

Yeats: Bard, Seer and Poet**Lec. Zahraa Adnan Baqer****Lec. Lina Muhssen****College of Education for Human Sciences \ University of Babylon****بييتس : ملحمياً، عرافاً و شاعراً****م. لينا محسن عبد الله****م. زهراء عدنان****كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ جامعة بابل**zahraabaqer74@gmail.comlinamuhssen33@yahoo.com**الخلاصة:**

يظهر شعر بييتس تنوعاً فريداً من حيث الفكرة والاسلوب كما يعكس اهتماماً وترابطاً مع كل من التراث الأيرلندي والحاضر. يهدف البحث الى اظهار هذا التنوع من خلال مختارات من قصائده. تقسم الدراسة الى خمسة اقسام. القسم الاول هو التمهيدي الذي يقدم حياة الشاعر واعماله. يركز القسم الثاني على الفترة المبكرة من شعريبييتس. ويتناول القسم الثالث والرابع الفترتين المتوسطة والاحيرة من شعره. واخيرا تلخص الخاتمة ما توصل اليه البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بييتس, الشعر, ايرلندا.**Abstract**

Yeats' poetry shows a unique versatility in theme and technique, and reflects an attention and attachment to both Irish lore and the present. The research aims to show this diversity through a selection of Yeats' poetry. The study is divided into five sections. The first is the prelim which presents Yeats' life and poetry. The second focuses on the poet's early poetry. The third section deals with the middle period and the fourth with the last face in his poetry. Finally, the fifth part is the conclusion that sums up the findings of the paper.

Key words: Yeats, Irish, poetry.**I. Preliminaries**

Yeats's life is largely beset with agonies since early childhood. After his father abandoned a career in law for painting, the family continually suffered a shortage of money. This and his mother's illness and ultimate death in 1900 left a deep impression on the young Yeats. (Holdeman 2)

Yeats, like many of his contemporaries, was affected deeply by the stunning discoveries of nineteenth-century science that made it difficult to accept the Bible. He possessed an unquenchable desire for some form of spiritual wholeness capable of easing the world – and self- splintering tensions he felt so keenly. His poems used symbols to evoke mysterious forces that promised to fit life's broken fragments into deeper hidden unity. (Ibid 5)

The urge to connect his broken life to a greater unity soon led Yeats to write in sympathy with those whose vision of a united Ireland demanded reduced or revised ties to Britain. His early poems typically offer chivalric allegories that meditate on the complexities of Irish politics and avoid direct calls for real-world insurrections. Yeats associated England with everything he loathed about the modern world: with imperialism, with vulgar, godless materialism, with urban ugliness and squalor. Ireland, by contrast, appeared an unspoiled, beautiful place where people lived according to age-old traditions and held on to magical, time-honoured beliefs. These traditions, he felt, preserved satisfying ways of life and eternal spiritual truths that had been forgotten in modernized places like England and that were threatened, even in Ireland, by the encroachment of British culture. (Ibid 5-6)

II. Early Yeats

The first of Yeats's poetic works is "Crossways". The collection opens with a 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd'. This lyric predates Yeats's decision to focus his writing on Ireland, and that instead reflects his teen-age immersion in the pastoral and romantic traditions of English poetry. Its speaker is an idealized poet-shepherd of the type that conventionally appears in pastoral poetry, the traditions of

which extend back to the ancient Greeks. Belying the title's description of him as "Happy," the shepherd laments the death of these age-old traditions, extinguished in a world that has exchanged nourishing dreams for the "painted toy" of "Grey Truth" (presumably, the spiritless truth of scientific materialism). To a world made "sick" by this situation, he defiantly announces that of all the "changing things" constituting temporal, material experience, "Words alone are certain good." This resonant statement calls to mind Yeats' interest in magic, in symbolic words capable of summoning supernatural realities. (Ibid 8)

Some of the shepherd's claims for poetic words are asserted so fervently, however, that they seem to betray anxiety. His blustering dismissal of the "warring kings," for example, suggests that, to some extent, his swagger masks the uncertainties of an instinctively timid poet who is far from sure that his preference for "endless reverie" really does make him superior to those who pursue heroic deeds. This uncertainty indicates the just beginning to develop presence of a quality that would eventually grow into one of Yeats's greatest strengths: his willingness to explore his doubts, even as he asserts his beliefs. Here, these doubts come across most obviously in what the shepherd tells us about the shell and then about the "hapless faun." (Ibid.)

