaps the outstanding poetic example during the 1911-17 period is "Easter 1916." In this indictment of political fanaticism, Yeats ends up damning all abstraction, symbolized by a stone. In the third stanza he condemns the stone by celebrating the swirl of life and process around it:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
 Through summer and winter seem  
 Enchanted to a stone  
 To trouble the living stream.  
 The horse that comes from the road,  
 The rider, the birds that range  
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
 Minute by minute they change;  
 A shadow of cloud on the stream  
 Changes minute by minute;  
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
 And a horse splashes within it;  
 The long-legged moor hens dive,  
 And hens to moor cocks call;  
 Minute by minute they live:  
 The stone's in the midst of all.<sup>87</sup>

Wholes and continuums abound. Horse and rider, birds and clouds, stream and horse and moor hens--each group is a

moving, changing whole aesthetically. (As Yeats would later say, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>88</sup>) The stone sits, completely inert and unyielding, while life performs arabesques around it. By extension, Yeats believes the artist is part of the stream as well as its perceiver, able to adapt and adjust to the least nuance of visual or emotional flux. The fanatic is predisposed to sameness and rigidity.

The most intriguing poem of the period is "Ego Dominus Tuus." Although written in 1915, it was published as the introduction to Per Amica Silentia Lunae in 1917. It is especially appropriate in this role, for it is Yeats' outstanding artistic statement of the mask doctrine and the perfect prelude to "Anima Hominis."

The form of "Ego Dominus Tuus" is a dialogue between Hic (objective, practical man) and Ille (the subjective artist). Ille walks by a stream in the moonlight, tracing a magical symbol in the sand to invoke his mask or anti-self:

By the help of an image

I call to my own opposite, summon all

That I have handled least, least looked upon.<sup>89</sup>

The pragmatic Hic answers, "And I would find myself and not an image."<sup>90</sup> Ille's rejoinder expresses Yeats' view that such a limited approach is why art in the modern age lacks that reckless style of tragic art, why sprezzatura has given way to timidity:

That is our modern hope, and by its light  
 We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind  
 And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;  
 Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,  
 We are but critics, or but half create,  
 Timid, entangled, empty and abashed. . . .<sup>91</sup>

The problem with such a pallid acceptance of one's self, in Yeats' view, is that no internal opposition (and hence no tragic process) takes place. Openly seeking the anti-self sets the process in motion. But finding one's opposite can happen only in sorrow or defeat. Only at fortune's nadir can the artist fuse with his mask and thereby shape tragic art. This is the meaning of Ille's description of Dante as the paradigm of the tragic artist. By seeking his opposite, by his "hunger for the apple on the bough / Most out of reach,"<sup>92</sup> Dante was able to reconcile his soul and perfect his art:

He set his chisel to the hardest stone.<sup>93</sup>  
 Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,  
 Derided and deriding, driven out  
 To climb the stair and eat that bitter bread,  
 He found the unpersuadable justice, he found  
 The most exalted lady loved by man.<sup>94</sup>

Surely, Hic responds, there must be men who create art "out of no tragic war," who are impulsive "lovers of life" seeking happiness and singing out when they have found it.<sup>95</sup> Ille's

reply reinforces Yeats' cardinal belief that only art arising from sorrow has validity:

. . . those that love the world serve it in action,  
 Grow rich, popular and full of influence,  
 And should they paint or write, still it is action:  
 The struggle of the fly in the marmalade.  
 The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,  
 The sentimentalist himself; while art  
 Is but a vision of reality.

What portion in the world can the artist have  
 Who has awakened from the common dream  
 But dissipation and despair?<sup>96</sup>

"Ego Dominus Tuus" is about life and art and the choice that must be made between them. The artist, of course, must choose his images--at the sacrifice of ordinary happiness. He can do nothing else; he can have nothing else: "Those men that in their writings are most wise / Own nothing but their blind, stupified hearts."<sup>97</sup> Ille accepts his task and therefore awaits his opposite--the beginning of the creative process:

I call to the mysterious one who yet  
 Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
 And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
 And prove of all imaginable things  
 The most unlike, being indeed my anti-self,  
 And, standing by these characters, disclose  
 All that I seek. . . .<sup>98</sup>

More than any of his previous poems or plays, then, "Ego Dominus Tuus" embodies Yeats' tragic perspective.

At the same time he was writing "Ego Dominus Tuus," Yeats was also adapting the Japanese Noh (or Nō) form as a profound vehicle of tragic ecstasy and the mingling orders. In November 1913 Ezra Pound, then reworking and editing Ernest Fenollosa's work on the Noh, introduced Yeats to the form.<sup>99</sup> Yeats was very excited. He was certain he had found at last the perfect structure for tragedy. All his earlier attempts at stylizing the theatre in order to reduce character and superficial realism were now completely vindicated. Chanting to achieve elevation, decorative and rhythmic movements, the Craig screens and masks--all these must have seemed to Yeats almost a fated progression toward the Noh. As Frank Kermode says, "He almost invented it himself."<sup>100</sup> Noh form seemed to exist for the very purpose of bringing his tragic theory to dramatic life. Even Pound understood this. In the introduction to his Noh edition, Pound wryly states, "It is a theatre of which both Mr. Yeats and Mr. Craig may approve."<sup>101</sup>

The Noh presented Yeats with a wealth of traditional elements: the symbolic dance; speech in formal prose, elevated to verse at intense moments; musical accompaniment (flute and small drums); traditional cultural allusions; elaborate costumes contrasting with a bare stage and a backdrop painted with a pine tree; and, perhaps most important

to Yeats, the wearing of wooden masks for certain roles (especially spirits, women, and old men).<sup>102</sup> Pound speaks of the Noh's "unity in motion" and its "Unity of Image."<sup>103</sup> But Pound's predecessor Fenollosa (writing about 1906) best defined the Noh purpose, in language much like Yeats':

The beauty and power of Noh lie in the concentration. All elements--costume, motion, verse, and music--unite to produce a single clarified impression. Each drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion. The emotion is always fixed upon idea. . . . Some one of these intense emotions is chosen for a piece, and, in it, elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment. Thus the drama became . . . a great moral force for the whole social order of the Samurai.

After all, the most striking thing about these plays is their marvellously complete grasp of spiritual being. . . . In no other drama does the supernatural play so great, so intimate a part. . . . we see the great characters operating under the conditions of the spirit-life; we observe what forces have changed them.<sup>104</sup>

Yeats' crucial tragic elements--passion, personality, tragic ecstasy, and the merging of man and spirit--are thus the very fabric of Noh drama.

The impact of the Noh on Yeats can be gauged from his introduction and commentary to Pound's edition, the essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916). Here he minces no words, stating that "with the help of Japanese plays 'translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound,' I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic . . . an aristocratic form."<sup>105</sup> (He is speaking of At the Hawk's Well, his initial Noh-inspired work, first presented in London in 1916.) In this essay Yeats seems especially interested in the masks and the concluding dance of the Noh. Apparently they are essential, in Yeats' mind, to the success of At the Hawk's Well.

Yeats believes that the Japanese dancer Michio Ito, whom Pound rescued from poverty in 1915,<sup>106</sup> made this first play possible. In the proper setting Ito's rhythmic dance embodies tragic ecstasy and the double link:

In the studio and drawing room alone . . . did I see him as the tragic image that has stirred my imagination. There, where no studied lighting, no stage-picture made an artificial world, he was able . . . to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind.<sup>107</sup>

The "deeps of the mind," where Unity of Being occurs and the supernatural enters the world, are the flood plain of the

communal experience. All imagery, all movement, aims at its indirect communication. Through suggestion, as in the Noh dance, subtlety becomes simplicity:

Our unimaginative arts are content to set a piece of the world as we know it in a place by itself, to put their photographs . . . in a plush or a plain frame, but the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.<sup>108</sup>

For the same reason, Noh masks thrill Yeats, as Craig's masks had five years before. The wooden mask is the ideal image, personality made tangible:

A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player . . . the fine invention of a sculptor. . . . A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body.<sup>109</sup>

The unified effect of mask, dance, music, and speech is that of a rhythmic ritual. To express the ecstasy of the tragic moment, Yeats must use form to suggest the transcendence of form: "The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves, and the triumph of their art is to



express the rhythm in its intensity."<sup>110</sup> As Yeats says in relation to Japanese art in general, one discovers "the most vivid and subtle discrimination of sense and the invention of images more powerful than sense; the continual presence of reality."<sup>111</sup> In the Noh Yeats had indeed found the dramatic correlative of his tragic theory.

Understandably, then, Yeats had high hopes for At the Hawk's Well. The play's theme is the choice of work over life during the moment of tragic wisdom. Cuchulain's acceptance of his heroic destiny corresponds to the artist taking up his creative mission in "Ego Dominus Tuus." But whereas that work brought Ille only to the threshold of unity, At the Hawk's Well, in the best Noh tradition, also presents the great moment itself, including the descent or incarnation of a spirit.

The young Cuchulain is seeking the waters of immortality. He has heard rumors that they come but for a moment to a dry well among withered boughs. He finds the spot occupied by an Old Man who has been waiting there fifty years and has never been able to drink the waters. Also present is the Guardian of the Well, a mute girl in black with a glassy stare. The Old Man wants Cuchulain to leave, for age more urgently needs the waters.

At this point, the Guardian cries like a hawk. Cuchulain remembers that a hawk had accosted him for thirty minutes when he first came to the spot, then vanished. He wants

to hood it if he can find a way to bring it down. The Old Man says there is no bird, only "the Woman of the Sidhe herself, / The Mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow," seeking to allure or destroy men.<sup>112</sup> This spirit has possessed the Guardian, who now looks and dances like a hawk. The lengthy dance lures Cuchulain away from the well. Utterly fascinated, he tells the hawk, "You shall be perched upon my wrist."<sup>113</sup> By seeking the hawk--very much like seeking his anti-self or setting his chisel to the hardest stone--he loses any chance for the restful ease of immortality. Thus, he hears the waters splash too late. The witch--equivalent to his Daimon--has brought him to the choice he so eagerly accepts. By choosing active heroism instead of passive immortality, Cuchulain has accepted tragedy into his life:

He has lost what may not be found  
Till men heap his burial-mound  
And all the history ends.  
He might have lived at his ease,  
An old dog's head on his knees,  
Among his children and friends.<sup>114</sup>

The Old Man, asleep during the brief filling of the well, awakens to describe Cuchulain's tragic lot. Aoife and her troops, worshippers of the hawk, have been roused against him, it seems, and the Old Man tells him, "Never till you are lying in the earth / Can you know rest."<sup>115</sup> However,

like the tragic artist eager to create, the young hero is fearless: "I will face them."<sup>116</sup> Indeed, he knows that "Wisdom must live the bitter life."<sup>117</sup> Cultural heroes such as Cuchulain and Oisín must always choose this path. And so must the prophetic artist, who, in attempting to unify his race, is also a cultural hero.

Yeats accomplishes much in At the Hawk's Well. His tragic themes are well served by the Noh form. The concise and unallusive language matches the bare stage, the rudimentary backdrop, and the deliberate music and movement. And the supernatural is subtly integrated into the landscape and action. But in his desire for remoteness and concentrated effect, Yeats has leached nearly all emotion from the play. Tragic intensity is not very intense, and joy seems entirely absent. He has stylized recklessness out of existence. Without sufficient feeling there is none of that "intensity of personal life" or of those "roots . . . of all faculties necessary for life" he had once thought necessary for evoking a communal response from an audience (see p. 85). Yeats wrote the play for a drawing room audience containing "only those who cared for poetry."<sup>118</sup> But not even such an elite group was raised into communion. Yeats had still not struck the universal chord in his drama.

Yet, creating a new form of Western theatre was a considerable achievement for Yeats, one that, combined with the success of his lyric poetry, made the 1911-17 period the

first in which his theory found adequate creative expression. The 1886-1902 period had been a circuitous journey involving the inception, loss, and recovery of Yeats' early prophetic vision. Yet, although his theory was in flux, his imaginative work remained sterile and escapist for the most part. During 1903-10 Yeats exhaustively hammered out a theory to fit his hard-won tragic perspective. As a result, his imaginative work was sparse and definitely secondary. Only in this third period, then, did Yeats begin forging a closer link between his theory and his art. And this was just the beginning. From now on, Yeats' art, particularly his increasingly bold lyrics, would almost constantly reflect his deepest thoughts and drives, sometimes even before they had been worked out theoretically.

This would become especially true in the next period, 1918-25, with the difficult birth of the first edition of A Vision. Yeats' new cosmic synthesis would amount to little more than a fascinating rough draft of the grand scheme he wanted as the last word on life, death, eternity, and tragic art. Yet his art--notably his lyrics--would supply some of what was missing. More and more Yeats the poet would save the day for the ambitious theorist.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Autobiography 30.

<sup>2</sup>Ellmann has a classic summary of this phenomenon in Masks 70-74. See also Morton Irving Seiden, William Butler Yeats: The Poet as Mythmaker 1865-1939 (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1962) 50-52 for a listing of influences on Yeats' mask idea.

<sup>3</sup>Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, in The Portable Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Aldington (New York: Penguin, 1977) 259.

<sup>4</sup>Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in The Portable Oscar Wilde 125-26.

<sup>5</sup>Wilde, "Critic" 114.

<sup>6</sup>Moore 146.

<sup>7</sup>Moore 187.

<sup>8</sup>Moore 187.

<sup>9</sup>Moore 188.

<sup>10</sup>Monk Gibbon says that Yeats once used this phrase in remarks to L. A. G. Strong (in The Yeats We Knew, ed. Francis Macmanus [Cork: Mercier, 1965] 51).

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans.

Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966) 51.

<sup>12</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond 222.

<sup>13</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond 160.

<sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, in The Portable Nietzsche, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954) 227.

<sup>15</sup>Nietzsche, Zarathustra 235.

<sup>16</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond 128.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Bohlmann 84.

<sup>18</sup>Bohlmann (136) says as much.

<sup>19</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Speaking to the Psaltery," in E & I 18.

<sup>20</sup>Yeats, "Psaltery" 18.

<sup>21</sup>Flannery 197.

<sup>22</sup>"Play" 176.

<sup>23</sup>Flannery's discussion of the Yeats-Craig relationship (262-67) provides the basis of this paragraph.

<sup>24</sup>W. B. Yeats, Notes to The Player Queen, in Variorum Plays 761.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Flannery 263.

<sup>26</sup>W. B. Yeats, Preface to Plays for an Irish Theatre, in Variorum Plays 1301.

<sup>27</sup>Letters 554.

<sup>28</sup>W. B. Yeats, Notes to The Hour-Glass, in Variorum Plays 645.

<sup>29</sup>Autobiography 317.

<sup>30</sup>Memoirs 253. Those journal entries from 1909-10 not published in Autobiography are found here. A collateral aspect of the mask rarely mentioned again also appears in this journal. A love relationship, it seems, requires the discipline of the mask just as surely as an individual: ". . . true love is a discipline. . . . Each divines the secret self of the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life; for love also creates the Mask" (Autobiography 313).

<sup>31</sup>Autobiography 340.

<sup>32</sup>Autobiography 311.

<sup>33</sup>Autobiography 319.

<sup>34</sup>Autobiography 319.

<sup>35</sup>"Theatre" 243.

<sup>36</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Theatre of Beauty," in UP II 398.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in Ellmann, Identity 108-09.

<sup>38</sup>Helen P. Trumpi's broad survey, "Demonology," in Dictionary of the History of Ideas, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner's, 1973), vol. I 667-70, provides a

useful summary of the concept.

<sup>39</sup>This process is described by Israel Regardie in The Tree of Life: A Study in Magic (New York: Weiser, 1973) 68-69. Regardie, disciple of the notorious Aleister Crowley (schismatic of the Golden Dawn who dueled with Yeats for power in the order in 1901), joined the later version of the Golden Dawn, the Stella Matutina, in 1934 and shortly thereafter betrayed it by publishing its secret rituals (Colin Wilson, The Occult: A History [New York: Random, 1971] 348). The "Astral Light" is a term also used by Madame Blavatsky, and thus would have been known by Yeats before he joined the Golden Dawn (Moore 104).

<sup>40</sup>Yeats had to take an oath upon joining the order, part of which said, ". . . I will from this day forward apply myself unto the GREAT WORK which is so to purify and exalt my spiritual nature that with the Divine Aid I may at length attain to be more than human, and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my Magus and Divine Genius . . ." (quoted in Ellmann, Masks 96).

<sup>41</sup>Arnold Goldman, "Yeats, Spiritualism, and Psychical Research," in Yeats and the Occult, ed. George Mills Harper (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975) 114.

<sup>42</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places," in Explorations 30. Hereafter cited as "Swedenborg."

<sup>43</sup>"Swedenborg" 31. Yeats also writes of these events in



Autobiography 267-68.

<sup>44</sup>For good summaries of this activity, see Ellmann, Masks 193-95; Goldman 114-15; and George Mills Harper's introduction to Yeats' manuscript titled (by Harper) "'A Subject of Investigation': Miracle at Mirebeau," in Yeats and the Occult (especially 173).

<sup>45</sup>Introduction to W. B. Yeats, "The Manuscript of 'Leo Africanus,'" eds. Steve L. Adams and George Mills Harper, in Yeats Annual No. 1, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1982) 3. All further references to this introduction will be cited by the authors' names, while those to the manuscript will be cited as "Leo Africanus."

<sup>46</sup>Goldman 115.

<sup>47</sup>Memoirs 264.

<sup>48</sup>Adams and Harper 19.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Adams and Harper 20.

<sup>50</sup>Adams and Harper (5-12) are very thorough about this activity.

<sup>51</sup>See introduction to W. B. Yeats, "Preliminary Examination of the Script of E[lizabeth] R[adcliffe]," eds. George Mills Harper and John S. Kelly, in Yeats and the Occult 133-41. This introduction hereafter cited by the authors' names.

<sup>52</sup>Harper and Kelly 137.

<sup>53</sup>Harper and Kelly 137.

54 "Swedenborg" 35-36.

55 "Swedenborg" 56.

56 Adams and Harper 13.

57 Quoted in Adams and Harper 13.

58 Adams and Harper 13 and accompanying note.

59 "Leo Africanus" 27.

60 Goldman (119) flatly states that "Yeats is writing fiction."

61 "Leo Africanus" 29.

62 It is also called "that all spreading modelling clay where every thought is moulded . . ." ("Leo Africanus" 35).

63 "Leo Africanus" 34. The last sentence is suggestive of Yeats' much later "Seven Propositions" (1937).

64 "Leo Africanus" 35.

65 "Leo Africanus" 38.

66 "Leo Africanus" 38.

67 W. B. Yeats, "Anima Hominis," Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in Mythologies 329. Hereafter cited as "Hominis."

68 "Hominis" 331-32.

69 "Hominis" 332.

70 "Hominis" 335-36.

71 "Hominis" 332.

72 "Hominis" 336.

73 "Hominis" 337.

74 "Hominis" 340. Hough (118-19) sheds some light on

Yeats' reference:

In Golden Dawn ethics a distinction is made between those who follow "the path of the arrow," who aim directly at the mystic vision . . . and those who, intending ultimately the same goal, follow the winding course of experience, passing through all the phantasms offered by the intellect, the senses, and the imagination on the way.

Thus, Yeats found, in addition to the alternating phases of theosophy (see p. 66), another idea compatible with his psychological predilections. This dualistic bias later produced the two poles of the mind in the Blake commentary (see p. 29), the two paths of art in "Discoveries" (see p. 86), and, ultimately, the basis antithesis in A Vision.

75 W. B. Yeats, "Anima Mundi," Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in Mythologies 345. Hereafter cited as "Mundi."

76 "Mundi" 346.

77 "Mundi" 361.

78 "Mundi" 361.

79 "Mundi" 362.

80 "Mundi" 362.

<sup>81</sup>"Mundi" 364-66. Yeats would later include this episode in "Vacillation" (1931-32).

<sup>82</sup>Variorum Poems 315-16.

<sup>83</sup>Variorum Poems 316.

<sup>84</sup>Variorum Poems 291.

<sup>85</sup>Variorum Poems 310.

<sup>86</sup>Variorum Poems 365-66.

<sup>87</sup>Variorum Poems 393.

<sup>88</sup>"Among School Children," Variorum Poems 446.

<sup>89</sup>Variorum Poems 367.

<sup>90</sup>Variorum Poems 367.