The "twisted, echoharbouring shell" – surely an emblem of poetry itself – responds with solipsistic "guile" to the stories people bring to it, offering comfort only for "a little while" before its echoing words "fade" and "die." Such language greatly undercuts the ensuing repetition of the claim that "words alone are certain good." The faun's evocation is similarly vexed; the only thing certain here is that the faun is dead and buried: that his ghost will be revived by the shepherd's "glad singing" depends upon a dream, possibly an illusory, narcotic one, given the reference to "poppies on the brow." Can dream-inspired words transform the world of the living and reanimate the world of the dead? The poem hopes so, but the more one reads it the less confident its hopes come to seem. (Ibid 8-9)

Probably the most famous fairy poem in this collection is 'The Stolen Child'. This poem is based on the belief that fairies sometimes steal human children. On the plain page, far away from Sligo, the poem may seem a bit too sweetly magical, a bit too quaint or twee. Yet like such apparent nursery-rhyme verse as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* or Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," it offers more than first meets the eye. It gives off, first of all, at least the whiff of cultural politics: one can easily imagine Irish readers in Dublin, London, or Boston interpreting its refrain as an invitation to abandon their Anglicized, modernized selves and "come away" to the seemingly more authentic form of Irishness associated with western peasant traditions. There are also repeated indications that the fairies tempt the child with something genuinely dangerous, indications largely absent from such tamely conventional earlier treatments of the subject. The final stanza, in particular, signals that when the child leaves the world of mortal weeping he also exiles himself – like the Happy Shepherd – from the peacefully comfortable human world represented by the lowing calves, singing kettle, and bobbing mice. Even the fact that the fairies' new companion is a child proves troubling. Does the poem (like Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality") suggest in true Romantic fashion that innocent children are the best philosophers? Or does it imply that only a child unable to "understand" the world could be so immature as to yield to the fairies' temptations? Although Yeats closes the poem by revealing that the child goes with his tempters, he leaves such larger questions open. (Ibid 11-12)

Both poems, I believe, encourage through the voice of the shepherd-poet and the fairy an escape from a world '*more full of weeping than you can understand*'. The earth dreams no more, hence, it is dead and consequently deadening people living in it, and that is why the poet-shepherd says '*dream thou!/For fair are poppies on the brow:/Dream, dream, for this is also sooth*'. Dreams are true because they are inspired and not vain illusions of the mind. And even if the dream is narcotics mediated, it is at least a dream.

Yeats in this collection speaks in the voice of the Bard, the traditional Irish poet, drawing his material from Ireland and its tradition. In his later poetry, he will reassume the voice of the bard to

emphasize his nationalism and attachment to Ireland and those who defend its causes, namely in 'Easter 1916'.

Yeats's second collection, 'The Rose', opens with 'To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time'. This poem draws material from Irish myth but the rose, as symbol, is Yeats's. The poet wants the rose to come near him while he sings about Ireland's myths and mythological figures. However, the rose suffers since it is on the cross of time, which is a symbol Yeats borrows from occult mysticism. (Malins 79) The rose could stand for beauty, Maud Gonne, or Ireland. The three interpretation can be seen as one since Maud Gonne represents both beauty and Ireland. The poet wants to find '*Eternal beauty wandering on her way*' when the rose is beside him opening his eyes.

But in the second stanza the poet asks the rose to '*leave me still/A little space for the rose-breath to fill!*' He wants to continue feeling the human world with all its inconsistencies and '*learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.*' This hesitation is typical of the early Yeats: he wants to attain the ideal ('Intellectual Beauty') without losing his sense of awareness of the real world and 'old Eire'. (Ibid 80) Several other poems in this collection center on the rose, and each one the rose bears a different meaning: in 'The Rose of Peace' it stands for worldly love, in 'The Rose of Battle' for the theme of soul vs. body, and in 'The Sacred Rose' the rose represents the poet's passion for Maud Gonne. (Ibid)

In 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', similar uncertainties appear again where the speaker assures future generations that he is no less an Irish patriot for singing of "elemental creatures" who "hurry from unmeasured mind" to quicken "Ireland's heart." At once bold and defensive, this assertion implicitly recognizes that conventionally Christian Irish readers will be unlikely to embrace Yeats's occult convictions. The speaker's bravado may even suggest that he requires further convincing. (Holdeman 20)

His association with the lady with the '*red-rose-bordered hem*', who might represent Maud Gonne sublimated as 'Intellectual Beauty' being beside God, does not hinder him from grouping with other poet occupied with Ireland's present. Nor does the fact that he says '*Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon,/A Druid land, a Druid tune.!*' In stanza two impede him from being as much an Irish poet as the others he mentions.

It is as if he believes that his identity and his world will come into congruence if he only incants his poetic spell forcefully enough –

*I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.*

but in the end he possesses no more surety than the Happy Shepherd before him that words alone can conjure certain good. This is not to say, however, that his failure to mask his anxieties ruins the poem: the cracks in the speaker's mask are the very things that bring him alive, that imprint him with Yeats's signature ability to blend imaginative power with moving displays of human frailty. Together, "To Ireland in the Coming Times" and "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" build a frame of italicized, declamatory poems around "The Rose" as a whole, encouraging readers to perceive it as a unit and to notice how its intervening poems keep faith with its central emblem. (Ibid. 20-21)

The Wind Among the Reeds mostly focuses not on male protagonists who perversely long to see their beloveds dead, but rather on speakers caught between the yearning to consummate their desires and the fear that doing so will entail a death-like self-sacrifice. It begins with one of its most gripping poems, "The Hosting of the Sidhe," a bold demonstration of its author's late nineties perception that his earlier depictions of Irish fairies had associated them too much with prettiness. As he explained to one correspondent, the Gaelic term sidhe (pronounced "shee") better reflects the fact that the "Irish peasant never thinks of the fairies as pretty [but rather] as terrible." And indeed, the poem's sexy, dangerous, horse-riding host of male and female spirits is a far cry from the prancing troop that tempts

“The Stolen Child.” Their pale cheeks, unbound hair, heaving breasts, and parted lips recall the iconography of Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry. (Ibid. 30)

Indeed, one might fairly say that the poem’s (and the volume’s) original artistic triumph centers on its success in bringing to Irish myth the same intoxicating combination of spiritual and erotic passions familiar from those traditions. Given the political insinuations of some of the collection’s ensuing uses of Irish myth, its description of the fairy host may also imply a massing of ancient forces hostile to the modern, materialistic world of Britain and its empire. But despite these potentially attractive connotations, it is clear that one has to die to join the Sidhe: riding over the grave of an Irish goddess, described in Yeats’s 1899 notes as one who beckons men to their deaths, they urge the speaker to “Empty [his] heart of its mortal dream.” (Ibid.)