<sup>91</sup>Variorum Poems 368.

<sup>92</sup>Variorum Poems 368.

<sup>93</sup>In Thus Spake Zarathustra (199) Nietzsche has an uncannily similar image: ". . . my fervent will to create impels me ever again toward man; thus is the hammer impelled toward the stone. O men, in the stone there sleeps an image, the image of my images. Alas, that it must sleep in the hardest, the ugliest stone!"

<sup>94</sup>Variorum Poems 369. In Autobiography (183) Yeats elaborates on Dante's (and Francois Villon's) achievement, emphasizing the necessity of suffering and its recognition--what he calls the "Vision of Evil"--in any creation of tragic

art:

Such masters--Villon and Dante, let us say--would not, when they speak through their art, change their luck; yet they mirrored in all the suffering of desire. The two halves of their nature are so completely joined that they seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens, being at the same time predestinate and free, creation's very self. We gaze at such men in awe, because we gaze not at a work of art, but at the re-creation of the man through that art, the birth of a new species of man, and it may seem that the hairs of our heads stand up, because that birth, that re-creation, is from terror. Had not Dante and Villon understood that their fate wrecked what life could not rebuild, had they lacked their Vision of Evil . . . they could but have found a false beauty, or some momentary instinctive beauty, and suffered no change at all. . . .

<sup>95</sup>Variorum Poems 369.

<sup>96</sup>Variorum Poems 369.

<sup>97</sup>Variorum Poems 370.

<sup>98</sup>Variorum Poems 371.

<sup>99</sup>Liam Miller, The Noble Drama of W. B. Yeats (Dublin:

Dolmen, 1977) 190. Miller's work, a thorough documentary approach to the conception and staging of Yeats' plays, treats Noh tradition and Yeats' introduction to it on 189-217, and Yeats' early Noh-inspired plays on 218-58.

<sup>100</sup>Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (New York: Vintage, 1957) 77.

<sup>101</sup>Ezra Pound, trans., "Noh" Plays (1916; rpt. in Ezra Pound: Translations [New York: New Directions, 1963]) 214.

<sup>102</sup>Compiled from Miller 193-215 and Arthur Waley, trans., The Nō Plays of Japan (1921; New York: Grove, 1957) 29-32.

<sup>103</sup>Pound 237.

<sup>104</sup>Ernest Fenollosa, "Fenollosa on the Noh," in Pound 279-80.

<sup>105</sup>W. B. Yeats, "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," in E & I 221. Hereafter cited as "Noble."

<sup>106</sup>Ellmann, Masks 214.

<sup>107</sup>"Noble" 224. Ito was not trained in Noh dance itself, becoming interested in Noh forms only after meeting Pound (Miller 224). In any case, Yeats and his London audience would not have known the difference between Noh-trained and Noh-copied dancing.

<sup>108</sup>"Noble" 224-25.

<sup>109</sup>"Noble" 226.

- 110 "Noble" 231.
- 111 "Noble" 235.
- 112 Variorum Plays 407.
- 113 Variorum Plays 410.
- 114 Variorum Plays 411.
- 115 Variorum Plays 411-12.
- 116 Variorum Plays 412.
- 117 Variorum Plays 413.
- 118 W. B. Yeats, Notes to At the Hawk's Well, in Variorum Plays 416.

## CHAPTER V

### TRAGEDY AND THE "SYSTEM," 1917-25

The fall of 1917 was a great watershed for Yeats. By finally marrying at fifty-two, he made his firmest commitment yet to life. And very soon his young wife, the former Georgie Hyde-Lees (a fellow Golden Dawn member), began automatic writing. To his great surprise a new road to the occult thus opened up. The "data" derived from these communications seemed to closely parallel, even sum-up, many of Yeats' own beliefs of the past thirty years, while giving him a new mythic structure. The result was the first version of his "system," published as A Vision in 1925. Composed during a feverish period that included Irish civil war, the birth of his children, the death of his father, and the winning of the Nobel Prize, A Vision is a fragmented masterpiece, part profundity and part palaver. But Yeats' system is also clearly a function of his tragic perspective. Such crucial ideas as Unity of Being, mask and image, and the power of the artist are central to it, with the Daimon hovering over all. This chapter traces the growth of the system in collateral works and closely examines its culmination in the first edition of A Vision.



The birth of the system was quite sudden. Georgie Yeats first attempted automatic writing on October 24, 1917, just four days after the wedding.<sup>1</sup> On November 5th Yeats began to record the answers of the controls and guides (later lumped together under the term "Communicators") in the automatic script, eventually filling thirty-six notebooks. Later, the preferred method of communication became Mrs. Yeats speaking during sleep. In a few cases, Yeats' own dreams and meditations led to his wife's corresponding dreams and visions (reminiscent of skrying). Both of these methods were recorded as "Sleeps," filling three notebooks. For over six years these sessions went on, at first exhaustively, then tapering off after 1921.

The Communicators constantly urged Yeats to reread and codify the results of the sessions, the first step toward A Vision. A small concordance was the result, soon replaced by cards indexed by subjects both specific ("Anima Mundi, Genius etc," "After Life State") and suggestive ("Fragrances," "Joy"). Yeats used notebooks to further codify and elaborate. In these he could also refine the charts and diagrams that would eventually form the strange geometry of the system.

Yeats began writing manuscripts even while the early sessions were taking place. Before the end of 1917, with the overall plan of the system already in mind, he started writing A Vision as a dialogue between Michael Robartes and Owen (initially John) Aherne. The basic psychology of the

scheme, what would become "The Twenty-eight Embodiments" in the finished work, was already conceived. During an automatic writing session of December 22nd, the control told Yeats to "finish all codifying" and "clear up as you go," to which Yeats answered, "I make statement of psychology of whole scheme as I see it & ask assent."<sup>2</sup> Assent must have been given, for he soon previewed the twenty-eight phases in the poem "The Phases of the Moon," written in 1918 (some lines of which appear in an early manuscript of A Vision).

During the eight years Yeats toiled on A Vision, he previewed many of its ideas in published prose and poetry. As the poem mentioned above shows, some of these works apparently existed solely to test the growing system, while the rest at least reflected Yeats' preoccupation with it. And what stands out in these pieces is their tragic focus, a clear sign of the tragic elements simultaneously being woven into A Vision.

One such concept that appears in several essays and poems is the moment of unity, ecstasy, and revelation. In "A People's Theatre" (1919), an essay defending his dramatic aesthetic, Yeats cites Shakespeare in support of his tragic-prophetic mission. The Bard, it seems, understood the tragic moment:

Shakespeare set upon the stage kings and queens  
 . . . because he could only write his best--his  
 mind and the mind of his audience being interested

in emotion and intellect at their moment of union and at their greatest intensity--when he wrote of those who controlled the mechanism of life. Had they been controlled by it, intellect and emotion entangled by intricacy and detail could never have mounted to that union, as Swedenborg said of the marriage of the angels, is a conflagration of the whole being.<sup>3</sup>

Implied here is the distinction between the primary figure (passive, concerned with externals) and the antithetical figure (active, creative)--the basic antinomies of the system. A later reference to the tragic moment in "A People's Theatre" reaffirms this point in broader dialectical images:

. . . every new logical development of the objective energy intensifies in an exact correspondence a counter-energy, or rather adds to an always deepening unanalysable longing. That counter-longing . . . can only become a conscious energy suddenly in those moments of revelation which are as a flash of lightning.<sup>4</sup>

Yeats' outstanding treatment of the tragic moment is in lyric poetry. By 1918 he had learned to symbolize its transient intensity in striking images. In "Solomon and the Witch" (1918), for example, Yeats presents the moment in both chiliastic and sexual terms. After Sheba describes

the lovers' physical ecstasy under "the wild moon" (at or close to the full moon of the system), Solomon provides the sublime context:

. . . "A cockerel  
 Crew from a blossoming apple bough  
 Three hundred years before the Fall,  
 And never crew again till now,  
 And would not now but that he thought,  
 Chance being at one with Choice at last,  
 All that the brigand apple brought  
 And this foul world were dead at last.  
 . . . . .  
 . . . the world ends when these two things  
 Though several, are a single light,  
 When oil and wick are burned in one;  
 Thereby a blessed moon last night  
 Gave Sheba to her Solomon."<sup>5</sup>

A more esoteric depiction of the perfect moment is found in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (1919), a poem steeped in the atmosphere of the system. Robartes imagines the visual equivalent of Phase Fifteen, the perfect antithetical phase (full moon), where no human life is possible. Here a strange trinity symbolizes both the parts and the whole of Unity of Being in an infinite moment--a Sphinx (intellect) and a Buddha (love) flank a dancing girl (unity itself, the perfect image of art). And a supremely

poised ecstasy, the paradigm of tragic joy, pervades the scene:

O little did they care who danced between,  
 And little she by whom her dance was seen  
 So she had outdanced thought.  
 Body perfection brought,  
 . . . . .  
 Mind moved yet seemed to stop  
 As 'twere a spinning top.

In contemplation had those three so wrought  
 Upon a moment, and so stretched it out  
 That they, time overthrown,  
 Were dead yet flesh and bone.<sup>6</sup>

Unity of Being (now eclipsing personality as Yeats' preferred term for self-integration) appears much more often during this time abstracted from the tragic moment. Indeed, it is by far the most visible tragic concept. As A Vision progressed, Yeats seemed almost obsessed with antithetical unity, delighting in its formal expression. The first instance of this preoccupation is in "The People's Theatre." While discussing Shakespeare early in this essay, Yeats closely links unity to the tragic moment. But later he isolates the concept. In words about Dante, Yeats for the first time states his classic definition of Unity of Being, one repeated constantly in the next few years:

His study was unity of being, the subordination of all parts to the whole as in a perfectly proportioned human body--his own definition of beauty--and not . . . the unity of things in the world. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In some essays of The Trembling of the Veil (1922) (reprinted in Autobiography), Yeats reveals aesthetic and social variations of Unity of Being deriving from work on the system. These "new" aspects--Unity of Image and Unity of Culture--were actually part of his early prophetic goal from the beginning, and had already been codified as part of the tragic creative process. In fact, Yeats uses the new terms in discussing events of thirty to thirty-five years before--old thoughts and feelings spruced up with the language of A Vision. In "Four Years: 1887-1891" he first gives the standard definition of Unity of Being (see above), then rhapsodizes on the power of the coherent image of art:

To-day I add to that first conviction, to that first desire for unity, this other conviction, long a mere opinion vaguely or intermittently apprehended: Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind, which is of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Unity of Being (artist) begets Unity of Image

(work), which begets more Unity of Being (single perceiver) and Unity of Culture (totality of perceivers)--the communal experience of tragic art. But, in a moment of doubt, Yeats closes the circle by writing in "The Stirring of the Bones" (also from The Trembling of the Veil) that not even the tragic artist is self-generating. Even "true Unity of Being," founded on passion and instinct, is little possible "without a Unity of Culture in class or people that is no longer possible at all."<sup>9</sup>

The contrary to Unity of Being in the system--primary unity--also is found in The Trembling of the Veil. Yeats presents this inversion of the artist's self-possession as a nightmarish, stupified passivity:

I now know that there are men who cannot possess "Unity of Being," who must not seek it or express it--and who, so far from seeking an anti-self, a Mask that delineates a being in all things the opposite to their natural state, can but seek the suppression of the anti-self, till the natural state alone remains. These . . . must seek no image of desire, but await that which lies beyond their mind--unities not of the mind, but unities of nature, unities of God . . . their preoccupation is to seem nothing . . . to become the lamp for another's wick and oil.<sup>10</sup>

The scientist, the politician, and the saint are Yeats' most

vivid examples of these primary types.<sup>11</sup> The first two were always his whipping boys, but the saint had previously been held up as a worthy alternative to the artist or hero, undoubtedly because Yeats had so often yearned for the mystic's path. Probably he still so yearned in the early twenties, and for that reason felt that he had to denigrate the simple path now that he was codifying the antithetical route as the clearly superior one.

The mask, mentioned in the above quotation, is the second prominent tragic element in Yeats' work of the period. By this time the mask had become the preferred model of the tragic creative process. And in the composition of A Vision it was being woven into the very fabric of each incarnated phase. While no hint of this mechanical function appears in The Trembling of the Veil, the mask is certainly prominent. In "Four Years," for example, Yeats speaks of it as vital to antithetical man in his tragic perspective: ". . . what I have called 'the Mask' is an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature. We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy."<sup>12</sup>

The essential unity of mask and artistic image, first voiced by Yeats in 1909, is also reaffirmed at this time. The Player Queen (1919) contains his most succinct statement on the subject: "Man is nothing till he is united to an image."<sup>13</sup> A more elaborate treatment is found in "Hodos Chameliontos," also including the role of the Daimon:



"There are, indeed, personifying spirits . . . through their dramatic power they bring our souls to crisis, to Mask and Image. . . ." <sup>14</sup> As he mentioned in "Anima Mundi," Yeats thinks that another kind of Daimon exists for a nation, driving it to "war or anarchy that it may find its Image. . . ." <sup>15</sup> But now there seems a reversal from Per Amica Silentia Lunae. In "Anima Hominis" the Daimon comes only after one has already achieved the mask for himself. However, in "Hodos Chameliontos" one apparently has no volition regarding the mask: ". . . man or nation can no more make this Mask or Image than the seed can be made by the soil into which it is cast." <sup>16</sup> (A Vision clarifies this discrepancy somewhat--there Yeats' complementary perspective sees the mask as simultaneously one's object of desire and the Daimon's subjective forward thrust. See pp. 195-99.)

Of course, beyond specific concepts, Yeats' work at this time also contains a continuing tragic élan. Style and recklessness still course through his lyric lines. The early song for the folding and unfolding of the backdrop cloth in The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919), one of Yeats' Noh-inspired plays, displays this attitude. Sounding like an impassioned parody of Blake's "The Tyger," it celebrates the tragic imagination:

What death? what discipline?  
 What bonds no man could unbind,  
 Being imagined within

The labyrinth of the mind,  
 What pursuing or fleeing,  
 What wounds, what bloody press,  
 Dragged into being  
 This loveliness?<sup>17</sup>

This exuberant feeling is stated more simply in other lyrics. For instance, a stubborn affirmation pervades the poetic series Meditations in Time of Civil War, written during the worst period of Irish strife. The first poem, "Ancestral Houses" (1921), sets the tone. Although quite depressed by events, Yeats still marshals hope from his tragic stance:

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not sung  
 Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
 That out of life's own self-delight had sprung  
 The abounding glittering jet. . . .<sup>18</sup>

And in "My Table" (1922) he utters the basic truth underlying all tragic art, that only suffering can bring out the higher joy of the imagination: ". . . only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art."<sup>19</sup> For the tragic artist in his prophetic task, the sacrifice of a normal life is thus a variety of felix culpa.

Yeats' outstanding tribute to the power of the tragic mind is "The Tower." Here his claims for the imagination exceed anything he had previously written. Composed just after he finished A Vision in the spring of 1925,<sup>20</sup> this

great poem shows Yeats in an autumnal state. Bemoaning the absurdity of his "decrepit age," tied to him "as to a dog's tail,"<sup>21</sup> and full of fire after a fruitful creative period, he celebrates his imprisoned imagination:

Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination, nor an ear and eye  
That more expected the impossible. . . .<sup>22</sup>

But because of his aging body and of what society expects from old poets, he "must bid the Muse go pack"<sup>23</sup> and be content with the arguments and abstractions of philosophy. Yeats searches for strength and perspective by calling up images and memories from local history and his own creative past. Then, in the final section, he makes his stand. To the next generation of artists he will deed his pride, which, even as he writes, grows into defiance of all who would hinder imagination:

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.<sup>24</sup>

In the exultation of a magnificent obstinacy, Yeats momentarily disdains any external reality. For an instant the system's entire empyrean of Daimons and gyres and wheels spins only within the human mind.

After years of sprinkling crumbs from the system in published works (and in letters), Yeats finally produced the real thing at the end of 1925 when A Vision was published. Eight years of toil and personal sacrifice had brought forth what he hoped was a unified myth of all reality, derived from the ultimate source. Yeats' chaotic data, written in the doggerel of spirits (or the unconscious), were reduced to essentials. All movements inside and outside time, within and without the human mind, were reduced to charts, diagrams, and mechanical functions. Yet, despite his best efforts, the result is still largely unfocused flux. The first edition of A Vision is too often confusing. Yeats describes the eternal hierarchy less coherently than in the Blake commentary or Per Amica Silentia Lunae. And the adventures of the soul between incarnations remain a mystery despite a reader's closest attention. Yet A Vision at its best is good art if not good thought. "The Twenty-eight Embodiments" is a tour de force, although arbitrary in its examples for each phase. And the treatment of historical cycles in "Dove or Swan,"

if even more arbitrary, contains some of Yeats' best poetic prose. Fortunately, the major tragic elements--mask and image, Unity of Being, and the Daimon--come through pretty clearly. And they are at the heart of the matter, which is, given Yeats' obvious antithetical bias, to justify the ways of the Daimonic man, creator of beauty.

Because everything in A Vision is supposedly interconnected, the basic scheme of Yeats' universe should be outlined first, to show the context of these tragic ideas. As mentioned above, the eternal hierarchy of the system is confusing, but beginning at the human level provides some bearings.

In life all human beings are primarily described by their internal mixture of two basic "tinctures"--the objective or primary ("that which serves,"<sup>25</sup> under the darker moon phases), and the subjective or antithetical ("that which creates,"<sup>26</sup> under the brighter moon phases). Whatever the proportion, each man must go through all twenty-eight embodiments that represent the basic human types. Actually, since objective Phase One and subjective Phase Fifteen are paradigms, only twenty-six phases must be lived through, although any one may be repeated.<sup>27</sup>

Within each incarnation or personality type lies a more basic mixture: the "Four Faculties." The first faculty, the "Will," basic emotion or energy unalloyed by any application or action, is the criterion by which a soul is classified

and assigned a phase.<sup>28</sup> The "Mask," the old anti-self in a new expanded role, is that which one wants to be or give reverence to,<sup>29</sup> or, as the Communicators told Yeats, "a form created by passion to unite us to ourselves."<sup>30</sup> Also, in keeping with his past practice, Yeats says that sometimes it is simply called the "Image."<sup>31</sup> Will and Mask are yoked opposites--subject and object respectively--and are primarily antithetical.<sup>32</sup> The paired faculties of the primary tincture are "Creative Mind," or constructive intellect, and "Body of Fate," the entire stream of external phenomena acting on the individual, or "time as it affects sensation."<sup>33</sup> The purpose of the wheel of incarnations is to show "when and in what proportions" the Four Faculties influence each other.<sup>34</sup>

Thus far, one might think this is merely an eccentric version of traditional psychological metaphors. But farther up the hierarchial ladder, the oddly familiar becomes the forbiddingly abstract. It seems that the fairly accessible Four Faculties have counterparts in eternity--the "Four Principles." The "Husk," equivalent to the Will, is something like the metaphysical ground of the senses, "almost the physical body during life, and after death its record."<sup>35</sup> The "Passionate Body," functioning (as the Mask does for the Will) as the object of the Husk, is simply called "passion."<sup>36</sup> (How sense and passion interact is not explained.) The "Celestial Body," corresponding to the Body of Fate, is the

total eternal fabric and the object of "Spirit," which is the Creative Mind writ large, or pure thought.<sup>37</sup> Although the Four Principles are profoundly spiritual, Yeats does say at one point that they "live" in the unconscious "while natural life continues."<sup>38</sup> If that is not confusing enough, he also calls them "emanations from or reflections from" Plotinus' fourfold hierarchy: One (Celestial Body), Intellectual Principle (Spirit), Soul of the World (Passionate Body), and Nature (Husk).<sup>39</sup>

Yeats confounds the problem with further analogies. Even a weak disclaimer does not deter him: "I have not considered the ultimate origin of things, nor have my documents thrown a direct light upon it."<sup>40</sup> He goes right ahead speculating on that very subject, complicating the first comparison to Plotinus with another, even vaguer one: "The 13th, 14th, and 15th cycles are described as Spheres, and are certainly emanations from the Soul of the World, the Intellectual Principle and the One respectively. . . ."<sup>41</sup> Apparently these cycles are achieved beyond the supposed twelve cycles of the wheel of incarnations.<sup>42</sup> Such is the situation after Book II of A Vision, which was probably completed by the end of 1922.<sup>43</sup> Not until Book IV ("The Gates of Pluto"), finished about two years later,<sup>44</sup> does Yeats scatter any more morsels about these spiritual cycles. And, as before, they are the subject of a hierarchial analogy. This time the comparison is to the Trinity itself:

the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Cycles correspond to Holy Ghost, Son, and Father.<sup>45</sup> Yeats is still fascinated, it seems, by those universal mystical triads he had described thirty-five years before in the Blake commentary (see p. 29).