In 'He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead', a lover’s frustrated craving for absolute possession of his uncooperative beloved becomes so unendurable that he longs to see her 'lying cold and dead.' Feminists have rightly pointed out that such violent thoughts about the flesh-and-blood woman are a predictable consequence of the lover’s perverse demand that she conform to his idealized image of a motherly nurturer who dispenses 'tender words.' In Yeats’s defense, however, we should note that the poem's speaker confesses his yearnings to the beloved herself: by admitting his need for forgiveness he indicates that to some extent both he and his creator have acknowledged the worrying nature of their desires. More to the point, the poem is not titled “I wish my Beloved were Dead.” This opens the possibility that Yeats does not personally sanction what “He” wishes any more than Robert Browning personally endorses the murderous misogyny dramatized in “My Last Duchess.” Yeats put even more distance between himself and his speaker in the volume’s original version, where the poem was called “Aedh wishes his Beloved were Dead.” In 1899, Aedh appeared along with Hanrahan and Michael Robartes as one of three recurring personae specified in the titles of most of the poems that now identify their speakers as “The Lover” or “He” or “The Poet.” (Ibid. 20-30)

Political inferences also contribute to the collection’s shifting currents. Its politics, however, do not lead toward real-world revolutions any more than its erotic energies move toward real sexual experiences. Typically, it advocates mystical substitutes for political change or looks ahead to a distant future reconfigured by apocalyptic violence. 'The Valley of the Black Pig' explicitly connects this battle with freedom for those who 'labour by the cromlech on the shore' in weary service to 'the world’s empires.' The poem target the British empire and its materialist cosmos with the same impulse to destroy that appears in “He wishes his Beloved were Dead.” It is hard to read them without remembering Freud’s theory of the death drive, that profoundly destructive instinct thought to develop in response to an unconscious wish to re-experience an infantile symbiotic link with one’s mother. (Ibid. 31-32)

III. The Middle Yeats

Although the minimalist movement did not come into vogue until after Yeats’s death, its slogan of “less is more” aptly describes his evolving philosophy of drama and performance. Influenced by such continental playwrights as Maurice Maeterlinck, by the Fay brothers’ acting methods, and eventually by the English actor, producer, and set designer Gordon Craig, Yeats came to believe that poetic drama must maximize its expressiveness by minimalizing all but a few highly salient features. Like a lens concentrating light to a point of burning intensity, it must focus the audience’s attention; only thus could it create and sustain intense, transforming moments similar to those evoked in his lyrics. As a poet, he wanted the strongest emphasis to fall on the spoken word (though he later developed an equally strong interest in dance). This meant that simple costumes and patterned backdrops must replace the eye catching garb and ornate sets used in most contemporary productions. It also meant that instead of improvising movements, actors must adopt stylized poses and move only to enact essential gestures. (Ibid. 46)

In the meantime, he applied minimalist principles to poetic language itself. Instead of building up layers of symbolism, he cut back on poetic artifice, introducing 'such numbness and dullness... that all

might seem, as it were, remembered with indifference, except someone vivid image'. Such vivid images as remained derived less from dim netherworlds and more from the realm of the physical eye and of ordinary speech. Diction, syntax, rhythm, and sound became simpler, more direct and vigorous: still eloquently beautiful, but more like a passionate hero speaking and less like an ethereal fairy singing or a magician chanting a spell. (Ibid. 47)

They are more apparent in the poetry of *In the Seven Woods*. This collection's initial, title poem summons a very different imaginative universe than the one evoked in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. That volume begins by mustering the wraithlike Sidhe. Here, we start with a speaker who seems a version of the real-world poet and who uses everyday language to locate himself in an actual place and time, the Seven Woods of Lady Gregory's estate, in August 1902. He also alludes to two real events that had recently demonstrated Ireland's continuing subservience to Britain: the coronation of King Edward VII ("new commonness/Upon the throne"), and the excavation by crackpot English archeologists of the ancient seat of Irish kingship at Tara. Though the speaker's rueful tone undercuts his claim to have 'put away/The unavailing outcries and the old bitterness,/That empty the heart,' he avoids the effusive lyricism typical of early Yeats. Instead he offers a series of numb, dull images – pigeons, bees, flowers – that hint at emotional and political distress. Only at the end do such images defer to symbols. At this point, the speaker avers that "Quiet" – personified as a woman and seeming to embody the feminine principle – still "Wanders laughing" at Coole. Within Lady Gregory's cultivated estate, she enjoys the masculine protection of the constellation Sagittarius, that "Great Archer" who, the speaker hopes, will one day unloose apocalyptic forces and remake the fallen cosmos. (Ibid. 47-48)

In the first-person, real-world lyric 'Adam's Curse,' the realities of modern, middle-class life prompt ever greater dejection. 'Adam's Curse' establishes a real-world setting and cast of characters: a poet who seems a version of Yeats himself addresses a beloved more like a real woman than an emblem. Recalling an earlier conversation shared with her 'close friend,' he remembers grumbling that, despite poetry's apparent artlessness, poets must work harder than servants scrubbing floors or paupers breaking stones and still end up dismissed as idlers by 'the noisy set/Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen/The martyrs call the world.' This had prompted the beloved's friend to tease him with the remark that women, too, 'must labour to be beautiful.' He had then admitted that, since Adam's fall, even true love requires skilled effort. This was bad enough in the old days, when poets wrote 'beautiful old books' full of precedents for lovers to follow. But now, in the capitalist, empirical era of 'bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen,' poetry attracts few followers, and love itself has consequently degenerated into 'an idle trade.' This admission leads to a memorable example of Yeats's new talent for isolating single vivid images, in this case a vision of the dying daylight and the waning moon that symbolizes the near extinction of the vital mixture of masculine and feminine energies associated with the conjunction of the sun and moon. The poet's memory of this vision prompts him to tell his beloved something left unstated in their earlier conversation: that, her beauty notwithstanding, his attempt to love her 'in the old high way of love' has failed, leaving both of them 'As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.' The beloved herself remains silent in both of the poem's time frames, and the fact that we cannot know how or whether she responds to the poet's anguished confession greatly augments its effect. More than anything she could possibly say, her wordlessness dramatizes their relationship's excruciating paradox: she is close enough to be intimately addressed, but immune to the power of his words, even when they come straight from the heart, undisguised by veils of myth. (Ibid. 48, 49-50)

"Adam's Curse" disavows faith in poetic words through both the matter and manner of its language. Virtually all of its words and phrases derive from everyday speech, and some are more mundane than any previously encountered in Yeats (e.g., 'maybe,' 'all kinds of weather,' and 'the noisy set/Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen'). Its 'sweet sounds' are mostly muted, and occasionally offset by the mild ticks and thuds created when a word ending with a phonetic stop precedes another word beginning with a similar sound (as in 'That beautiful' and 'not talk'). Speechlike rhythms roughen

its iambic pentameter lines, and its sentences often strengthen the impression of spontaneous, colloquial speech by extending themselves over several lines, sometimes by means of enjambment. The poem's rhymes also merit careful attention. Yeats possessed an extraordinary skill for using rhyming sounds to call attention to rhyming words and thereby enhance their significance. By the time he wrote 'Adam's Curse,' he had learned to tone down the music of his rhymes by making some of them imperfect. The result is a rhyming tour de force that reinforces the poem's major conflicts with such resonant pairings as 'school/beautiful,' 'fine thing/laboring,' 'enough/love,' and 'poetry/maybe.' The dissonant chord of sound and connotation characterizing the last of these masterfully encapsulates the poem's deflated mood. (Ibid. 50)

Though colloquial language, muted sounds, irregular rhythms, and dissonant rhymes check the poem's artfulness, that artfulness preserves considerable latent strength. This is especially evident at the end, where the dying sun and hollow moon imply a measure of hope both through their trembling blue-green beauty and by virtue of being heavenly bodies that wane only to wax again. Even the beloved's silence is not absolutely daunting: she confirms neither a commitment nor a disavowal. Like many of Yeats's most admired works, 'Adam's Curse' dramatizes painfully unresolved conflicts. (Ibid.)