The Thirteenth Cycle is the most important. (In the later edition it becomes virtually Yeats' God, while the other two cycles are left out.<sup>46</sup>) It is home for such entities as the "Ghostly Self" and the Daimon. About the former he says little. The Ghostly Self is the "permanent self,"<sup>47</sup> wellspring of "that which is unique in man and in his fate."<sup>48</sup> Hence, it would seem to stand in the same relation to the Daimon as the Will does to the Mask during life, but Yeats says nothing about this parallel. (In the second edition he equates the Ghostly Self and the Daimon while both are in the Thirteenth Cycle.<sup>49</sup>) The Ghostly Self is involved primarily in the stages between incarnations, where, for example, it is united momentarily with the Spirit and Celestial Body during the "Beatitude" state.<sup>50</sup> If the Ghostly Self is a truncated concept, the Daimon, like the mask, has an expansive role to play in the system. And with the Daimon the hierarchy loops back upon man.

In A Vision the Daimon, now female, functions as an all-purpose mother, lover, muse, and dimensional go-between. But, as before, it is structurally an eternal anti-self, the means by which Yeats continues his creatively productive war between the orders. A man and his Daimon share a common



set of faculties in an inverse relationship: the man's Will is the Daimon's Mask and vice-versa, and the same holds true for their respective Creative Minds and Bodies of Fate.<sup>51</sup> Thus the Daimon has "her energy and bias in man's Mask, and her constructive power in man's fate. . . ." <sup>52</sup> Now that Yeats has added gender to the mixture (presumably a woman would have a male Daimon), he appropriately enlivens his analogies:

. . . man and Daimon face each other in a perpetual conflict or embrace. This relation (the Daimon being the opposite sex to that of man) may create a passion like that of sexual love. The relation of man and woman, in so far as it is passionate, reproduces the relation of man and Daimon, and becomes an element where man and Daimon sport, pursue one another, and do one another good and evil.<sup>53</sup>

Images of sexual pursuit are especially apt when Yeats expresses the opposition in broader terms. When a man is in his strongest antithetical phases (approaching Unity of Being), the Daimon is most primary. Here the man (both loving and hateful) is most assertive--pursuing and imposing passion or an image upon the Daimon's thought.<sup>54</sup> But in the reverse instance--man primary, Daimon antithetical--he is pursued in love and hate, and "must receive an alien terror or joy."<sup>55</sup> The man's passive acceptance of the

"Image" (the Daimon's Mask) during his primary eclipse is what Yeats means when he speaks of "Unity with God" or "Unity with Nature."<sup>56</sup> (This situation appears in the quotation from The Trembling of the Veil on p. 186.)

From this interpenetrative dynamic Yeats creates a new model of the imaginative process, similar to that in Per Amica Silentia Lunae (see pp. 150-51). The struggle between man and Daimon is largely played out inside the human mind. According to Yeats, the Daimon controls "the entire dark of the mind."<sup>57</sup> Human dreams and thoughts are therefore the Daimonic Creative Mind appearing in the human mind as Body of Fate, just as the Daimon's Will seems the man's Mask (or beauty).<sup>58</sup> The key passage concerns Unity of Being or the blossoming of the imagination, as all versions of Yeats' creativity myth must:

. . . when . . . in antithetical man the Daimonic mind is permitted to flow through the events of his life (the Daimonic Creative Mind) and so to animate his Creative Mind, without putting out its light, there is Unity of Being.<sup>59</sup>

The process then becomes sublimely reverberant, as the man in turn illuminates the source:

A man becomes passionate and this passion makes the Daimonic thought luminous with its peculiar light--this is the object of the Daimon--and she so creates a very personal form of heroism or of poetry.<sup>60</sup>

Man's apparent lack of volition in the process--the Daimon seems to initiate creativity, to impart unity, even to the non-passive antithetical man--is a partial mirage due to the peculiar reciprocal relationship. From the moment willful man reaches out for his Mask, it is simultaneously "reaching" toward him. Indeed, as seen from the other side, the Mask is the Daimon's Will seeking its Mask (or man's Will), and so on with the other faculties. As Yeats says, the antithetical man cannot distinguish between fate and freedom.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Yeats gets to eat his dialectical cake and still have it. Free will and determinism are but two more interpenetrating gyres. In a sense, then, Yeats' legerdemain is tantamount to Niels Bohr's "complementarity" in quantum theory at almost the same time.<sup>62</sup> Whatever the analogy, in A Vision Yeats has obviously evolved his early idea of the double link between the orders to a high level of sophistication.

Such a complementary approach was as far as Yeats would go toward embracing eternity, however fascinated by it. He was not about to surrender human creative power, human choice, to any agent of the Absolute, else his tragic perspective would have been developed in vain. The Daimon's role, then, is essentially tutelary--like a teacher or parent. And the man, like a student or child, does grow up. In the logic of the system, full maturity means escape from the wheel. In Book IV Yeats hints at the power escaped man

would have in the Thirteenth Cycle, beyond even that of the Daimon:

. . . seeing that she remains always in the Thirteenth Cycle, [the Daimon] cannot accompany man in his wanderings, nor can her tutelage of man be eternal, seeing that after many cycles man also inhabits the Thirteenth Cycle and has in a certain way a greater power than hers. When both are as it were side by side in the same cycle, she . . . can communicate with one living man, chosen still doubtless from a cycle beneath her own, whereas the man can communicate with an indefinite number of other men.<sup>63</sup>

Even in heaven the artist's imaginative consciousness would continue unabated.

Desire for such conscious control was a constant in Yeats' entire life and work. As he says in A Vision, "A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this is like some great tragic person. . . ." <sup>64</sup> Since Yeats' earliest need to conquer shyness and achieve self-control (often through a brazen pose), the key had always been to keep his conscious wits about him. Whenever he felt drawn to the way of the saint and its self-surrender, he reacted by celebrating life and imagination. The birth of his tragic theory was one example. And the espousal of Unity of Being in A Vision was another. Such affirmation restored self-possession and revitalized imagination.

If from the eternal perspective Daimons initiate Unity of Being in mortals, Yeats naturally prefers the complementary viewpoint when analyzing antithetical unity in A Vision. That way conscious control is featured. Between Phases Twelve and Eighteen, for instance, the struggle "becomes conscious and its attainment possible . . . antithetical control over primary faculties increases."<sup>65</sup> As the optimum phase for unity (seventeen) approaches, thought grows "sensuous and musical" and emotions become harmonious, like musical notes.<sup>66</sup> Using his father's old metaphor for personality (see pp. 115-16), Yeats completes this image: "It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings into sympathetic vibration."<sup>67</sup> In the vocabulary of the wheel, man unites with his Mask. The antithetical man naturally desires a free Mask, whereas primary man awaits an enforced Mask. Yeats employs terms familiar from his tragic theory (although ultimately deriving from J. B. Yeats) to distinguish between the two Masks: ". . . the free Mask is personality, a union of qualities, while the enforced mask is character, a union of quantities. . . ."<sup>68</sup> And human volition does matter: "Personality . . . is a constantly renewed choice."<sup>69</sup> (In "The Twenty-Eight Embodiments" Yeats describes the onset of Unity of Being phase by phase, complete with ratios of faculties and famous human examples, but without adding anything substantial to the above.)

Central to this state of unity is, of course, the tragic view of things. Self-possession includes understanding and accepting the disappointment and defeat inherent in life.<sup>70</sup> This had been a cardinal idea of Yeats' since at least the 1904 Samhain, and was always considered the first step in the tragic creative process. Hence, Yeats tended to be boisterous in describing pain and its glorious aftermath. Yet, early in A Vision he is uncharacteristically subdued about it:

He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny<sup>71</sup> until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest. . . . he is no longer bitter, he may even love tragedy like those "who love the gods and withstand them"; such men are able to bring all that happens, as well as all that they desire, into an emotional or intellectual synthesis and so to possess not the Vision of Good only but that of Evil.<sup>72</sup>

The terms "content" and "no longer bitter" hardly ring out with recklessness, perhaps because Yeats must keep the mechanics of the system in mind as he writes--scarcely conducive to fervent prose. But once he turns to Unity of Culture in Book III ("Dove or Swan"), Yeats unleashes his mind and his style in a celebration of imagination and tragic

art, the high point of A Vision.

The historical cycles of "Dove or Swan" are broadly parallel to the twenty-eight embodiments. What happens to individuals--the circling from control to subservience and back again--also happens to cultures. If a single man progresses to Unity of Being, a whole race moves toward Unity of Culture. Indeed, as the past two chapters have shown, these two unities are symbiotic, each drawing power from the other. Through a transitive unity--Unity of Image--the artist helps consolidate a race. But, as Yeats says in The Trembling of the Veil, a unified cultural setting is helpful to the artist in the first place (see pp. 185-86). The problem is that Unity of Culture is rare in the historical cycles (the phases are longer than those of individuals). Looking into the past, Yeats sees only a handful of such cultures (which just happen to be those he had long admired): classical Athens at the time of Phidias, Byzantium during Justinian's reign, and Quattrocento Italy are foremost.

The first two periods particularly inspire Yeats to stylistic heights. Freeing himself from formal exposition and indulging in illustrations, he lets his images soar as in his poetry. Yeats' description of the unifying art of Phidias is as rapturous as anything in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes": "Those riders upon the Parthenon had all the world's power in their moving bodies, and in a movement that seemed, so were the hearts of man and beast

set upon it, that of a dance. . . ."73 But he achieves the perfect balance of idea and image in his famous discussion of Byzantium. Celebrating Unity of Being, Image, and Culture, it is Yeats' finest expression of the communal end of tragic art:

I think that in early Byzantium . . . religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers . . . spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image. . . .74

Perhaps the most intriguing passage in "Dove or Swan" is the concluding prophecy. This statement is tentative and rambling (and was dropped from the second edition), yet seems very close to Yeats' heart. It contains his ultimate wish: that everyone will soon begin thinking like William Butler Yeats himself, glorying in experience and channeling all reality through the human imagination:



During the period said to commence in 1927 . . . must arise a form of philosophy, which will become religious and ethical . . . and be in all things opposite of that vast plaster Herculean image, final primary thought. It will be concrete in expression, establish itself by immediate experience, seek no general agreement, make little of God or any exterior unity. . . . It will make a cardinal truth of man's immortality that its virtue may not lack sanction, and of the soul's re-embodiment that it may restore to virtue that long preparation none can give and hold death an interruption. . . . Men will no longer separate the idea of God from that of human genius, human productivity in all its forms.<sup>75</sup>

What Yeats has done, inadvertently, is to state his own rationale for writing A Vision, projected as a mythic future for all. His bias is now clear: the cosmic mechanism of the system is but stage scenery<sup>76</sup> for the star player--antithetical, Daimonic man, or the tragic artist. No amount of spirit-data could have changed this central focus of his life. For over twenty years Yeats had been firm in his tragic perspective and prophetic mission. A Vision, therefore, may be seen as an elaborate apology for this choice.<sup>77</sup>

At the beginning of 1926, Yeats (now sixty) was at the peak of his powers. Fatherhood, the Nobel Prize, and his

role as Senator in the new Irish Free State had given him dignity in the world. And A Vision, however fragmented, had provided ballast to internal conflicts, justifying his belief in the artist's winding path. In the next few years, as his health began to fail and death loomed larger, Yeats would need all his strength as man and poet. Yet, he would not only survive but flourish. As he read widely between 1926 and 1932 to revise and bolster the system, he just happened to write some of his finest poems. If his life was waning, then his senses would become more acute, and his imagination would flame even higher.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All facts about the origins of A Vision come from the introduction to W. B. Yeats, A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925), eds. George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978) xv-xxi. References to this introduction are hereafter cited by the editors' names, while those to the text are cited as AVA. Passages in the 1925 edition that are unchanged in the second (1937) edition (especially from Book III) are cited from the latter as AVB (W. B. Yeats, A Vision [1937; New York: Collier, 1966]).

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Harper and Hood xxi.

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Yeats, "A People's Theatre," in Explorations 245.

<sup>4</sup>Yeats, "People's" 258-59.

<sup>5</sup>Variorum Poems 388.

<sup>6</sup>Variorum Poems 383-84.

<sup>7</sup>Yeats, "People's" 250.

<sup>8</sup>Autobiography 132.

<sup>9</sup>Autobiography 235-36.

<sup>10</sup>Autobiography 166.

<sup>11</sup>Autobiography 166.

<sup>12</sup>Autobiography 128.

<sup>13</sup>Variorum Plays 749.

<sup>14</sup>Autobiography 183.

<sup>15</sup>Autobiography 184.

<sup>16</sup>Autobiography 184.

<sup>17</sup>Variorum Plays 531.

<sup>18</sup>Variorum Poems 419.

<sup>19</sup>Variorum Poems 421.

<sup>20</sup>Ellmann (Identity 291) gives October 7, 1925, as the date "The Tower" was finished.

<sup>21</sup>Variorum Poems 409.

<sup>22</sup>Variorum Poems 409.

<sup>23</sup>Variorum Poems 409.

<sup>24</sup>Variorum Poems 414-15. Just months after he wrote these lines, Yeats offered at least quasi-philosophical support for them in a letter to T. Sturge Moore:

. . . what decides that this or that possibility is to become actual? Surely the human mind. The choice between almost infinite possibilities is surely almost infinite creations. In so far therefore as Time and Space are deduced from our sense-data we are the creators of Time and Space.

(W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore, Their Correspondence, 1901-1937, ed. Ursula

Bridge [New York: Oxford UP, 1953]

82. Hereafter cited as Yeats and Moore)

Yeats clarifies this startling idea by further defining his terms for Moore: "I want to widen the issue so that instead of sense-data in the narrow sense of the words we have to deal with the whole of that which the mind knows" (Yeats and Moore 82). He tip-toes around any charge of cosmic solipsism by declaring that he does believe in a matrix but that such a concept appears to him "living and active, not merely a logical possibility" (Yeats and Moore 83).

One month later (April 22, 1926) Yeats presented an alternate model of this same topic in a letter to Olivia Shakespear. This time he described the process with the terms of the "Four Faculties" of his system: ". . . in my book the 'Body of Fate' of one's being is but the 'creative mind' of another. What we call an object is a limit of perception. We create each other's universe . . ." (Letters 714). This quotation obviously refers to the relationship between man and Daimon discussed on pp. 195-98. Robert Langbaum (in "The Exteriority of Self in Yeats's Poetry and Thought," New Literary History 7 [1976]: 579-97) presents a subtle discussion of Yeats' ideas on perception (including mask and Daimon), comparing them to related concepts in Descartes, Wordsworth, and Jung.

<sup>25</sup>AVA 19.

<sup>26</sup>AVA 19.

<sup>27</sup>AVA 14.

<sup>28</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>29</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>30</sup>AVA 18.

<sup>31</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>32</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>33</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>34</sup>AVA 15.

<sup>35</sup>AVA 160.

<sup>36</sup>AVA 160.

<sup>37</sup>AVA 160.

<sup>38</sup>AVA 159.

<sup>39</sup>AVA 176.

<sup>40</sup>AVA 176.

<sup>41</sup>AVA 176.

<sup>42</sup>In AVB (210) Yeats describes the Thirteenth Cycle (or Cone) as "that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space."

<sup>43</sup>Harper and Hood xxxvi.

<sup>44</sup>At the end of Book IV (AVA 252) Yeats himself writes, "Finished at Syracuse, January, 1925."

<sup>45</sup>AVA 236.

<sup>46</sup>AVB 240.

<sup>47</sup>AVA 221.

<sup>48</sup>AVA 243.

<sup>49</sup>AVB 193.

<sup>50</sup>AVA 235. Yeats discusses the progress of the soul between incarnations--the most esoteric (and opaque) portion of A Vision--on 222-39. He changed this section radically for the second edition.

<sup>51</sup>AVA 27.

<sup>52</sup>AVA 27.

<sup>53</sup>AVA 27.

<sup>54</sup>AVA 29.

<sup>55</sup>AVA 29.

<sup>56</sup>AVA 29.

<sup>57</sup>AVA 28.

<sup>58</sup>AVA 28.

<sup>59</sup>AVA 28.

<sup>60</sup>AVA 28.

<sup>61</sup>AVA 28.

<sup>62</sup>Bohr's idea, part of the 1927 "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum mechanics, has been concisely summarized by Heinz R. Pagels: "Bohr's principle of complementarity asserts that there exist complementary properties of the same object of knowledge, one of which if known will exclude knowledge of the other" (The Cosmic Code: Quantum Physics As the Language of Nature [1982; New York and Toronto: Bantam, 1983] 75. Coincidentally, Yeats once spoke of quantum theory in a letter to Mrs. Shakespear on April 22, 1926, saying that Alfred North Whitehead uses the term (in describing molecules) "in a way that suggests 'antithetical' and 'primary'" (Letters 714).

<sup>63</sup>AVA 220-21.

<sup>64</sup>AVB 268. This passage is identical in both editions.

<sup>65</sup>AVA 60.

<sup>66</sup>AVA 61.

<sup>67</sup>AVA 61.

<sup>68</sup>AVA 18.

<sup>69</sup>AVA 18.

<sup>70</sup>Bloom, who is at his best on A Vision, has an unusual slant on this point: "Yeats . . . makes his system for the poet and hero, and begins by predicating their defeat. . . . A Vision exists to pattern the drama of defeat, for its apocalypse is the hopeless judgment of gnosis" (230). For



Bloom, Yeats' viewpoint is Romantic but filtered through an inherent Gnosticism. He thinks that "for Yeats tragedy was not sublime enough," that "there was enough of the genuine apocalyptic to make him something other than a tragic artist" (254). Ultimately, then, Bloom sees A Vision as primarily "a Gnostic scripture or apocalypse" (270). His later essay, "Yeats, Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void" (in Harold Bloom, Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens [New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1976] 205-34) further explores this theme.

<sup>71</sup>These concepts are not the same for Yeats. "Destiny" is all that the Will can achieve in action or creation if left free, while "Fate" means all external acts or forms forced on the Will by the mind in its freedom. They are also called "beauty" and "truth" respectively, in honor of their dominant tincture. (Yeats sketches these rough ideas in AVA 130 and 135.)

<sup>72</sup>AVA 28-29. Yeats' parallel (and contemporary) discussion in The Trembling of the Veil (Autobiography 183) of the Vision of Evil in Dante and Villon serves as a gloss on this passage (see p. 176).

<sup>73</sup>AVA 276.

<sup>74</sup>AVB 279-80. This passage is identical in both editions.

<sup>75</sup>AVA 214-15.

<sup>76</sup>About 1926 Yeats wrote an interesting note on A Vision

that supports this point:

This book records "A Vision," and its writer like the writers of all similar books in the past, when he uses some abstract term or definition, knows that they are incidental and temporary. He is even persuaded that whatever is so defined is taken out of experience as water is when we describe it as two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, in momentary ignorance of the fact that it uses a little sunlight, or sediment, a little duckweed or a fish or two, and that spiritual realities especially can only be known in the animation of experience.

(Quoted in Ellmann, Identity 163)

<sup>77</sup>T. R. Henn suggests that one is never certain whether Yeats "was rationalizing his own emotions in terms of the myth, or explaining the myth in terms of himself" (The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats, 2nd ed. [London: Methuen, 1965] 184).

## CHAPTER VI

### ANTITHETICAL EXPLOSION, 1926-32

After finishing A Vision in the spring of 1925, Yeats thought he could rest from the task that had occupied him so long. But soon he was at work on a revision, especially the section on the soul between incarnations. And this time he would make certain that his system had the exemplary rational support of the philosophical tradition. That was not possible in the first edition. At the start of the spirit messages in 1917, Yeats' Communicators had told him not to read philosophy until after completion of their statements.<sup>1</sup> They wanted him to remain clear of rational preconceptions. In fact, Yeats would later say that, apart from a few of Plato's dialogues, he knew no philosophy then.<sup>2</sup> Of course, he had long felt the resonance of Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas in occult studies, what Ellmann calls philosophy's "dingy back entrances."<sup>3</sup> But the first Vision, as per instructions, remained mostly clear of direct philosophical influence, and was, Yeats felt, the poorer for it. Now, in 1925, he could begin changing that by methodically sifting rational thought for parallels to his own esoterica. Beginning with Berkeley, Plato, and Plotinus that same year, and continuing with Russell, Whitehead, Croce, Hegel, Kant,

Bergson, and many others in the next few years (including Eastern thought after 1930), Yeats thoroughly explored being and perception.<sup>4</sup>

However, once again in Yeats' life, experience leavened abstraction: his always frail health began giving way to age. Twice he almost died during this period. In October 1927 he lay delirious with "lung congestion" for a time.<sup>5</sup> Then, in the winter of 1929-30, Yeats was deathly ill with Malta Fever (Brucellosis), even writing a will just before the condition was finally diagnosed and the danger from a raging fever allayed.<sup>6</sup> And once more, as in 1903 when Maud Gonne married, he had a new surge of energy after disaster, embracing life and writing starker, grittier poetry.

Actually, even before his first brush with death, Yeats was already beginning to write poetry that juxtaposed abstraction and experience as they relate to the artist's role and to the imaginative process. Throughout the period, then, Yeats featured the primary-antithetical division of the system in his art. And two distinct but closely related groups of poems stand out. In one group (especially "Byzantium") he explores the familiar double link of life and eternity, the source of tragic art. In the other group (especially "Vacillation") Yeats opposes rather than intermingles the same elements, so that he can reaffirm his choice of the artist's path over the saint's. In both groups Yeats expresses his tragic perspective--his antithetical bias--

more directly and more passionately than ever before. While acknowledging his old yearnings for spiritual escape, he remains true to Homer and Dante and Shakespeare, content to toil and sing his way to perfection through "bird songs of an old man, joy in the passing moment. . . ." <sup>7</sup> This chapter, after first assessing the impact of Yeats' reading and personal crises on his general tragic conception, features both categories of poetry.

The initial effect of Yeats' readings in philosophy is best gauged from letters he wrote between 1926 and 1929. The most intriguing are those to T. Sturge Moore, poet, cover artist of many of Yeats' poetry editions, and brother of G. E. Moore, the Cambridge "realist" philosopher. In these letters Yeats sounds different than he does anywhere else. He is more self-consciously intellectual, uncomfortably so. Because he tended to dress up sketchy knowledge as expertise, Yeats often seems the intolerable dilettante here. Misreadings and oversimplifications abound as he drops name after name. Yet, his enthusiasm offsets his noetic naiveté, making these letters quite entertaining. For instance, Yeats' attempts to harmonize rational tradition with his own assumptions are fascinating. He makes Plotinus and Whitehead sound like confirmed Yeatsians. And he cleverly uses Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore as foils for his own notions about perception and the nature of things--obsessions for forty years.

Throughout much of 1926 Yeats tried to persuade Sturge Moore that sensual and conceptual images are one. Beginning in several letters with the story of John Ruskin seeing a phantom cat, he goes on and on about both Ruskin's cat and a house cat having equal reality, irrespective of whether any image actually exists outside the working human mind.<sup>8</sup> (At this time Yeats inclined toward the view that the mind confers reality. See pp. 207-08.) After dueling with Moore and his brother on this matter in a series of letters, on June 9, 1926 Yeats the upstart scorns the eminent Cambridge philosopher:

Your brother sees a difference of kind, not of degree, because he cannot rid his mind of the now obsolete sense-corked bottle of personality. The moment one considers all the images, sense-images, dream-images, mind-images, as forming a single existence one is forced to concede an equal reality to the conceptual ideas . . . and the ancient pair Intellect and Imagination stand face to face.<sup>9</sup>

Sturge Moore's reply ridicules Yeats' thought process:

"Speculate as much as you like, turn out as many hypotheses as you can, but don't imagine that because they please you they are therefore true or ascertained. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Yeats, in turn, answers this scorching letter with what can only be called petulance:

I certainly have not read your brother carefully. My special experience has shown me that the barrier which he assumes between images of sense and of the mind does not exist. I think therefore that he is not an author who has for me a special value. It is nothing to me that my special experience is not yet shared by the majority of teachers in universities (which is what is meant by "proved"). What matters to me is that it is my experience.<sup>11</sup>

His intellectual bluff called, Yeats falls back on his old brazen self-possession to carry the day. Logical or not, he knows what he knows: all images derive from the two-way path between the universal orders. Whether ultimately from moods, Daimons, the great memory, or Anima Mundi, images come alive in the human imagination. And, since the early nineties Yeats had known that images flow freely between human minds--in sleep, waking trance, and, most sublimely, in art. That is what Yeats means by "my experience." Only by pressing the quasi-philosophical position that sensual and mental images are interchangeable can he "explain" a lifetime of magical and aesthetic assumptions. For Yeats, philosophy served myth.<sup>12</sup>

In a letter to Joseph Hone in 1927, Yeats clarifies this context. At the same time, he reaffirms the eternal and temporal communality underlying his tragic perspective:

Apropos of much. I think that much of the confusion of modern philosophy, perhaps the whole realism versus idealism quarrel, comes from our renouncing the ancient hierarchy of beings from man up to the One. What I do not see but may have seen, is perceived by another being . . . is part of the fabric of another being. I remember what he forgets, he remembers what I forget. We are in the midst of life and there is nothing but life.<sup>13</sup>

The spiritual interpenetration is between gyres, between man and Daimon, or, to paraphrase Yeats' favorite Heraclitean statement, between two entities living each other's death and dying each other's life.

Yeats was always aware of such sexual metaphors, sometimes speaking directly, not just symbolically, on the relationship between the physical and spiritual dimensions. In early October 1927, just before his first health crisis, he wrote Olivia Shakespear that "only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind--sex and the dead."<sup>14</sup> And shortly after the crisis he stressed the connection much more passionately to her: "Certainly we suck always at the eternal dugs. How well too it puts my own mood between spiritual excitement, and the sexual torture and the knowledge that they are somehow inseparable!"<sup>15</sup>



Yeats was most himself in his letters when he forgot his intellectual stance and became excited in the familiar tragic manner, which at this time was more than aesthetic. His recent illness had put him to the test: could the tragic joy long central to his theory actually exist? Yeats' answer was emphatic--in extremis he had indeed become like the revered tragic hero, like Hamlet. For example, in late November 1927, with his lung still not healed, Yeats indulges in tragic comfort in a letter to Mrs. Shakespear: "How strange is the subconscious gaiety that leaps up before danger or difficulty. I have not had a moment's depression--that gaiety is outside one's control, a something given by nature. . . ." <sup>16</sup> However, in a note to Sturge Moore in April 1929, Yeats still must state such feelings obliquely, more along the lines of his earlier tragic theory. Yet, he manages an undercurrent of passion:

The one heroic sanction is that of the last battle of the Norse Gods, of a gay struggle without hope. Long ago I used to puzzle Maud Gonne by always avowing ultimate defeat as a test. Our literary movement would be worthless but for its defeat. <sup>17</sup>

Yeats focused his thoughts on tragic gaiety even more after his second bout with death (1929-30). This occurred not in letters but in a diary he kept during 1930, which also sums up, quite clearly, the system late in its revision. If one wants to understand the Yeats of "Byzantium," the Crazy

Jane poems, and "Vacillation," this work is the place to begin.

The first entry in the diary (April 7) deals with Yeats' feeling that he has almost recovered from his long illness. He describes his routine: writing on A Vision in the morning, turning to Swift in the afternoon, and ending the evening with detective stories.<sup>18</sup> Above all, Yeats has an obvious sense of delight in living and working. This translates later in the spring to a dynamic entry on tragic joy, perhaps his most developed concerning literary tradition:

It has always seemed to me that all great literature at its greatest intensity displays the sage, the lover, or some image of despair. . . . When I say the lover I mean all that heroic casuistry, all that assertion of the eternity of what Nature declares ephemeral; and when I speak of an image of despair I think of a passage in Sophocles, or many passages in Shakespeare and in the Old Testament. . . .

All three have collapsed in our day. . . . When the image of despair departed with poetical tragedy the others could not survive, for the lover and the sage cannot survive without that despair which is a form of joy. . . .<sup>19</sup>

The familiar context of the tragic moment is here: heroic assertion of the universal amid despair, and "a form of joy"

accompanying the brief intermingling of orders. For thirty years Yeats had celebrated this state, but never more than now, after his own near-death experiences.

Yeats discusses his five-year effort to grasp philosophical tradition in an intense entry of June 19. The problem had been, from the start of his reading, to mate the abstractions of others to his own, then fit it all into a more concrete tragic perspective. He now sees this task as part of the larger drama of his life, in which tragic unity is, of course, a product of the fused orders:

I cannot discover truth by logic unless that logic serve passion, and only then if the logic be ready to cut its own throat, tear out its own eyes. . . . Those spiritual beings seem always as if they would turn me from every abstraction. I must . . . see myself set in a drama where I struggle to exalt and overcome concrete realities perceived not with mind only but as with the roots of my hair. The passionless reasoners are pariah dogs and devour the dead symbols. The clarified spirits own the truth, they have intellect; but we receive as agents, never as owners, in reward for victory.<sup>20</sup>

This double link, evolving in Yeats' mind since at least the Blake edition, through the essays on tragedy and the geometry of the system, is now quite personal to him. What may have begun as intellectual and aesthetic ostentation has become

rooted in life.

Such relative clarity about ultimate things reflects the progress Yeats was making in revising his system. His grasp of the overall scheme was now much better. In a series of brilliant, very personal diary entries, Yeats conveys the gist of the updated system. One entry in particular is probably the clearest statement Yeats ever made on the subject:

I think that two conceptions, that of reality as a congeries of beings, that of reality as a single being, alternate in our emotion and in history, and must always remain something that human reason, because subject always to one or the other, cannot reconcile. I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. . . . could these two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease.<sup>21</sup>

In another entry Yeats re-aligns the same elements into a more aesthetic form, yet he still includes an earthy analogy typical of the period:

If men are born many times . . . that must originate in the antinomy between human and divine freedom. Man, incarnating, translating "the

divine ideas" into his language of the eye, to assert his own freedom, dying into the freedom of God and then coming to birth again. So too the assertions and surrender of sexual love, all that I have described elsewhere as antithetical and primary.<sup>22</sup>

The most intriguing entries concern the Absolute, the one. Continuing with the two freedoms quoted above, and citing Plotinus as a prime influence, Yeats in one place describes the simplicity behind all cycles, all freedoms: "The ultimate reality must be all movement, all thought, all perception, extinguished, two freedoms unthinkably, unimaginably absorbed in one another."<sup>23</sup> In another entry he uses the vocabulary of A Vision, calling the Absolute the Thirteenth Cone. However, the Thirteenth Cone (or Cycle) has evolved since A Vision was published, for it now functions as a virtual godhead:

Berkeley . . . thought that "we perceive" and are passive whereas God creates in perceiving. He creates what we perceive. I substitute for God the Thirteenth Cone, the Thirteenth Cone therefore creates our perceptions--all the visible world--as held in common by our wheel.<sup>24</sup>

Lest one think Yeats has tempered his antithetical bias and become truly evenhanded in his treatment of the orders, the following entry, written between the last two quoted, should

be considered:

If reality is timeless and spaceless this is a goal, an ultimate Good. But if I believe that it is also a congeries of autonomous selves I cannot believe in one ever-victorious Providence, though I may in Providences that preside over a man, a class, a city, a nation, a world--Providences that may be defeated, the tutelary spirits of Plotinus.<sup>25</sup>

Yeats' bias was indeed defiant and stubborn, and would never die, no matter what he might say in moments of doubt or vacillation. When an old poet's passion bubbled up, as it did so often at this time and for the rest of his life, numbered cones and Daimonic spirits seemed to fade into the background. At such times Yeats delighted in man and the lusty human imagination. Life and feeling were the stuff of tragic art; the rest was acknowledged but hidden, like underground streams and aquifers in the living earth. As Yeats told Sturge Moore in 1928, "Experience or our senses never set before us the one or render us conscious of it. We feel ourselves to be one among many. . . ." <sup>26</sup>

Even when Yeats discussed spirits at this time, he often did so in terms of the many, as if plenitude were universal. This is especially apparent in a long and lively introduction to the play Words Upon the Window-Pane, written in 1931. Yeats devotes the final section to the Daimon, which he characterizes as a "timeless individuality" containing

archetypes of all conceivable lives.<sup>27</sup> Each archetype enters time through an allotted life, or, to paraphrase Yeats, Socrates may cease living but can never cease existing.<sup>28</sup> Once we realize that past archetypes can re-emerge at will in our minds, "many strange or beautiful things become credible."<sup>29</sup> In other words, spectres fit the Yeatsian scheme, too. And abundance is truly universal: "All about us there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred."<sup>30</sup> Thus has the early image of the moods pouring themselves onto the world (see p. 31) survived forty years of Yeats' constant tinkering with the idea of warring / intermingling orders.

Such an obsession with the right relationship of the natural and the supernatural during 1926-32 led Yeats to write some of his greatest poems. In such works as the Byzantium poems and "Among School Children," for example, he explores the creative result of this interchange. Specifically, he looks at the way art achieves perfection--the semblance of eternity--through images deriving from the interlocked orders. (This was also Yeats' way of soothing himself with that traditional anodyne for decrepitude and death--personal immortality through the work of art.)

"Among School Children" (1926) first presents images that mock and haunt human mortality, then shifts to unified images that celebrate art and immortality. Yeats, "a sixty-

year-old smiling public man"<sup>31</sup> (as senator), is touring a schoolroom, guided by a nun. Suddenly, images of Maud Gonne appear in his mind. First she is "a Ledaean body,"<sup>32</sup> in her prime, telling him over a fire of some childhood hurt. At that moment, Yeats recalls, "our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy."<sup>33</sup> Then, seeing the children in the classroom, he imagines her at their age. His heart is "driven wild,"<sup>34</sup> for this image is as real to him as any living child. But now the sobering image of the aged Maud, "hollow of cheek,"<sup>35</sup> assails him, and he remembers that he, too, once had been young. He pulls himself back from reverie and, with gentle bitterness, decides it is better to smile, showing that an "old scarecrow"<sup>36</sup> can be comfortable.

In the fifth stanza Yeats begins speculating on this terrible mockery of an aging body by the mind and its images, which seem as timeless as still photographs. If a mother could see her son at sixty, he surely would not seem worth the "pang of his birth,"<sup>37</sup> for he could never live up to the pristine image of him that her hopes had once given her. And nuns as well as mothers "worship images."<sup>38</sup> Although theirs are of marble or bronze, these too can break a heart. In sum, the images of female hopes and of smiling public men are ideal, unblemished, symbolizing "all heavenly glory."<sup>39</sup> But because human beings must suffer and age, the gap between ideal and reality widens, and felicitous images no longer soothe but haunt. Men become maddeningly trivial--



their bodies reduce them to scarecrows at the time of their greatest fame and wisdom. It happened to Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. And it happens to poets. How, then, can one reconcile the body's decline with the active imagination, bring the real and the ideal into some balance, and thereby turn despair into joy?

The answer is, of course, a different kind of image--the unified image of art, product of a unified being. The famous final stanza of "Among School Children" defines such antithetical perfection:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 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?<sup>40</sup>

Static images come from imbalance. Lines 2-4, appositives, are examples of abstractions eclipsing life, the most common imbalance. Mothers must undergo the physical pain of childbirth to "pleasure" deep instincts for giving love (and for creating ideal images of their infants). Nuns must sacrifice bodily drives to worship ineffable images. The beauty of a static image, such as that of the young Maud in the second and third stanzas, may well arise because it is entirely

absent in reality. And rational truth comes only through mental effort at the expense of living. All such images, all such truths, are not rooted in life and process.

Yeats now presents, in the last four lines, two perfect images, balanced between stillness and movement, organic yet eternal. The tree, Cabalistic symbol of man's ascent toward eternity as well as a traditional emblem of organicism, literally blossoms out of the earth, just as Yeats says tragic art must. And which is the tree--its potential in the seed or its progressive stages of leaf and blossom? Yeats at sixty, worried about aging, finds comfort in the implied answer that a man may still blossom and be as much himself as when he was the child in a classroom or the young man sitting infatuated before a fire. The dancer,<sup>41</sup> a favorite image of Yeats', is the perfect example of poised stillness in movement, a most dynamic figure for Unity of Being / Unity of Image. It is at once Phase Fifteen (a paradigm to approximate, not attain), like the dancer in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," and the Yeatsian heaven, like the island of eternal youth in The Wanderings of Oisín and "the predestined dancing-place" of Upon a Dying Lady. And if Yeats draws solace from the tree's three-in-one nature, he is ecstatic about the implied answer to the second question. The dancer and the dance seem two, yet are an indistinguishable whole--as are the poet and poem. Through his work, then, Yeats secures immortality. An aging poet

may be a scarecrow, but in his poem he is forever young, forever dancing. Through art, the lightning bolt of eternity strikes during life, and heaven and earth are joined.

"Sailing to Byzantium," also written in 1926, presents a similar quandary of aging body and active mind. And its concluding stanza offers much the same solution: the unified art image. As an old man, Yeats feels out of place looking at nature's fertile plenty. Therefore, he seeks the order and serenity of "monuments of unageing intellect,"<sup>42</sup> which the sensual young ignore. More precisely, he would refine his soul through art:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.<sup>43</sup>

As in "Among School Children," scarecrows must sing or dance through images, refinements of nature, not in nature itself. And Byzantium, symbol of both the spiritual life and anti-theetical unity,<sup>44</sup> is the realm of art.

Once in Byzantium, Yeats calls on sages in a mosaic to descend from the "holy fire" and be his singing masters. Almost parodying Donne and his three-personed God, Yeats

implores them to consume his heart away, to gather him "into the artifice of eternity,"<sup>45</sup> which, as Kermode points out,<sup>46</sup> is a reversible term. As usual, Yeats equates art and eternity--the sages are both spiritual and aesthetic. Like Daimons, they function as tutelary spirits or muses to be invoked. Yet, they are also colored patterns in a work of art.

The final stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium," like that of the previous poem, offers the ideal image of art as the solution for the mocked scarecrow. Here Yeats twists the idea a bit, imagining himself as the unified work:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.<sup>47</sup>

However, for all his desire to escape nature and find pure being (one draft says, "I fly from things becoming to the thing become"<sup>48</sup>), Yeats subtly confuses the issue in the final lines. His golden bird is still suspiciously like a natural bird or an old poet singing bird songs in the joy of the passing moment. Indeed, in singing of things "past, or passing, or to come," the metallic bird acts very much like

the tragic artist performing his prophetic duties in a world of process. The point is that even the unified work of art (according to Yeats' tragic theory, especially the unified work) must be rooted in life<sup>49</sup> to effect Unity of Culture.

The other Byzantium poem, "Byzantium" (1930), goes far beyond either "Among School Children" or "Sailing to Byzantium" by showing the ordering process behind all images. Adapting the complementary perspective of A Vision, Yeats in this poem uses Byzantium as the unifying principle for all flux in and out of time. From the eternal perspective it is the paradise where all the newly dead, still reeking of life, are purified for the next cycle. From the human viewpoint it is the place of floating images and dancing flames--the living imagination. Death and art partake of one continuous process. Spirits, shades, and art images are different wavelengths of a single radiant reality. And since the nineties Yeats had pondered this great process. First, theosophical and Golden Dawn ideas led to the mystical triad of the Blake commentary, which in turn helped spawn myths such as the moods flooding the world as images and apparitions, the double link of the orders, and the great memory giving shape to human passions. Yeats' tragic theory then presented more mature myths, involving contemplation, the mask, and especially the Daimon, that personal emissary and muse from eternity tying a man to Anima Mundi

or, as the system took shape, to the Thirteenth Cycle. Through it all, Yeats insisted that man must be self-possessed, else he cannot receive, much less control, emanations from eternity. "Byzantium" animates these endless speculations and myths in a most sophisticated, complex way.

For "Byzantium" to make sense, the entire poem must be read as a meditative vision. The physical city, with its receding day images and night sounds, anchors otherwise forbidding abstractions. (Yeats' discussion of the afterlife in both editions of A Vision is so difficult because it lacks such orientation.) But that does not prevent creative ambiguities. At the end of the first stanza, for instance, the dome of St. Sophia is "starlit" or "moonlit," illuminated in either Phase One or Phase Fifteen. Thus, it disdains "the fury and the mire of human veins"<sup>50</sup> either by absorbing the dead in the primordium (as eternal clearing house), or by unifying human "complexities" into pure beauty (as imagination).