Finally, the intensity of this dejection breaks open a new set of visions best exemplified 'The Happy Townland.' Here, both the inaccessible glories of Ireland's past and the disillusioning realities of its present give way to the hope that it will be revitalized through communal sharing of its surviving folk traditions. This concluding lyrics mostly feature plural speakers and folk-based forms and hence evoke collective, ritualized experience. "The Happy Townland," for example, uses an approximation of ballad stanza to herald a populist paradise where beerdrinking, bagpipe-playing peasants mix with dancing queens and fighting warriors, where the archangel Michael blows his trumpet for supper instead of judgment, and where miracles actually occur "On wet roads where men walk." *In the Seven Woods* thus satisfies the apocalyptic expectations of its first poem by moving away from the impossibly idealized Romanticism of its heroic poems – and through the disillusioning realities encountered at its mid-point – to conclude with a synthesis of the miraculous and the earthly. (Ibid. 48-49)

His next collection, 'The Green Helmet and Other Poems', shows Yeats's further development in writing of verse. Yeats had suffered difficult years dealing with the affairs of the Abbey Theatre, including a lecture tour in the USA, as well as writing lectures, finding, therefore, little time for writing lyrics. Yeats is writing about himself after these hard times, and not about a bard in a Celtic twilight, and the diction matches the change. The diction is no longer overlaid with epithets like 'honey-pale' or 'wine-stained', but apt, few, unexpected and straightforward diction like 'spontaneous joy', 'natural content' and 'theatre business'. The poem is short, only thirteen lines, with only five rhymes, with brittle monosyllables, like 'colt', 'dolt', and 'bolt', etc., placed with couplets between them, with the initial half-rhyme 'difficult'. (Malins 83)

Yeats curses the theatre and who is in it for taking him away from writing lyrical poetry:

My curse on plays
That have to be set up in fifty ways,
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
Theatre business, management of men.

He finally decides to 'before the dawn comes round again/I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.' To free his Pegasus to roam 'from cloud to cloud'.

Yeats's next volume of poetry, 'Responsibilities', holds its enduring reputation from its own poetic merits. Eliot made no mistake when he identified 'In the Seven Woods' as the starting point for Yeats's metamorphosis as a twentieth-century poet, and such 'Green Helmet' lyrics as 'The Fascination of What's Difficult' are no doubt as gaunt and hard as anything in 'Responsibilities'. It unleashes an onslaught of proud assertions, savage accusations, mocking fables, and anguished revelations. Many of these counterpoint traditional poetic forms with emphatic, fist-pounding rhythms, slangy turns of phrase, and imagery that revels in indecorous descriptions of brawling beggars and urinating dogs. The

collection pushes Yeats's post-nineties fascination with heroically masked versions of his own personality to a new level of intensity, bringing home the conflict between his commitment to the masks worn by those able to 'Be secret and exult' and his urge to express 'naked' pride, anger, and fear. The clash between the laughing mask and the angry self permeates 'Responsibilities'. (Holdeman 59)