Ambiguities increase in the difficult second stanza. Proceeding through his visionary landscape, Yeats is confronted by a nebulous entity:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
 Shade more than man, more image than a shade;  
 For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
 May unwind the winding path;  
 A mouth that has no moisture and no breath

Breathless mouths may summon;

I hail the superhuman;

I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.<sup>51</sup>

In his original prose outline for the poem, Yeats had written "death of a friend" as the first sentence under "subject for a poem."<sup>52</sup> While there is nothing overtly personal about this spirit in the finished work, it does seem to seek out Yeats. The clause in lines 5-6 has an ambiguous subject and object, and most commentators think Yeats invokes the spirit. But earlier drafts, coupled with the peculiar context of lines 3-4, suggest otherwise. For instance, one draft says, "His breathless body beckons me,"<sup>53</sup> while a later states, "A mouth that has no moisture and no breath / May better summon me."<sup>54</sup>

The meaning of "mummy-cloth" and of the winding path unwinding is even more suggestive. In the stages between incarnations (as described so vaguely in A Vision), the soul seeks purification. One step involves two interrelated processes: "the Dreaming Back" and "the Return."<sup>55</sup> In the former, the Spirit must constantly relive the most passionate events of its recently completed life in the order of their intensity. In the latter, all events must be relived in chronological order, so that causes can be understood and knowledge attained. Hence, knots are unraveled on the road to equilibrium. The two processes alternate while that happens. During the Dreaming Back the Spirit discovers the

concrete events in the Passionate Body (the eternal object of sense), but must get "the names and words of the drama . . . from some incarnate Mind"<sup>56</sup> because its own faculties have disappeared. It accomplishes this by inhabiting the living unconscious mind (in the process providing reciprocal dream imagery for the host). And cases of apparitions appearing in places where passionate events have taken place are also part of the Dreaming Back.

These ideas must be important, for they relate to so much in Yeats, from the moods to Anima Mundi and Daimons.<sup>57</sup> At the least they help provide a working gloss to the second stanza of "Byzantium." The floating image or apparition is a mummy because its soul ("Hades bobbin") is wrapped in the events, the passions, of its recent incarnation. It appears as part of the Dreaming Back stage, unraveling the events of that life. As part of the process, it must summon Yeats for specifics of those events to be relived. In response, Yeats acclaims the visage (an earlier draft says, "I adore that mystery"<sup>58</sup>). (Any reciprocal infusion of images from the shade would overly complicate the logic of the poem, so that part of the Dreaming Back is not presented.) Finally, the apparition is called "death-in-life" and "life-in-death" because it is physically dead yet eternally alive, and also, perhaps, as Bloom suggests,<sup>59</sup> because it is still one more ambiguous emblem of Phases Fifteen and One respectively.



Yeats next sees a slightly more substantial image, this one artistic:

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.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, this second image also confuses him. Unlike the miraculous bird of "Sailing to Byzantium," it is not definitely antithetical. It is more like the dome in stanza one, existing under both tinctures. This bird is either eschatological cock at Phase One, welcoming the dead, or unified metal at Phase Fifteen, scorning anything less beautiful than itself. But, as in both the first stanza and the earlier poem, Yeats protests too much about nature. He cannot leave it alone.

In the fourth stanza, which Helen Vendler rightly calls the poem's fulcrum,<sup>61</sup> Yeats presents the purifying process common to both apparitions and images of art. Here spirits are purged, equilibrated, and set spinning like agonized dancers:

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit  
 Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,

Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,  
 Where blood-begotten spirits come  
 And all complexities of fury leave,  
 Dying into a dance,  
 An agony of trance,  
 An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.<sup>62</sup>

Although Yeats seems concerned only with the dead in these lines, clearly he is thinking of the imaginative process as well. Already in the poem, images and shades and miracles have been confused with one another. And in a cancelled line in one draft Yeats showed his intentions when he wrote of this pavement, "There images and spirits come."<sup>63</sup> While opting for less direct language in the final version, he still chooses an artwork--"the Emperor's pavement" (called "marbles of the dancing floor"<sup>64</sup> in the last stanza)--as his crucible. More importantly, Yeats always associated the dance that is "an agony of trance" (motion in stillness) with his favorite symbol of ideal art--the dancer.

The context of this fourth stanza is perhaps best expressed in some unpublished notes Yeats wrote for A Vision in 1928:

. . . the point in the Zodiac where the whirl becomes a sphere once reached, we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame, where there is nothing but

the state itself. . . . We attain it always in the creation or enjoyment of a work of art, but that moment though eternal in the Daimon passes from us because it is not an attainment of our whole being.<sup>65</sup>

This stanza therefore resonates with the ideas and imagery of forty years: "the fire-born moods" in the early poem "The Moods" (1893);<sup>66</sup> "the condition of fire" in "Anima Mundi," where all is music and the soul has "eternal possession of itself in one single moment";<sup>67</sup> the stages of the soul called "Shiftings," "Beatitude," and "Purification" in A Vision;<sup>68</sup> and, of course, the moment of personality and tragic ecstasy in Samhain (1904) and "Poetry and Tradition." In only eight lines Yeats has concentrated a universe of thought and fury.

If the fourth stanza is contained energy, the final stanza is unleashed apocalypse. Its action seems out of dialectical sequence--it should appear before the purification stanza. But, as Bloom says,<sup>69</sup> to reverse them would be a rhetorical loss. As the poem stands, Yeats' finale is certainly overwhelming:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
 Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
 The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
 Marbles of the dancing floor  
 Break bitter furies of complexity,

Those images that yet  
 Fresh images beget,  
 That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.<sup>70</sup>

In the previous stanza Yeats only implies the artistic process. Here, all is explicit. The images of art are indistinguishable from dead spirits; the golden smithies are simultaneously imaginative and purgatorial. Nature and eternity are continuous, symbiotic. The "Emperor" is as much Wallace Stevens' emperor of ice-cream as Anima Mundi. In fact, Yeats concludes this poem about processing raw images, about breaking "bitter furies of complexity," not with the refining marbles or smithies, but with those fecund images themselves. At the end he is quite taken with the same complexities disdained earlier by dome and bird. Once again Yeats has asserted his antithetical bias. The prophetic artist (especially one nearing his own death) is always fascinated by life images, the primal sea where tragic art is spawned. The artist indeed loves the bole as much as the leaf and the blossom.

Yeats shows his bias more directly in the second group of poems mentioned earlier. In these works, often dramatic dialogues based on his own internal primary and antithetical imperatives, Yeats invariably favors not only the life images of "Byzantium" but also life itself. The tragic artist chooses the mire for its passion as well as for its artistic utility.

"A Dialogue of Self and Soul," finished soon after Yeats' lung problem in 1927, especially embraces life--all of it, even one's own past folly and pain. At the beginning, "Soul" (primary, spiritual) implores "Self" (antithetical, creative) to set aside Sato's ancient samurai sword (symbolizing life<sup>71</sup>) and climb to the top of Yeats' tower (emblematic of escape into the Absolute):

Think of ancestral night that can  
 If but imagination scorn the earth  
 And intellect its wandering  
 To this and that and t'other thing,  
 Deliver from the crime of death and birth.<sup>72</sup>

This is, of course, Yeats' old yearning for the saint's direct path to eternity--bliss through subsumption. But Self, sword in hand, claims "as by a soldier's right / A charter to commit the crime once more."<sup>73</sup> Soul then states the best possible case for primary unity:

Such fullness in that quarter overflows  
 And falls in the basin of the mind  
 That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,  
 For intellect no longer knows  
Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known--  
 That is to say, ascends to Heaven;  
 Only the dead can be forgiven;  
 But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.<sup>74</sup>

As Bloom says, Soul has apparently read A Vision,<sup>75</sup> for the terms are from that work. Near Phase One all that is distinctly human disappears. The Four Faculties lose their identities--Will and Mask (Is and Ought), Creative Mind and Body of Fate (Knower and Known).<sup>76</sup> And even Soul cringes at the thought that only death brings expiation (through the purification process of the system). Escape brings bliss at the cost of identity and imagination.

Self's answer occupies the last half of the poem. In a new departure, Yeats now considers self-possession to be more than heroic bravado or achieving one's mask. He has added a moral dimension: redemption through self-forgiveness. Contrary to Soul's lines above, Yeats believes the living can be forgiven, too, for one can initiate an internal purgatorial process, reliving and reconciling past events, just as in eternity. Self-forgiveness is self-purification. Yeats evades nothing, not the "ignominy of boyhood,"<sup>77</sup> the clumsiness of early manhood, or the self-doubts caused by the constant malice of enemies. He even faces the great folly of his life--his long, hopeless yearning for Maud Gonne. Consistent with the bold figure of life as flooded ditches teeming with "frog-spawn,"<sup>78</sup> Yeats considers the wooing of Maud "that most fecund ditch of all . . ."<sup>79</sup> (because so much poetry came from it). The result of all this is a deeply felt tragic joy:

I am content to follow to its source  
 Every event in action or in thought;  
 Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
 When such as I cast out remorse  
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
 We must laugh and we must sing,  
 We are blest by everything,  
 Everything we look upon is blest.<sup>80</sup>

The thought Yeats expressed in 1910, that creative joy brings an acceptance of life and arouses sympathy and tragic ecstasy (see p. 104), now had substance. More and more he was finding that his tragic theory could stand up in actual experience.

The idea of redemption and imagination arising from the basest mire appears even more starkly in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" (1931). In this informal but grotesque dialogue, the Bishop advises the reckless old woman to "'live in a heavenly mansion, / Not in some foul sty.'"<sup>81</sup> After she first replies that "'fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul,'"<sup>82</sup> Crazy Jane tersely states the moral and artistic truth of tragic experience:

". . . Love has pitched his mansion in  
 The place of excrement;  
 For nothing can be sole or whole  
 That has not been rent."<sup>83</sup>

The most important poem of this group, "Vacillation" (1931-32), makes the case for the antithetical path better

than any other poem or play Yeats wrote. Forty-five years after first declaring his prophetic mission, and nearly thirty after his first essays on tragedy, Yeats had at last found the perfect vehicle for explaining his internal struggle and tragic choice. "Vacillation," then, may be the one indispensable work of his tragic perspective.

The poem begins with a question that takes in the whole sweep of Yeats' spiritual, moral, and artistic concerns:

Between extremities  
 Man runs his course;  
 A brand, or flaming breath,  
 Comes to destroy  
 All those antinomies  
 Of day and night;  
 The body calls it death,  
 The heart remorse.  
 But if these be right  
 What is joy?<sup>84</sup>

In the presence of death and constant remorse over the errors of a lifetime, what constitutes value? Are there any grounds for joy? Yeats had often answered such questions before-- after all, his tragic theory was created expressly to ameliorate such confusion. And only recently he had shown how remorse can be turned on its head in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." But by asking a rhetorical question, he dramatically creates the tone of near despair necessary to set the tragic



anodyne in proper relief. Indeed, the rest of the poem emphatically answers the question.

Section II of "Vacillation" presents the joy of artistic creation. Yeats shows the hieratic function of tragic art by equating the working artist with the devoted priest in the ancient festival of Attis, a vegetation god:

A tree there is that from its topmost bough  
Is half all glittering flame and half all green  
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;  
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.<sup>85</sup>

The tree is a Welsh symbol from the Mabinogian,<sup>86</sup> and represents "all those antinomies" of Section I: the spiritual and the natural, being and becoming, and so on. As the priest castrated himself to serve Attis, so does the artist sacrifice a normal life for his work. And if the priest hung the mask of Attis to reconcile the tree's two sides, the artist brings the two orders together in his art. The result is Unity of Being and the tragic joy so different from ordinary joy.

Tragic gaiety is expressed more exultantly, more in the usual way, in the next section. Yeats scorns worldly, vulgar ambitions as mere illusions. Instead, one must

prepare for death with tragic coherence and exuberance:

No longer in Lethean foliage caught  
 Begin the preparation for your death  
 And from the fortieth winter by that thought  
 Test every work of intellect or faith,  
 And everything that your own hands have wrought,  
 And call those works extravagance of breath  
 That are not suited for such men as come  
 Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb.<sup>87</sup>

Section IV describes a personal moment of illumination, adapted from a much longer passage in "Anima Mundi" (see pp. 151-52). As indicated in the discussion of that passage, Yeats is referring to the re-creation of an artist's original ecstasy by the perceiver of his work (in this case, a book of verse). Hence, the astringent joy of the first conception becomes gentler, refined through the work and the onlooker:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
 I sat, a solitary man,  
 In a crowded London shop,  
 An open book and empty cup  
 On the marble table-top

While on the shop and street I gazed  
 My body of a sudden blazed;  
 And twenty minutes more or less  
 It seemed, so great my happiness,  
 That I was blessed and could bless.<sup>88</sup>

Such moments (Ellmann calls them "momentary secular blessedness"<sup>89</sup>) capture something of the saint's innocent link to God while maintaining self-possession. The price is that they are fleeting--but renewable.

After a less than exultant section describing his remorse ("responsibility so weighs me down"<sup>90</sup>), Yeats begins tying the poem's threads together. In Section VI he realizes that the varieties of tragic joy described earlier in the poem are impossible without the very sorrow felt in Section V. Only art rooted in some mire like remorse is suited to men who come laughing to their tombs. The tree of antinomies where Attis' mask hangs can grow only in Crazy Jane's excremental soil:

From man's blood-sodden heart are sprung  
Those branches of the night and day  
Where the gaudy moon is hung.<sup>91</sup>

The final two sections of "Vacillation," VII and VIII, reaffirm this cardinal Yeatsian truth. In VII "Heart" (taking the role of Self) and "Soul" have a dialogue along the same lines as that in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," but one marvelously condensed, even terse. Yeats has reduced his internal conflict to its barest essence:

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.  
The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?  
The Soul. Isiah's coal, what more can man desire?  
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!

The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin?<sup>92</sup>

The condition of fire--goal of the saint and poet alike--can be reached directly through transcendence and subsumption, or indirectly through a spiraling dialectic. The saint, primary and passive, ignores life and is content to be swallowed up by eternity. He looks on the fire, his senses stupified. But the reckless, antithetical artist embraces experience, using his senses to fabricate (with the help of eternity) perfection from imperfection. He refuses to suspend his hard-won self-possession for easeful sainthood. Perhaps perversely (at least to saints, bishops, and the Soul), he is fascinated by "what's difficult,"<sup>93</sup> by the flux of life, above all by the intoxication of making images.

The last section closely parallels VII, but is a light-hearted dramatic monologue, with Catholic mystic Friedrich von Hügel as foil. Yeats admits affinities with von Hügel, for he, too, honors sanctity and accepts miracles. But "though much alike,"<sup>94</sup> Yeats reluctantly thinks they must part, for the same reasons given in the previous section:

I--though

heart might find relief

Did I become a Christian man and choose for my  
belief

What seems most welcome in the tomb--play a  
predestined part.

Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

The lion and the honeycomb, what has the scripture  
said?

So get you gone, Von Hugel, though with blessings  
on your head.<sup>95</sup>

The lion and the honeycomb image comes from Judges 14:5-18 and is part of the perfect parable for the tragic creative process. Samson observes bees making honey in the carcass of a lion he has killed--sweetness growing out of carrion (yet another fecund ditch or "place of excrement"). Similarly, the artist shapes beauty from confusion and pain. That has been the bardic-prophetic mission since Homer. If one chooses it, he must, as Yeats says in "The Choice" (1931), "refuse / A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark."<sup>96</sup> In the late eighties, Yeats made Oisín so choose, rejecting St. Patrick's offer of religious repose. "Vacillation" rounds the circle, its sophistication but a refinement of Yeats' original prophetic fervor.<sup>97</sup>

The period between the publication of A Vision at the end of 1925 and the completion of "Vacillation" in March 1932<sup>98</sup> may have been Yeats' most fruitful. His mind and spirit and senses were fully engaged. Philosophical studies gave him confidence that his metaphysics belonged to a respectable tradition outside occult circles. And those metaphysics seemed more urgent because of his own brushes with death--speculations on the ultimate questions took on

a more personal coloring. But life, now precious, was a greater preoccupation. Thus, Yeats' tragic perspective also became very personal. The result was an explosion of great poetry, as he reaffirmed his self-possession amid physical decay and exulted in the tragic process. Keenly aware of the mutability of life and its dreams, Yeats more than ever celebrated the imaginative result of this knowledge:

Whatever flames upon the night

Man's own resinous heart has fed.<sup>99</sup>

This confidence in imagination, this reckless spirit, would sustain Yeats the rest of his life. After a brief wavering of purpose upon the death of Lady Gregory in 1932, he would again rebound, to continue even more fervently thinking about or experiencing everything possible. His poetry and plays would become alternately strident and magnificent, reflecting this careening intensity. If, as he would say at the end, one can only embody truth, not know it, Yeats would in his last years fully embody his own tragic beliefs, living out his prophetic dream of fifty years before.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>AVB 12 and Yeats and Moore (letter of March 4, 1926) 83.

<sup>2</sup>AVB 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ellmann, Identity 216.

<sup>4</sup>The best source for Yeats' reading is Yeats himself, especially the correspondence with Sturge Moore. See also Hone (368-69), Ellmann (Masks 249-50, 261-62), and particularly Moore and her massive ch. X.

<sup>5</sup>Hone 389-90.

<sup>6</sup>Hone 411.

<sup>7</sup>Letter to Olivia Shakespear, February 23, 1928 (Letters 737).

<sup>8</sup>See letters dated January 16 and 26, and February 5 (Yeats and Moore 63-64, 66-67, and 67-69).

<sup>9</sup>Yeats and Moore 94.

<sup>10</sup>Yeats and Moore 96. At one time or another, every Yeats scholar probably wishes he could have said this to him.

<sup>11</sup>Yeats and Moore 99.

<sup>12</sup>As Yeats told Olivia Shakespear early in 1931, ". . . one can believe in a myth--one only assents to philosophy" (Letters 781).

<sup>13</sup>Letters 728.

<sup>14</sup>Letters 730.

<sup>15</sup>Letters 731.

<sup>16</sup>Letters 733.

<sup>17</sup>Yeats and Moore 154.

<sup>18</sup>W. B. Yeats, Pages from a Diary Written in 1930, in Explorations 289. Hereafter cited as Diary.

<sup>19</sup>Diary 295-96.

<sup>20</sup>Diary 301-02.

<sup>21</sup>Diary 305.

<sup>22</sup>Diary 306.

<sup>23</sup>Diary 307.

<sup>24</sup>Diary 320.

<sup>25</sup>Diary 309-10.

<sup>26</sup>Yeats and Moore 130-31.

<sup>27</sup>W. B. Yeats, Introduction to Words Upon the Window-Pane, in Explorations 368. Hereafter cited as WWP.

<sup>28</sup>WWP 368-69.

<sup>29</sup>WWP 369.

<sup>30</sup>WWP 369.

<sup>31</sup>Variorum Poems 443.



<sup>32</sup>Variorum Poems 443.

<sup>33</sup>Variorum Poems 443.

<sup>34</sup>Variorum Poems 444.

<sup>35</sup>Variorum Poems 444.

<sup>36</sup>Variorum Poems 444.

<sup>37</sup>Variorum Poems 444.

<sup>38</sup>Variorum Poems 445.

<sup>39</sup>Variorum Poems 445.

<sup>40</sup>Variorum Poems 445-46.

<sup>41</sup>See Kermode (83-86) on this image.

<sup>42</sup>Variorum Poems 407.

<sup>43</sup>Variorum Poems 407-08.

<sup>44</sup>In a paragraph written for a 1931 broadcast but never used, Yeats speaks directly of Byzantium as symbolic of the search for spiritual wholeness:

Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon the subject I have put into a poem called "Sailing to Byzantium." When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells . . . Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life

by a journey to that city.

(Quoted in A. Norman Jeffares, A New  
Commentary on the Poems of W. B.

Yeats [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1984] 213)

But Yeats is not speaking of the saint's direct path to spirituality, for Byzantium also relates to tragic exuberance and, thus, to Unity of Being. He mentions this connection in yet another paragraph written for a talk but not used (this one for his American tour of 1932-33). Discussing Aristotle's term "magnificence" in regard to John O'Leary, Yeats says that "style, whether in life or literature, comes, I think, from excess, from that something over and above utility which wrings the heart," and then immediately writes the following cancelled passage: "In my later poems I have called it Byzantium, that city where the saints showed their wasted forms upon a background of gold mosaic, and an artificial bird sang upon a tree of gold in the presence of the emperor . . ." (quoted in Curtis Bradford, "Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A Study of Their Development," revised version, in Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Unterecker [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1963] 96).

Part sensual and part spiritual, Byzantium is the perfect symbol for the double link between the orders and, hence, for the entire imaginative process.

<sup>45</sup>Variorum Poems 408.

<sup>46</sup>Kermode 87.

<sup>47</sup>Variorum Poems 408.

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Bradford 99. A. G. Stock cautions that Yeats characteristically "seeks the fixity of pure form, not dissolution into the formless infinite" (W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961] 202). In other words, Byzantium is the condition of pure form or being in art--ideal and spiritual, but spiritual in the sense of Phase Fifteen, not Phase One.

<sup>49</sup>Richard J. Finneran says that "Nature causes Art which expresses Nature" (Introduction to William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems, ed. Richard J. Finneran [Columbus: Merrill, 1970] 7).

<sup>50</sup>Variorum Poems 497.

<sup>51</sup>Variorum Poems 497.

<sup>52</sup>Diary 290.

<sup>53</sup>Quoted in Bradford 117.

<sup>54</sup>Quoted in Bradford 118.

<sup>55</sup>The information in the next few sentences is adapted from AVB 226-27.

<sup>56</sup>AVB 227.

<sup>57</sup>In "Anima Mundi" (352), for example, Yeats refuses to distinguish between apparitions and mental images. And, as already mentioned on pp. 225-26, in the introduction to Words

Upon the Window-Pane (itself a drama about such occurrences) Yeats explains some apparitions as our past archetypes reappearing in our minds.

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Bradford 118.

<sup>59</sup>Bloom, Yeats 391.

<sup>60</sup>Variorum Poems 497-98.

<sup>61</sup>Helen Hennessey Vendler, Yeats's "Vision" and the Later Plays (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963) 116.

<sup>62</sup>Variorum Poems 498.

<sup>63</sup>Quoted in Bradford 123.

<sup>64</sup>Variorum Poems 498.

<sup>65</sup>Quoted in Ellmann, Identity 221.

<sup>66</sup>Variorum Poems 142.

<sup>67</sup>"Anima Mundi" 357.

<sup>68</sup>AVB 231-33.

<sup>69</sup>Bloom, Yeats 391.

<sup>70</sup>Variorum Poems 498.

<sup>71</sup>Yeats' letter to Olivia Shakespear on October 2 (or 4), 1927 makes this clear: ". . . I am writing a new tower poem 'Sword and Tower,' which is a choice of rebirth rather than deliverance from birth. I make my Japanese sword and its silk covering my symbol of life . . ." (Letters 729)

- 72 Variorum Poems 478.
- 73 Variorum Poems 478.
- 74 Variorum Poems 478.
- 75 Bloom, Yeats 374.
- 76 AVB 73.
- 77 Variorum Poems 478.
- 78 Variorum Poems 478.
- 79 Variorum Poems 478.
- 80 Variorum Poems 479.
- 81 Variorum Poems 513.
- 82 Variorum Poems 513.
- 83 Variorum Poems 513.
- 84 Variorum Poems 499-500.
- 85 Variorum Poems 500.
- 86 Yeats describes this tree in "The Celtic Element in Literature," in E & I 176.
- 87 Variorum Poems 500-01.
- 88 Variorum Poems 501.
- 89 Ellmann, Identity 274.
- 90 Variorum Poems 501.
- 91 Variorum Poems 502.

<sup>92</sup>Variorum Poems 502. Commenting on an earlier draft of these lines in a letter to Mrs. Shakespear (January 3, 1932), Yeats sums up their broad meaning:

I feel that this is the choice of the saint  
(St. Theresa's ecstasy, Ghandi's smiling face):  
comedy; and the heroic choice: Tragedy (Dante, Don  
Quixote). Live tragically but be not deceived  
(not the fool's Tragedy). Yet I accept all the  
miracles. (Letters 790)

<sup>93</sup>Yeats once wrote a poem called "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (Variorum Poems 260).

<sup>94</sup>Variorum Poems 503.

<sup>95</sup>Variorum Poems 503.

<sup>96</sup>Variorum Poems 495.

<sup>97</sup>In a letter of June 30, 1932 to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats stresses this common focus: "The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that perhaps the sole theme--Usheen and Patrick--'So get you gone von Hügel though with blessings on your head'?" (Letters 798). And in a manuscript note obviously written about the same time, he repeats this thought: "I have spent my life saying the same thing. I denounced old age before I was twenty, and the swordsman throughout repudiates the saint--though with vacillation" (quoted in Henn 334).

<sup>98</sup>Ellmann (Identity 292) dates the completion as March 5, 1932.

<sup>99</sup>"Two Songs from a Play," Variorum Poems 438.

## CHAPTER VII

### FINAL CONFLUENCES AND AFFIRMATIONS, 1932-39

After completing "Vacillation" in March 1932, Yeats wrote very few poems for the rest of 1932 and all of 1933.<sup>1</sup> This damming of his creative powers after several years of great productivity was mostly due to Lady Gregory's death in May 1932 and the subsequent closing of her estate, Coole Park. To Yeats, the death of a great friend and benefactor was depressing enough, but the dismantling of the house and its grounds represented the additional demise of an ideal, as if all dancers were stilled or all statues broken. Coole was his favorite place, a spiritual and artistic retreat born of aristocratic manners and beliefs, a second Urbino, a symbol of what Irish Unity of Culture could be. Its closing also seemed to fulfill Yeats' worst fears that a dark new primary age was underway.<sup>2</sup> His horror of a mediocre tide swamping great manners and great art no doubt caused his brief flirtation with General Eoin O'Duffy's fascist Blueshirts in 1933-34<sup>3</sup> (as well as occasional intolerant outbursts for the rest of his life). Fortunately, the increasing impact of Eastern thought and a (perhaps imagined) physical revitalization from his 1934 Steinach operation helped Yeats recover his tragic affirmation and



lyric fervor. For the remainder of his life he would rethink reality in its entire spectrum, from eros to eternity, reaffirming his tragic perspective and its prophetic mission, extolling self-possession to the very end. This chapter, then, traces the final contours of Yeats' mind and art.

Yeats' determination to justify the human imagination on the most elaborate scale--his antithetical bias--found fresh support in both the Indian and Chinese traditions, especially the former. The Vedanta was particularly helpful. While Yeats had been exposed to Hindu ideas sporadically in his life (through the Brahmin theosophist Mohini M. Chatterjee, in 1885, and Rabindranath Tagore, whom he befriended in the teens), only in the early thirties did he study them in detail. The catalyst was Shri Purohit Swami, whom Yeats met at Sturge Moore's house in 1931,<sup>4</sup> and with whom he would later translate the Upanishads. In the winter of 1931-32 at Coole, as Lady Gregory lay dying and "Vacillation" was being written, Yeats read Purohit's autobiography, An Indian Monk.<sup>5</sup> In his introduction to this work, Yeats declares its importance for him: ". . . it seems to me something I have waited for since I was seventeen years old."<sup>6</sup> Specifically, he had found a transcendental philosophy that maintained concrete referents, and "that satisfied the intellect."<sup>7</sup>

As Yeats continued to read and compare Vedantic beliefs to his own, he discovered that Hindu meditation practices closely paralleled those of the Golden Dawn, including the

most crucial factor: maintaining a conscious ego throughout the process, even at the moment of ecstasy. His introduction to The Holy Mountain (1934), a partial autobiography by Purohit's master, underscores this point. While discussing "the stages of concentration,"<sup>8</sup> Yeats fits Hindu enlightenment to his own tragic theory, complete with consciousness and personality:

In the fourth stage the ascetic enters one or more of these stages at will and retains his complete memory when he returns; this is Turiyā, but as yet only in the form called Savikalpa; full Turiyā or "seedless" Samādhi comes when all these states are as a single timeless act, and that act is pure or unimpeded personality, all existence brought into the words: "I am."<sup>9</sup>

In a later introduction, "The Mandukya Upanishad" (1935), Yeats writes a variation on this passage, further clarifying parallels between his own beliefs and Indian philosophy:

In pure personality, seedless Samādhi, there is nothing but that bare "I am" which is Brahma. The initiate . . . is "the Human Form Divine" of Blake, that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body; henceforth he is self-creating. But the Universal Self is a fountain, not a cistern, the Supreme Good must perpetually give itself. The world is necessary to the Self,

must receive "the excess of its delights," and in this Self all delivered selves are present, ordering all things. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Pure personality is ultimately the same as God or the Absolute. Atman is Brahman. And Unity of Being telescopes into Unity with God--complementarity verging on identity. In this passage Yeats has thus fulfilled his own prophecy in the 1925 A Vision, that after 1927 men will equate God with human genius (see pp. 203-04). He also indicates a fundamental change in his Daimon concept as the revision of the system neared completion. No longer would the Daimon be one's eternal opposite, but instead one's higher or ultimate self. Yeats had hinted at such a change in his 1930 diary, when he called the Daimon "the permanent self" in a brief, unexplained statement.<sup>11</sup> Indian thought allowed him to elaborate: through Vedanta Yeats could now project the human imagination into the highest reaches of the eternal hierarchy.

The completed revision of the system dramatically features this reflexive configuration. The 1937 A Vision therefore redefines the antithetical-Daimonic man. By making the Daimon an individual's paradigm, Yeats avoids much of the awkwardness of the earlier conception. No longer, for example, is the Daimon of the opposite sex as in the first edition. And no more would convoluted Yeatsian logic be necessary to explain the apparent passivity of antithetical man during an influx of Daimonic knowledge or images. Despite

the ingenuity of Yeats' complementary perspective in the first edition (see pp. 197-98), the artist's volition still seemed lost at the height of the double link--a problem of wavering self-possession that had plagued Yeats since the earliest versions of his imagination myth. Whether called a mood or a Daimon, the eternal intermediary always seemed the aggressor, man the receiver. How could the reckless antithetical artist be so passive--so primary--at the decisive moment? The new conception offered a simple solution to this dilemma. If the Daimon is an individual's essence, his potential, then such passivity is but the quietness of the conscious mind tapping innate qualities in the unconscious. One is then truly self-possessed. The opposition is between self and Self, actuality and possibility, not between self and an external, albeit complementary entity. The Yeatsian imagination is now self-contained, self-begotten. Psychology enfolds metaphysics.

The Daimon has become the hub of the system, joined closely to the other major elements (now considerably refined since 1925). For instance, it is now integral to both the Four Faculties and the Four Principles. In fact, the faculties result from the "four memories" of the Daimon, which Yeats specifically calls the "ultimate self" of each man.<sup>12</sup> One's Body of Fate comes from the Daimon's memory of events in past lives; the Mask out of its memory of exalted moments in past lives; the Will (or "normal ego") from its memory of

all events in the present life; and the Creative Mind out of its memory of universal ideas shown by "actual men" in previous lives or by their spirits between incarnations.<sup>13</sup> The Four Principles, "the innate ground of the Faculties,"<sup>14</sup> are also tied to the Daimon. Here Yeats is at his most difficult. The Husk ("sense") exists because the Daimon wants to perceive other Daimons, and therefore the Passionate Body (object of sense) is "the sum of those Daimons."<sup>15</sup> The Spirit ("mind"<sup>16</sup>) is the Daimon's knowledge, for it knows the other Daimons as "the Divine Ideas in their unity," which just happens to be the definition of the Celestial Body (object of mind).<sup>17</sup> But such knowledge cannot occur unless the sensual perception first has taken place.<sup>18</sup> Earthly perception and cognition, then, are Yeats' model for absolute processes. He has made the thinking, perceiving artist into a paradigm and has called it the higher self or Daimon.

The Daimon concept also allows Yeats to clarify the very shadowy Ghostly Self of the first edition. The Ghostly Self is called the "permanent self" in the first edition, something like the Holy Ghost of the Thirteenth Cycle, where it resides with the Daimon (see p. 195). But the relationship between these co-inhabitants is not made clear. In the later edition of A Vision, Yeats resolves this problem (and greatly streamlines the eternal mechanism) by simply combining the two concepts. When the Daimon inhabits the

Thirteenth Cycle or Sphere, it is called the Ghostly Self.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the way is cleared for the Daimon to be called the ultimate or permanent self, the definition formerly reserved for the Ghostly Self alone.

So fascinated was Yeats by Daimons that in the introduction to the 1937 A Vision he even ascribes the birth of the system to them. The Communicators of the original data (now called "philosophic voices" or "teachers") have often insisted, Yeats says, "that the whole system is the creation of my wife's Daimon and of mine, and that it is as startling to them as to us."<sup>20</sup> The teachers, it seems, are but a reflection and distortion of reality, "mere 'spirits.'"<sup>21</sup> Reality itself can be found only by the Daimon in the Ghostly Self<sup>22</sup>--in other words, when the Daimon resides in the sphere. By this neat trick, Yeats reconciles two personal quandaries concerning supernatural knowledge. One was that Leo Africanus, his supposed Daimon, seemed to say nothing that came from beyond Yeats' own imagination (see pp. 144-45). Now Leo's words can be seen as indeed a product of Yeats' imagination--yet, that in itself now qualifies Leo as Yeats' Daimon. And the problem of the system's original spirit data looking suspiciously like his own previous views is similarly answered. In effect, Yeats is saying, these ideas are mine, for my Daimon has simply found a different way of communicating my essence to myself. The upshot is that reality in A Vision is a function of Yeats' oldest and deepest

instincts for self-possession and control. In an example of sublime solipsism, he has fashioned a universe in the likeness of his own antithetical soul.<sup>23</sup> No other tragic artist ever showed more recklessness.

Yeats' revised concept of the Thirteenth Cycle is the most audacious instance of this phenomenon. In the earlier edition it is a confusing, highly truncated idea. The Thirteenth Cycle is but the first of three cycles (each spheres) outside the twelve cycles of incarnation, and at one point is said to correspond to the Holy Ghost, just as the two later cycles relate to the Son and the Father (see pp. 194-95). But in the second edition Yeats eliminates the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Cycles and creates a new version of the traditional three-in-one godhead: the Ghostly Self, the Daimon (incarnating in the world), and the sphere itself (the self-contained Father as well as a synthesis of the other two parts plus all phenomena spiritual and material, especially the human imagination). It is the one and the many, a single being and a congeries of beings:

The ultimate reality because neither one nor many, concord nor discord, is symbolised as a phaseless sphere, but as all things fall into a series of antinomies in human experience it becomes the moment it is thought of . . . the thirteenth cone. All things are present as an eternal instant to our Daimon (or Ghostly Self as it is called,

when it inhabits the sphere), but that instant is of necessity unintelligible to all bound to the antinomies.<sup>24</sup>

But above all, the Absolute is conscious and self-possessed, unified and proud of it:

The Thirteenth Cone is a sphere because sufficient to itself; but as seen by Man it is a cone. It becomes even conscious of itself as so seen, like some great dancer, the perfect flower of modern culture, dancing some primitive dance and conscious of his or her own life and of the dance. . . . Only one symbol exists, though reflecting mirrors make many appear and all different.<sup>25</sup>

The Thirteenth Cycle has become a veritable god, but, consistent with the rest of Yeats' man-centered universe, a god modeled on the tragic artist, on Yeats himself.<sup>26</sup> When Yeats finally let God into his system, he made certain he was the right kind of god. Only a thoroughly Yeatsian deity could be allowed to create the visible world and human perception (see p. 224). In fact, this very active, reckless god even controls all activities in eternity. In Yeats' revised discussion of the stages between incarnations, for example, it is constantly mentioned: spirits are "called by the Thirteenth Cone,"<sup>27</sup> "permitted by the Thirteenth Cone,"<sup>28</sup> "summoned by the Thirteenth Cone,"<sup>29</sup> and given either its "consent"<sup>30</sup> or "assistance."<sup>31</sup> Such repetition certainly



reinforces the impression of a conscious force absent from the earlier edition of A Vision. Yeats even promises a deus ex machina at the cusps of historical cycles: ". . . always at the critical moment the Thirteenth Cone, the sphere, the unique intervenes."<sup>32</sup>

The eternal hierarchy of A Vision now seems to work this way: the Thirteenth Cycle or Cone, every Daimon, and every Ghostly Self are divisions of the one, yet are also indistinguishable from it; Daimons or human paradigms enter time through successive incarnations, each embodiment imperfect but progressively less so, until at last such cycles are unnecessary and the Daimons return permanently to the sphere (where individuality remains intact). These model human Selves are the many of the one, variations of the same primal substance. The incarnate flux, then, is the many of the many, so to speak. Yet, every molecule of each human mind is Daimon-derived and hence divine. However, some configurations work better than others--i. e., antithetical is better than primary, and the artist is closer to his paradigm, closer to the sphere, than other mortals. Indeed, at the moment of artistic creation his Unity of Being is, if only briefly, a preview of the sphere (see pp. 237-38). The prophetic artist controls his world, while the Thirteenth Cone manages the whole. The artist understands his origins, knows that "the particulars are the work of the thirteenth sphere or cycle which is in every man and called by every

man his freedom."<sup>33</sup> Through his own liberating work, the tragic bard helps others notice what they are made of, thus creating a community of self-possessed individuals. That is the ultimate goal in life and in death--community, but with consciousness and individuality intact. And artist and God-as-artist (an identity through the Daimon) make it possible.

While the second edition of A Vision explores the farthest reaches of self-possession, it only hints at the idea of a universal community of discrete entities. In "Seven Propositions" Yeats completes these speculations, effectively projecting his prophetic goal of community onto eternity just as in A Vision he projects the artistic personality onto the prime mover. This unique work, dictated to Mrs. Yeats in 1937,<sup>34</sup> breaks the eternal hierarchy into essentials, then further simplifies the vocabulary. The result is a remarkably compact brief of Yeats' post-Vision thinking on ultimate reality. In fact, "Seven Propositions" turned out to be his final doctrinal statement. Specifically, these propositions represent his last word on the Daimon concept. They feature Daimons (simply called "Spirits") in all their glory: incarnating into time and space, and also defining each other individually and collectively through perception, much as artists and audiences help define one another through the primary and secondary perception of tragic art. Thus does Yeats make imagination and the creative

act the linchpin of literally everything.

The first two propositions establish the critical fact of both community and separateness among Daimons, as well as their interpenetrative function to each other:

### I

Reality is a timeless and spaceless community of Spirits which perceive each other. Each Spirit is determined by and determines those it perceives, and each spirit is unique.

### II

When those Spirits reflect themselves in time and space they still determine each other, and each Spirit sees the other as thoughts, images, objects of sense. Time and space are unreal.<sup>35</sup>

Several important ideas should be noted here. First, the belief in intermingling minds (both conscious and unconscious) goes back to Yeats' Golden Dawn days and skrying. It was refined during the twenties in letters to Sturge Moore and in A Vision--as Yeats told Mrs. Shakespear in 1926, "We create each other's universe" (see p. 208 for the full quotation). Further refinement in the 1937 A Vision (the Four Principles arising from Daimonic perception) led directly to the linked spirits of "Seven Propositions." Second, the belief in Proposition II that thoughts, images, and sensual objects are indistinguishable was a near-obsession with Yeats in several letters to Moore (see pp. 207-08 and 217). And,

finally, the last statement in II, which is profoundly Vedantic, affirms Yeats' lifelong celebration of a fluid, boundless imagination. Each proposition, then, is a fine distillation of previous Yeatsian concepts, assumptions, and attitudes, most dating back to his early youth.

Propositions III-VI concern further Daimonic "reflections" in time and space--i. e., on the wheel of human incarnations. In short, these propositions are an abstract of Yeats' whole gyrating system. Proposition VII, however, acts as a coda of the first two propositions, re-emphasizing the twin themes of community and distinctiveness: "Though the Spirits are determined by each other they cannot completely lose their freedom. Every possible statement or perception contains both terms--the self and that which it perceives or states."<sup>36</sup> A dynamic, creative symbiosis underlies all phenomena.

Together, "Seven Propositions" and the second edition of A Vision represent Yeats' most sophisticated attempt to resolve his lifelong conflict between the desire to bypass life through the saint's direct path to the one and the need as an artist to confront and reorder life, thereby approaching eternity through a torturous ascent. By remaking eternity in the image of life and its conflicts, by transposing sensual perception (and hence the creative process) to a spiritual realm, Yeats avoids the charge of escapism in any yearning for the Absolute. Eternity becomes just like life--only at a higher pitch. Or, as Yeats described

it for Olivia Shakespear in 1931, "Heaven is an improvement of sense. . . ."37 The urge to vault directly into felicity might then be seen as merely impatience to experience the ultimate imaginative process, to "live" art in a higher dimension. In an audacious coup, Yeats' antithetical bias has neutralized the dreaded primary, negating his fears that consciousness and creativity disappear at death. The tragic artist's self-possession is but an aspect of his ultimate self and cannot die. To paraphrase "The Tower," death and life were not till Yeats made up the whole.

One more speculative work of 1937 is crucially important: "A General Introduction for My Work." In this piece Yeats returns to earth (for the most part) to make perhaps his most concise statements about the tragic artist and his work. As the title says, Yeats sums up his career, putting his tragic perspective into a clear context. For instance, he suggests that tragic art is the indirect apotheosis of the artist's self, another way of saying that Unity of Being and the creative act are one:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it may be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly, as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. . . . he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. . . . He is Lear, Romeo,

Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play. . . .  
 He is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore  
 him because nature has grown intelligible, and by  
 so doing a part of our creative power.<sup>38</sup>

The last sentence also describes the communal effect of tragic art in a new, subtle way. The artist edits, then highlights experience for the members of his audience, thus helping them digest life and even enhance their own (if lesser) imaginations in the process.

Of course, this unified clarity of the work is best communicated during the moment of tragic ecstasy. Yeats writes of this moment later in the essay as the quintessential meeting of heaven and earth--the familiar double link made especially vivid:

The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us their looks,  
 or through the metaphorical patterns of their  
 speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision,  
 their ecstasy at the approach of death . . . the  
 supernatural is present, cold winds blow across  
 our hands, upon our faces, the temperature falls.  
 . . . imagination must dance, must be carried  
 beyond feeling into the aboriginal ice.<sup>39</sup>

The most fascinating part of "A General Introduction" concerns Yeats' central belief that the human imagination is the measure of all things--the ontological basis, as this chapter has stressed, of A Vision and "Seven Propositions."

Here he calls the Daimon "Christ," emphasizing that the supernatural and natural are "knit together" and that, as a result, this Christ is "flowing, concrete, phenomenal."<sup>40</sup> Yeats elaborates on this point in a seminal passage, first by equating the supernatural to essential human states, then by rooting this identity in experience:

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake's "Imagination," what the Upanishads have named "Self": nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent [emanative?], differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, "eye of newt, and toe of frog."<sup>41</sup>

The double link is finally a single point in the artist's mind, Yeats' own space-time singularity.<sup>42</sup>

Emphatic as he was about the tragic artist's central place in the universe, Yeats urgently sought in his last years to embody his theories. He wrote plays and poems of passionate, sometimes extravagant intensity, fueled by prophetic intent, dense with tragic content. Consequently, the surest way of assessing this volcanic final output is to examine key works according to the tragic elements most featured: recklessness, the double link, tragic joy, the

creative process, and the self-possession or Unity of Being revered above all else.

The overall impression one receives from Yeats' final creative work is that of recklessness--the tragic manner--gone almost haywire. The aging poet seemed to push himself and his images to the limit. At times harshness, coarseness, and stridency threaten to overwhelm the beauty and poise he had so long labored to achieve. Expletive competes with serenity, sexuality with spirituality, sometimes in the same work. Yet, all this is the necessary attitude of the tragic artist at the end of his life. On June 24, 1935 Yeats told Ethel Mannin that he wanted "to make a last song, sweet and exultant, a sort of European geeta,"<sup>43</sup> to rid himself of bitterness and irritation. But two weeks later he again understood, as he had known since his early essays on tragedy, that sweetness must arise from bitterness. His letter of July 6 thus exemplifies the verities of his tragic theory: "'Bitter and gay,' that is the heroic mood. . . . The lasting expression of our time . . . is in a sense of something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and cold."<sup>44</sup> As the end came nearer, Yeats cut closer to the quick in speaking of recklessness. He was quite blunt about it to Ethel Mannin on December 12, 1937: "I must lay aside the pleasant paths I have built up for years and seek the brutality, the ill breeding, the barbarism of truth."<sup>45</sup>



Recklessness therefore courses through Yeats' entire output in this final period. And some poems use it as a subject. "A Prayer for Old Age" (1934), for instance, seems to keynote the final half decade:

He that sings a lasting song  
 Thinks in a marrow-bone;  
 . . . . .  
 O What am I that I should not seem  
 For the song's sake a fool?  
  
 I pray . . .  
 . . . . .  
 That I may seem, though I die old,  
 A Foolish, passionate man.<sup>46</sup>

In "The Spur" (1936) Yeats addresses the problem of "lust and rage" in his old age by asking the tragic rhetorical question, "What else have I to spur me into song?"<sup>47</sup> But it is "An Acre of Grass" (1936) that best expresses his need for recklessness, tying it to heroic mask and prophetic purpose:

Grant me an old man's frenzy,  
 Myself I must remake  
 Till I am Timon and Lear  
 Or that William Blake  
 Who beat upon the wall  
 Till Truth obeyed his call;

[break]

And mind Michael Angelo knew  
 That can pierce the clouds,  
 Or inspired by frenzy  
 Shake the dead in their shrouds  
 Forgotten else by mankind  
 An old man's eagle mind.<sup>48</sup>

Nowhere is Yeats' late recklessness more apparent than in his treatment of the double link. The mingling of the orders becomes coarsened by starker images, as Yeats more and more describes the ineffable via the earthy. The influence of Indian thought and of his Steinach operation in this regard was considerable. The combination of Vedantic studies equating self and Self and his physical "rejuvenation" in May 1934<sup>49</sup> led Yeats later that year to write most of the Supernatural Songs, a group of poems usually celebrating the metaphysical with sexual images. One poem, "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn," insists that the tragic death of lovers promises transfiguration into perfect sexual union, that heaven is indeed an improvement of sense:

The miracle that gave them such a death  
 Transfigured to poor substance what had once  
 Been bone and sinew; when such bodies join  
 There is no touching here, no touching there,  
 Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole;  
 For the intercourse of angels is a light  
 Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed.<sup>50</sup>

As always, Yeats' lyrics breathe life into his abstractions. The geometries of A Vision (intersecting gyres subsumed in the sphere) and "Seven Propositions" (intersecting spirits in communal perfection) are given immediacy here and in still another poem about Ribh, that pre-Christian hermit and foil of St. Patrick.

In "Ribh Denounces Patrick" the identity of the orders is expressed as universal fecundity:

Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring  
are wed.

As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets,  
Godhead begets Godhead,<sup>51</sup>

For things below are copies, the great Smaragdine  
Tablet said.<sup>52</sup>

And only incomplete self-unity (which also means incomplete love) keeps the multiple from becoming the one:

. . . all that run in couples, on earth, in flood  
or air, share God that is but three,  
And could beget or bear themselves could they but  
love as He.<sup>53</sup>

Some later works offer unusual variations on the relationship between the orders, again with peculiar sexual images. Two especially stand out: The Herne's Egg (1936-37), a savage play, and "News for the Delphic Oracle" (1938), a sweet lyric. The former is Yeats' satyr play, mocking this universal sexual link and the rest of his tragic perspective,

while the latter celebrates a piquant, sensual paradise.

The Herne's Egg is a strange work indeed. Although serious in tone, it turns Yeatsian verities upside down. Yeats the absurdist jeers at Yeats the tragic artist, as if Lear were his own Fool. Crazy Jane's "place of excrement" takes center stage (Bloom calls the play "unequivocally rancid"<sup>54</sup>). Along the way Yeats mocks several tragic ideas, including the tragic moment, the dancer as ideal image, and Daimonic or divine incarnation.

The play's outlandish plot is ideal for such explosive mockery. Congal, King of Connacht, has made a truce with Aedh, King of Tara, after fifty fruitless battles. To celebrate, the kings and their men plan a feast in Tara. So that the proceedings might have "a certain novelty or relish,"<sup>55</sup> Congal and six of his men seek herne (heron) eggs. They go to a large hernery to ask Attracta, priestess of the Great Herne, for some eggs. She, as the "promised bride"<sup>56</sup> of the Great Herne, refuses. Congal scorns her sanctity, blaming it on the sexual frustration of virginity. Such women, he thinks, take "its abominable snow" and fashion "an image of god or bird or beast / To feed their sensuality. . . ."<sup>57</sup> (Yeats says almost as much about nuns and their images in "Among School Children.") Attracta replies that she burns in mind, not body, yet describes her mission in starkly sexual terms: "That I may lie in a blazing bed / And a bird take my maidenhead. . . ."<sup>58</sup> At this point,

Congal's men appear, leading a donkey packed with pilfered eggs. Attracta's servant, Corney, grows furious. With her permission, he utters a curse on Congal--that he will become a fool and be killed by a fool.

After this straightforward if tense beginning, Yeats begins to ridicule his tragic perspective. Attracta goes into a trance, accompanied by an offstage flute, as if the Great Herne were beckoning her. She takes a hen's egg out of a friend's basket and moves to the music like "a doll upon a wire," a puppet.<sup>59</sup> Then she moves out of sight, "travelling fast asleep / In long loops like a dancer."<sup>60</sup> Thus, Yeats trivializes his favorite symbol of artistic unity, not to mention the tradition of the Noh dancer, which he had always treated so reverently.

As Congal and his retinue return to Tara for the feast, they are "attacked" by the swooping Great Herne (which they can only sense, not see), with accompanying flute sound. At the celebration Congal feels insulted by a hen's egg being presented to him instead of a herne's egg. What has happened is that Attracta, in her trance, has reclaimed the holy egg. Congal, already at war with her god over the curse, seeks revenge, proposing that he and his men strike at the Great Herne by penetrating and possessing his priestess, "melting out the virgin snow,"<sup>61</sup> thereby also freeing Attracta from her obsession. Ironically, the still-entranced woman anticipates her coming union with the Great Herne in a deliciously

fearful song:

Where is he gone, where is that other,

He that shall take my maidenhead?

. . . . .

When beak and claw their work begin

Shall horror stir in the roots of my hair?<sup>62</sup>

The next morning Congal tells Attracta that she is now "all sensible woman," not "a crazed loony / Waiting to be trodden by a bird. . . ." <sup>63</sup> She is puzzled at this, for did not the Great Herne come to her in the night, consummating the union of heaven and earth? Congal assures her that instead she lay with seven men. The bewildered priestess implores her god to declare her pure. Accordingly, thunder breaks forth, and all the men save Congal retract their story. Attracta tells him that the curse he bears has made him imagine it all. Then she prophesies the punishment for each of the seven: rebirth as some lower animal, although Congal's form is still undecided. She also tells the defiant king when and where his death must occur.

The final scene of The Herne's Egg is a threadbare Walpurgisnacht under a full moon (in Yeats' stage direction, "the moon of comic tradition, a round smiling face"<sup>64</sup>--he must also mock his beloved Phase Fifteen). Congal boasts of winning the final bout with the Great Herne, as he had won earlier by possessing Attracta. This time he would win by cheating the curse, by taking his own life rather than

risk death at the hands of a fool. Therefore, Congal falls on a wooden spit. As he lies dying, he implores Attracta to protect him, his words a travesty of tragic heroism:

Protect me, I have won my bout,  
 But I am afraid of what the Herne  
 May do with me when I am dead.  
 I am afraid that he may put me  
 Into the shape of a brute beast.<sup>65</sup>

The hero as fool has fulfilled his own curse.

Congal's fears touch the priestess' heart. As soon as he dies, she shouts at her servant Corney to come lie with her before Congal's body cools, lest the king become a beast in his next life. Her explanation mocks Yeats' long-held view of Daimonic incarnation as union with the Absolute, splitting it into a spiritual-carnal duality:

I lay with the Great Herne, and he,  
 Being all a spirit, but begot  
 His image in the mirror of my spirit,  
 Being all sufficient to himself  
 Begot himself; but there's a work  
 That should be done, and that work needs  
 No bird's beak nor claw, but a man,  
 The imperfection of a man.<sup>66</sup>

But it is too late. Two donkeys have already coupled, dooming Congal to rebirth as an ass. Corney's comment on this is surely the strangest ending in the history of drama:

I have heard that a donkey carries its young  
 Longer than any other beast,  
 Thirteen months it must carry it.

[He laughs.]

All that trouble and nothing to show for it,  
 Nothing but just another donkey.<sup>67</sup>

Heroism and antithetical fervor have been reduced to braying bestiality under a grinning moon. After all, the Great Herne is the ultimate practical joker. He maneuvers his priestess into a ridiculous trance-dance, leading her to a rendezvous with seven men in what amounts to ritual rape (unlike Zeus, the Great Herne does not take a direct physical form), then allows her total debasement at the end of the play. He uses Congal and his men as indicated, and later has this king changed into a fated fool with delusions of individuality. The Herne giveth, and the Herne taketh away, without mercy--Blake's Nobodaddy as puppeteer and voyeur, implacable as Browning's Setebos.

Yeats' harrowing of his own tragic perspective in The Herne's Egg is a unique, bewildering swerve from his prophetic path in the late thirties. Almost devoid of humanity and favoring fragmentation, this work is the inversion of the communal goal of tragic art. Whatever Yeats' intent in writing it,<sup>68</sup> The Herne's Egg fails either as a satyr play with slapstick purpose or as an ironic play with serious purpose.



Fortunately for the stunned reader, "News for the Delphic Oracle" is the perfect antidote. Bleak landscapes and contrived shocks have no place in this exquisite poem. With a wry wink, Yeats creates a paradise of sensual delights, where gods, heroes, and philosophers recline and sigh in delightfully mortal ways. The opening lines immediately establish the luxuriant mood:

There all the golden codgers lay,  
 There the silver dew,  
 And the great water sighed for love,  
 And the wind sighed too.<sup>69</sup>

Ferrying dolphins bring new souls to a sweeter Byzantium, where waters are no longer tormented and the grim unwinding of the mortal spool has become a dance:

Straddling each a dolphin's back  
 And steadied by a fin,  
 Those Innocents re-live their death,  
 Their wounds open again.  
 The ecstatic waters laugh because  
 Their cries are sweet and strange,  
 Through their ancestral patterns dance. . . .<sup>70</sup>

Here, in an eternal afternoon of the faun, mythic and heroic souls discover that the natural and the supernatural are indeed wed with the "self-same ring":

Down the mountain walls  
 From where Pan's cavern is

Intolerable music falls.  
 Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,  
 Belly, shoulder, bum,  
 Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs  
 Copulate in the foam.<sup>71</sup>

More physical and exciting than the Island of Eternal Youth in The Wanderings of Oisín, a more kinetic dancing place than that of "Her Courage," Yeats' last poetic paradise is very endearing. The excesses of The Herne's Egg are forgotten; joy once again banishes terror. When he so refined his audacity, Yeats the "wild old wicked man" became, truly, a golden codger.

Other poems of this period highlight the tragic joy underpinning such affirmative art. Yeats was much concerned with this subject in his last years. As he wrote Ethel Mannin in 1935, "Our traditions only permit us to bless, for the arts are an extension of the beatitudes. Blessed be heroic death (Shakespeare's tragedies), blessed be heroic life (Cervantes), blessed be the wise (Balzac)."<sup>72</sup> To Dorothy Wellesley later in 1935, he was more direct on this theme: "To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy. An impossible aim; yet I think it true that nothing can injure us."<sup>73</sup> In his seventies, Yeats was trying earnestly to live by his theoretical statements on tragic joy of thirty years before-- and to engender such blessed strength in his lyrics. Two

poems written in 1936 stand out as examples of this effort: "The Gyres," an overwrought failure, and "Lapis Lazuli," one of Yeats' finest poems.

"The Gyres" comes out of Yeats' fear that the primary, common tide threatens beauty and aristocratic life, a mood that in the thirties usually produced his meanest-spirited works (especially On the Boiler). This poem is no exception. Instead of harmony born out of a unified being, there is shrillness and strain, rhetorical rather than actual joy. The affirmation rings hollow:

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.

What matter though numb nightmare ride on top,  
And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?  
What matter? Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,  
A greater, a more gracious time has gone;

. . . . .

What matter? Out of a cavern comes a voice,  
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice!'<sup>74</sup>

The communal spirit of tragic art--its prophetic pulse--seems lost in this poem. Here Yeats' faith is in the deterministic certainty that a more favorable gyre will come again, not in the tragic artist's ameliorative power.

"Lapis Lazuli" is another matter. Although it concerns the same problem--the shifting of historical cycles--the tone is confident, not fearful. Serenity replaces agitation, for here the faith is in Unity of Being, in the power of the imagination. And tragic joy is demonstrated, not merely named: each of the last three stanzas shows it from a different perspective. The second stanza, for instance, deals with the nature of the tragic moment in drama, when the hero achieves ecstasy (a creative projection of the artist's own similar state). Speaking of actors who play the great roles in Shakespeare, Yeats insists they must not display the histrionics of sorrow but instead realize the essence of the moment:

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;  
 Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.  
 All men have aimed at, found and lost;  
 Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:  
 Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.<sup>75</sup>

The actor need not embellish; tragic joy is inherent in the

moment of unity.

The third stanza of "Lapis Lazuli" deals specifically with the cycles mentioned in "The Gyres," but now with regard to the artist's power to mitigate disaster and create new cultures. If "old civilizations" and their art are continually "put to the sword," the building of new civilizations--largely an artistic effort--is cause for great joy: "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay."<sup>76</sup>

The final stanza is possibly Yeats' finest treatment of that gentler, sweeter variety of tragic ecstasy described earlier in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation." Looking at a piece of lapis lazuli containing a Chinese scene, Yeats, like Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," constructs a living world from the carved images. In their glorious natural setting, the two Chinese with their serving man embody the perfect peace of tragic reconciliation:

There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.<sup>77</sup>

Two poems written in Yeats' last full year of life (1938), "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and "High Talk," concern the tragic creative process, source of the artist's prophetic

power. Yeats' fascination with images and their origin was, of course, a constant in his life, from the days of skrying and the early forms of his myth of imagination to the later theoretical essays and poetic speculations such as "Among School Children" and "Byzantium." These 1938 poems, then, are among the last statements of a vital Yeatsian tradition.

"The Circus Animals' Desertion," often mistaken for an exultant work, is actually a self-apology for flagging inspiration. Still, it is valuable as a history of Yeats' symbolism and for its concluding analysis of the tragic process. Yeats refers to himself as "a broken man" who can but "enumerate old themes," specifically his early symbolic works, his "circus animals."<sup>78</sup> The Wanderings of Oisín, for example, came from an "embittered heart," but he became enamored of the work itself, or at least Oisín's "faery bride."<sup>79</sup> The Countess Cathleen was written for and about Maud Gonne, out of his fear that fanaticism would destroy her soul. But once again, Yeats says, the play itself soon "had all my thought and love."<sup>80</sup> And so it was with On Baile's Strand, when the "heart-mysteries" that caused its creation were quickly forgotten: "Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things they were emblems of."<sup>81</sup> Now that such inspiration has apparently disappeared, the mature Yeats feels he must be "satisfied with my heart,"<sup>82</sup> source of all his images. He must reluctantly face the unalloyed reality underlying all tragic art--Crazy Jane's

cesspool or Heart's "original sin" in "Vacillation." The well-known final stanza of "Circus Animals" thus looks at the imaginative process with great insight, but without Yeats' usual exuberant response to image-making:

Those masterful images because complete  
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
 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.<sup>83</sup>

"High Talk" restores the affirmation, to say the least. Surely no other poem of Yeats' contains more sheer exhilaration than this one. Rather than resurrecting his circus animals, Yeats makes the tragic artist himself the sole performer. Because the animals of an earlier age of poetry-- "piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions"<sup>84</sup> (akin to the performers in stanza one of the previous poem)--"make but poor shows,"<sup>85</sup> the reckless modern artist must take to high stilts. In other words, his power now must come from style, from tragic passion. Hence, the former panoply of symbols has been replaced by the concentrated, audacious metaphor. The result is nothing less than a prophetic juggernaut:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has  
 run wild,

From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from  
 father to child.

All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle  
 goose

Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and  
 the dawn breaks loose;

I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on,  
 stalk on;

Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh  
 at the dawn.<sup>86</sup>

The extraordinary self-possession, the Unity of Being, at the core of "High Talk" and other exultant works is itself the subject of poetry in these last years. "He and She" (1934), one of the Supernatural Songs, is a prime example. It concerns the "I am" of pure personality or Samadhi featured in "The Holy Mountain" and "The Mandukya Upanishad" (see pp. 261-62). That simple assertion of identity is repeated almost exactly in the poem:

She sings as the moon sings:

"I am I, am I;

The greater grows my light

The further that I fly."

All creation shivers

With that sweet cry.<sup>87</sup>

The chief antithetical moon phases in Yeats' system and the final stage of concentration in Vedanta are one. And it is



Yeats' keen, almost fanatical insistence on the poised self that connects them. The importance of self-possession in its various forms cannot be overstated: it is the central motive of Yeats' entire life and work, the basis of his earliest prophetic stirrings, his tragic theory, and his antithetically-biased system. As he said to Olivia Shakespeare in 1934 after just quoting a late draft of "He and She," "It is of course my centric myth."<sup>88</sup>

With such self-unity the artist can create the values of a culture. "Long-Legged Fly" (1937-38) is especially clear on this point:

That girls at puberty may find  
 The first Adam in their thought,  
 Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,  
 Keep those children out.  
 There on that scaffolding reclines  
 Michael Angelo.  
 With no more sound than the mice make  
 His hand moves to and fro.  
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence.<sup>89</sup>

The quiet unity at the center of intensity--tied to eternity--radiates a universal light that melds humanity. Tragic-prophetic art arises from entire self-possession.

This prophetic purpose of the tragic artist was constantly in Yeats' mind during his last years. He never

stopped trying to embody it. A letter to Dorothy Wellesley in 1936 captures this near-obsession with the artist's path:

. . . ours is the main road, the road of naturalness and swiftness, and we have thirty centuries on our side. We alone can "think like a wise man, yet express ourselves like the common people."  
 . . . we stride ahead of the crowd, its swordsmen, its jugglers looking to right and left. . . . we need, like Milton, Shakespeare, Shelley, vast sentiments, generalizations supported by tradition.<sup>90</sup>

In the concentrated language of poetry, Yeats distilled this idea to its essence. "Under Ben Bulbin" (1938), another harsh, blunt work, contains his most succinct statement on the artist's ultimate goal:

. . . there's a secret purpose set  
 Before the secret working mind:  
 Profane perfection of mankind.<sup>91</sup>

In 1886 Yeats the young would-be prophet had said that great heroic poetry "touches all the strings" of man, arousing an answering harmony (see p. 16). After fifty-two years of struggle, through the bloody birth of a new Ireland, the agony of unrequited love, an inherently vacillative nature, and almost constant bad health for the last dozen years, Yeats was still saying the same thing in a terser way. At the end of his life he was still driven by the early dream. Although Ireland continued to ignore his message, Yeats

remained stubbornly, defiantly, the tragic artist.

At the very end, though, Yeats was at peace. The often strident intensity that accompanied his prophetic purpose in the thirties disappeared in his final letters. He had found the quiet center. He was living his tragic principles. A letter written to Elizabeth Pelham on January 4, 1939 (just three weeks before his death) shows Yeats self-possessed and affirmative in the best heroic tradition:

I am happy, and I think full of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence.<sup>92</sup>

One must conclude that Yeats went to the tomb with a twinkle in his ancient, glittering eye.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ellmann, Identity 292-93.

<sup>2</sup>Yeats had anticipated what the impending death of Lady Gregory would mean in "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931":

We were the last romantics--chose for theme  
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
Whatever's written in what poets name  
The book of the people; whatever most can bless  
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;  
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

(Variorum Poems 491-92)

<sup>3</sup>One version of a marching song he wrote for them is Yeats at his meanest, although typical of many Irish at the time:

What's equality?--muck in the yard:  
Historic Nations grow  
From above to below.  
Those fanatics all that we do would undo:  
Down the fanatic, down the clown;  
Down, down, hammer them down,  
Down to the tune of O'Donnell Abu.

(Quoted in Tuohy 204)

<sup>4</sup>W. B. Yeats, "An Indian Monk," in E & I 426.

<sup>5</sup>Moore 351.

<sup>6</sup>Yeats, "Monk" 428.

<sup>7</sup>Yeats, "Monk" 429.

<sup>8</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Holy Mountain," in E & I 461.

<sup>9</sup>Yeats, "Mountain" 462.

<sup>10</sup>W. B. Yeats, "The Mandukya Upanishad," in E & I 483.

<sup>11</sup>Diary 331.

<sup>12</sup>AVB 83.

<sup>13</sup>AVB 83.

<sup>14</sup>AVB 187.

<sup>15</sup>AVB 189.

<sup>16</sup>AVB 187.

<sup>17</sup>AVB 189.

<sup>18</sup>AVB 189.

<sup>19</sup>AVB 193.

<sup>20</sup>AVB 22.

<sup>21</sup>AVB 22.

<sup>22</sup>AVB 22. See Moore (370) on this statement.

<sup>23</sup>Seiden (134) goes almost as far in the following passage:

Yeats believed that . . . the human mind projects itself outward, remakes the universe in its own image, and thus in a very important sense contains nothing but itself. But, since he feared solipsism . . . he also pointed out that . . . the human mind can do these things only because there is a reality external to it; and both this external reality and the human mind, he added, embody each other.

<sup>24</sup>AVB 193.

<sup>25</sup>AVB 240.

<sup>26</sup>Seiden (123) is insightful about Yeats' God:

He transforms A Vision into a personal faith in which, without a loss of their identity, men are metaphorically exalted to and then united with the image of God. And God, though independent of both matter and the human mind, is explained, paradoxically, as a synthesis of both. . . . He also looms as the absolute idealization of the psychic life of mankind. The origin and the measurement of the entire phenomenal universe, Yeats implies, are to be sought in the imagination of the poet and the non-poet alike. Human beings either are or can be the very gods they worship.

<sup>27</sup>AVB 233.

<sup>28</sup>AVB 234.

<sup>29</sup>AVB 235.

<sup>30</sup>AVB 235.

<sup>31</sup>AVB 235.

<sup>32</sup>AVB 263.

<sup>33</sup>AVB 302.

<sup>34</sup>Moore 378.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Moore 379. Moore was the first to present "Seven Propositions" (in 1953). She also has a useful commentary on it on 379-83.

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Moore 379. A letter to Ethel Mannin in October 1938 contains Yeats' broadest Heraclitean statement on such mutual perception, cutting across dimensional lines: "To me all things are made of the conflict of states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. That is true of life and death themselves" (Letters 918).

<sup>37</sup>Letters 781.

<sup>38</sup>W. B. Yeats, "A General Introduction to My Work," in E & I 509.

<sup>39</sup>Yeats, "General" 522-23.

<sup>40</sup>Yeats, "General" 518.

<sup>41</sup>Yeats, "General" 518.

<sup>42</sup>On the Boiler (1939), that harsh and intolerant mating of Yeats' favorite political and philosophical theories, contains a section on this identity of mind and other:

Space was to antiquity mind's inseparable "other," coincident with objects. . . . During the seventeenth century it was separated from mind and objects alike, and thought of as a nothing yet a reality . . . with material objects separated from taste, smell, sound. . . . Nature or reality as known to poets and tramps has no moment, no impression like another, everything is unique, and nothing unique is measurable.

(W. B. Yeats, "Private Thoughts," On the Boiler, in Explorations 434-35)

<sup>43</sup>Letters 836.

<sup>44</sup>Letters 836-37.

<sup>45</sup>Letters 903.

<sup>46</sup>Variorum Poems 553.

<sup>47</sup>Variorum Poems 591.

<sup>48</sup>Variorum Poems 575.

<sup>49</sup>Ellmann, Masks 276.

<sup>50</sup>Variorum Poems 555. The image of copulating angels is from Swedenborg and had already been mentioned by Yeats on



several occasions, especially in two letters of 1933. On February 21, for instance, he speaks of "that saying of Swedenborg's that the sexual intercourse of the angels is a conflagration of the whole being" (Letters 805).

<sup>51</sup>In "Byzantium," of course, images beget images in the final stanza.

<sup>52</sup>Variorum Poems 556.

<sup>53</sup>Variorum Poems 556.

<sup>54</sup>Bloom, Yeats 424.

<sup>55</sup>Variorum Plays 1015.

<sup>56</sup>Variorum Plays 1015.

<sup>57</sup>Variorum Plays 1016.

<sup>58</sup>Variorum Plays 1017.

<sup>59</sup>Variorum Plays 1021.

<sup>60</sup>Variorum Plays 1021.

<sup>61</sup>Variorum Plays 1028.

<sup>62</sup>Variorum Plays 1029.

<sup>63</sup>Variorum Plays 1031.

<sup>64</sup>Variorum Plays 1034.

<sup>65</sup>Variorum Plays 1039.

<sup>66</sup>Variorum Plays 1039-40.

<sup>67</sup>Variorum Plays 1040.

<sup>68</sup>While he was writing The Herne's Egg, Yeats had little to say about it. In a letter of December 16, 1935, he mentions that Shri Purohit Swami is with him and that "the play is his philosophy in a fable, or mine confirmed by him" (Letters 844). Only three days later, he captures the flavor of the play when he calls it "the strangest wildest thing I have ever written" (Letters 845). More specifically, on Christmas day Yeats classified the work as "a wild fantastic humorous, half-earnest play" (W. B. Yeats and Margot Ruddock, Ah, Sweet Dancer, W. B. Yeats and Margot Ruddock--Their Correspondence, ed. Roger McHugh [London: Macmillan, 1970] 65). He echoed this sentiment in early 1938, just after the publication of The Herne's Egg, calling it "my very Rabelasian play . . . do not ask me what it means" (Letters 904).

Critical interpretations have varied widely (many Yeats critics simply ignore it). F. A. C. Wilson, for example, in a long analysis in W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1958), takes Yeats at his first word above, that The Herne's Egg is applied Vedanta. Stressing Yeats' discovery that in Indian thought the pure Self is equivalent to God, Wilson believes that Congal is the embodiment of self-sufficiency, feeling "joy in heroic achievement" (136) and "dying with real, if tragicomic dignity" (133). For Wilson, then, the work is the apotheosis of the heroic, and thus essentially serious. Helen Vendler, on the other hand, takes

Yeats at his alternate word, believing that the play is instead "Yeats's philosophy confirmed by Indian symbols rather than the other way round" (160). However, Bloom thinks the play "a deliberate outrage. . . . a monument to the mounting confusion and systematic inhumanity of the last phase of Yeats" (Yeats 422). But he thinks The Herne's Egg "less a parody of its sources, however Indian or Balzacian-Swedenborgian they may be, than it is a parody of Yeats' own mythology, a self-parody only in part intentional" (423).

<sup>69</sup>Variorum Poems 611.

<sup>70</sup>Variorum Poems 612.

<sup>71</sup>Variorum Poems 612.

<sup>72</sup>Letters 832.

<sup>73</sup>Letters 838.

<sup>74</sup>Variorum Poems 564.

<sup>75</sup>Variorum Poems 565-66.

<sup>76</sup>Variorum Poems 566.

<sup>77</sup>Variorum Poems 567. A letter to Dorothy Wellesley (July 6, 1935) contains Yeats' description of the actual piece, as well as comments on its importance:

. . . someone has sent me a present of a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the

mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry. (Letters 836)

Yeats apparently changed his mind again when he wrote the poem, for the final stanza speaks of "the tragic scene."

78 Variorum Poems 629.

79 Variorum Poems 629.

80 Variorum Poems 630.

81 Variorum Poems 630.

82 Variorum Poems 629.

83 Variorum Poems 630.

84 Variorum Poems 623.

85 Variorum Poems 623.

86 Variorum Poems 623. The lines about dawn breaking loose from darkness and "the terrible novelty of light" strongly suggest key images in Golden Dawn rituals. For example, the O=O or Neophyte ceremony (described in Chapter II) contained a circumambulation along a "Path of Knowledge that leadeth unto Light" (quoted in Moore 136). At one stage (the East) the initiate's blindfold was raised, and he saw the Hierophant as Guardian, now called "Light dawning

in Darkness, the Light of a Golden Day!" (quoted in Moore 136). At the end of the ceremony, all three conducting officers--the Hegemon, the Hierus, and the Hierophant--announced together, "We receive thee into the Order of the Golden Dawn," followed by the ancient cry of the Eleusinian Mysteries in both Egyptian and Greek, translated as "Light in Extension" (quoted in Moore 137).

In the 5=6 or Adeptus Minor ritual, the Hierophant as Osiris-Christ declared, "I am the Preparer of the Pathway, the Rescuer unto the Light. Out of the Darkness, let that Light arise" (quoted in Moore 154). At the climax of this speech, he also said, "Let the White Brilliance of the Spirit Divine descend!" (quoted in Moore 154).

<sup>87</sup>Variorum Poems 559.

<sup>88</sup>Letters 829.

<sup>89</sup>Variorum Poems 617-18.

<sup>90</sup>Letters 853.

<sup>91</sup>Variorum Poems 639.

<sup>92</sup>Letters 922.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

Yeats the aspiring prophet of 1886 had a message for his people: humanity is made of imperishable stuff, and each person is linked to the eternal source through imagination. This message would be sounded in heroic poetry, Yeats thought, and arouse in Ireland an answering harmony, unifying the race. His goal was clear. But Yeats felt inadequate to make his prophetic instinct tangible, for he lacked symbolic structure for his vision, and, even more important, he lacked self-confidence. He knew that self-unity, self-possession, must come before all else--a prophetic artist needs a coherent center, an unwobbling pivot. Yeats therefore first sought personal and artistic control through study of ultimates--the occult. Surely, he thought, a grasp of the absolute scheme of things would lead to self-unity and an understanding of the source of imagination. Theosophy promised little of the former and hindered the latter. The Golden Dawn, however, offered Yeats nearly everything he wanted. Here he learned about the hierarchy of being and the ritual means of ascending it until, after perfecting the self, one could merge with the supernatural order. And, through a more immediate ritual--a sudden fly-cast into eternity--he

learned to evoke images. Golden Dawn rituals thus promised Yeats both the self-possession and the creative wellspring he required. Now his prophetic goal certainly seemed attainable.

But the means of reaching the goal so fascinated Yeats that he began losing sight of the goal itself. Obsession with evocation rituals and the resultant symbolic filigree in his work set him adrift from any natural context and, hence, from his audience. A prophetic voice must speak a common tongue; Yeats by 1900 was speaking instead the gaudy language of a magical adept, a symbolist dreamer. He was drowning in uncontrolled, abstract images, and was far from being the confident shepherd of Ireland's renascent soul. As a result, Yeats' ambitious Celtic order reflected its leader's own disorder, confusing rather than uniting Eire. The collapse of the order and of its dramatic wing, the Irish Literary Theatre, convinced Yeats that art as an extension of the occult was too remote to unify a race. Spirit had to be tied to life, and that required new, concrete images.

A revitalized Irish theatre provided Yeats the conceptual framework to solve the problem at the same time as the ideas of Nietzsche and the trauma of Maud Gonne's marriage helped astringe his diffuse mind. Yeats soon became the president and chief motivator of the Irish National Theatre Society, a new effort to unify Ireland through drama. And he shortly

began writing a series of essays on tragedy, featuring the great moment of tragic drama as the catalyst for cultural harmony. As the national theatre moved to its new home at the Abbey Theatre in 1904, Yeats had at last found the right prophetic context after years of wandering in nebulosity. A new tragic perspective made his oracular instincts tangible.

Yeats' manner changed as well. He defied safe conventions, preferring self-sufficiency and astringent joy. And he was obsessed with imagination and the need to create tragic form. The occult was still there for Yeats, providing the ultimate picture. But no longer would he look away from life with eyes half-closed in passive reverie. Now he would stare at life with an eagle's eyes. There would be moments of vacillation, of yearning for the straight path of the mystic or saint, for the rest of his life. But he would never again step off the twisting path of the artist. Yeats' prophetic goal was now set firmly in a tragic matrix. With recklessness and style he could begin writing the requisite heroic works.

However, Yeats quickly discovered that tragic theory was difficult to translate into actual tragic art. His idea of a transfigured, ecstatic moment may have derived from Greek and Shakespearean models, but he found that the prophetic lyricism of the moment was almost impossible to portray physically on a traditional stage. Privately reading *Unity of Being* in Shakespeare's written lines was one thing,



presenting unity on stage to entrance an audience quite another. Hence, Yeats began experimenting with stylized, ritualistic forms of staging, eventually settling on a Noh-derived form unique in Western drama. Yet, not even these later plays contained the balance of passion and form he had called for in his tragic theory. Ultimately, Yeats realized that only in concentrated lyric poems could he express properly the precarious suspension inherent in tragic ecstasy.

If Yeats' prophetic mission depended on the lyric form and its highly-charged, tightly-written lines, if the silent page rather than the stage best conveyed the communal message of the tragic imagination, then his old problem of finding precise images was more urgent than ever. Thus, as always, Yeats spent much time speculating on the creative process. This rage to understand imagination had led him astray in the nineties--ritual evocation produced a stream of images with no floodgate, and the artist was reduced to passive receptor. But in his tragic theory Yeats made the artist active controller of the creative process during an act of contemplation. Through style, mind or imagination shapes unruly passion into coherent, communicable emotion. The artist's Unity of Being, however momentary, is thus passed through the work to the audience, where it is recreated both individually and collectively, fulfilling the prophetic goal of Unity of Culture. Yeats later simplified this process,

describing it as finding or making a mask or anti-self in disappointment or defeat. Later still, he connected this concrete idea to the supernatural in the concept of the Daimon, one's eternal opposite, which responds to the artist's self-unity with an influx of divine imaginative essence. (In effect, one is possessed by his own absolute potential.)

For the rest of his life Yeats continued to plumb imagination and refine his speculative models. Even his strange and fascinating system can be read as a vast setting for the antithetical-Daimonic artist, a hyper-rationale for the tragic creative process. In Yeats' last decade Western philosophy and Eastern mysticism fed his speculations, which received final form in the second edition of A Vision and in "Seven Propositions." All these soundings supported, above everything, his faith in tragic art and its prophetic purpose. In fact, Yeats ultimately modeled the Absolute on the human imagination.

Through all this furious rationalizing of his basic instincts, Yeats' lyric art continued to mature as a prophetic tool. If his intensely gorgeous prose too often proved elliptical, Yeats' best poems precisely conveyed his peculiar thoughts, passions, and biases. "Among School Children" and "Byzantium" embody his rage to understand tragic form. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation" are each an apologia for the tragic artist's vocation. And "News for the Delphic Oracle" and "High Talk" exemplify the

exuberant tragic manner.

As he felt his time growing short, Yeats was driven by his prophetic mission. At times he was strident, even vulgar in his fervor. If the masses refused to look within and realize their communal link to one another and to eternity, then Yeats would trumpet all the louder, goading his charges, generally acting as a reckless artist should. Yet, in his final days Yeats found the peace of self-possession, of a quieter affirmation. He could face his imminent death with the aplomb of admired tragic figures, such as Deirdre or that couple in Naoise's tale who played chess while awaiting the sword's stroke. In the end, Yeats not only drew theory and art from his tragic perspective, but lived it as well.

To a great extent, then, Yeats himself was like a work of art. After distilling his thoughts on tragedy early in the new century, he simply willed his own reality as tragic prophet and public man--quite a feat for a shy dreamer. Yeats began living a metaphor, but along the way the mask of redeeming tragic artist fused with his face. Self and anti-self became indistinguishable--by his own formula he attained Unity of Being. Moreover, even the initial artifice was firmly grounded. Through a curious loop of imagination, Yeats fashioned himself after an ideal that was itself largely a projection of his own finest instinct: to serve Ireland.

Alas, the Irish stubbornly resisted Yeats' communal song, often deriding his eccentric ideas and pontifical air. But Yeats would not compromise. He just worked harder at being oracular. Whatever Yeats did, though, he could not alter a simple fact: his prophetic message was too lofty for the everyday world. Not even great poets can change human nature, only give it shape and context. Still, in his pursuit of cultural harmony through tragic form, Yeats managed to create perhaps the finest body of lyric poetry since Wordsworth--a fair legacy for a frustrated prophet.

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