Like 'The Rose,' Responsibilities frames itself with two italicized and, untitled poems. The first – according to Eliot, a 'violent and terrible epistle' – instantly establishes the sinewy mode commended to Yeats by Pound. Constructed as a single, intricate sentence, it builds the syntactic and emotional tensions released in its final quatrain by devoting its first eighteen lines to phrase after appositional phrase. It also relies on forceful, colloquial language and repeatedly invigorates its iambic meter with the insistent rhythms created when two or more trochaic words follow in jolting succession (as in the phrase, 'Old country scholar, Robert Emmet's friend'). These stylistic energies summon neither an idealized feminine comforter nor a devouring whorl of wraiths. Instead, the poet calls on and praises the masculine attributes of his Anglo-Irish 'old fathers,' (and, by extension, of Anglo-Ireland generally). Proudly delineating a family tree filled with seafaring merchants, public-spirited scholars, and brave soldiers, he implies that, whatever their allegiances, his ancestors earned honored places in Ireland's history when they transcended bourgeois aspirations to set examples of selfless courage. Despite the poet's haughty celebration of his forebears, he ends by begging their pardon that 'for a barren passion's sake' he has 'nothing but a book' to 'prove' their blood and his. As someone who sacrificed ordinary pursuits to create works he hoped would change his country, he has lived up to his old fathers' boldness and public spirit. But, lacking a flesh-and-blood child, and as unsure as ever that words alone really are certain good, he cannot match the assurance that allowed his grandfather to wear a mask of wordless self-mastery. Here and elsewhere, his angry outcries bespeak as much self-doubt as arrogance. (Ibid. 59-60)

'September 1913' is the most far-reaching and striking of these poems. Both its title and position in the volume suggest that the Lane controversy forms part of its backdrop, and its depiction of an Ireland deprived of passionate leaders by an obsession with sexual transgression calls Parnell clearly to mind. But the angry tones of its refrain decry something more significant than one or two isolated failures: they proclaim the death of the high-minded nationalist traditions the poet has wished to inherit from his political 'old fathers,' traditions that once allied Catholic activists like John O'Leary with such eighteenth-century Protestant patriots as Robert Emmet, Edward Fitzgerald, and Wolfe Tone. (Ibid. 60)

'September 1913' stands out from its surroundings not only because its perspective is more sweeping. Even more than the collection's untitled opening salvo, it confronts readers with stunning directness. Yeats's nineties lyrics had relied on the theory that esoteric symbols draw readers quietly toward the universal spirit. But 'September 1913' forces us to decide whether we will take sides with the poet or stand against him with the 'you' (the new Catholic middle class (Ellmann and O'Clair 123n)), he directly and contemptuously addresses. His compelling voice – gliding between free-spoken denunciations of Ireland's present and chanted laments for its past – is not easily resisted. Anyone who has ever tried to write metered poetry knows how hard it is to recreate the changing intonations of authentic speech amid the repeated patterns of conventional verse forms. In this respect, at least, 'September 1913' triumphs. Most of its lines drum out a resounding four-beat rhythm that strengthens itself by stressing, and sometimes alliterating, the plosive initial sounds of words like 'fumble' and 'prayer.' At the same time, the first six lines of each stanza unwind a single shifting sentence that counters this regular beat with the varying inflections created by enjambments, colloquial expressions, rhetorical questions, and bursts of dazzling eloquence. The result is a pulse-quicken blend of heroic song and angry speech that cannot be appreciated fully unless recited aloud. (Ibid. 60-61)

The final poem, 'A Coat', proudly recounts Yeats's decision to exchange the mythological 'embroideries' of his early work for the directly autobiographical poetry of 'walking naked.' 'Responsibilities' succeeds artistically by enacting Yeats's mostly unsuccessful struggle to sing 'unnoticed like a bird' in the face of Romantic Ireland's death. (Ibid. 63)

IV. Later Poetry

Yeats's late poems and plays rejuvenate the impassioned spirit of his nineties work without disregarding the fiercer, more skeptical disposition that directed his subsequent development. Their rejuvenated spirit derives from the terrible beauty of the Easter Rising and its aftermath, from the emotional and occult energies set free by the poet's marriage, and from the international recognition reflected in such honors as the Nobel Prize for Literature. But while such occurrences partly restored Yeats's early hopes, he always had to settle for something short of his initial desires. He found love and marriage, but not with Maud Gonne. He became a Senator in an independent Irish state, but that state was born in appalling violence, and in his view did not properly accommodate the Anglo-Irish. He achieved spiritual illumination, but that illumination postponed individual redemption until after death and cultural redemption for some future era. Yeats succeeded more and more in constructing his own self, his own art, his own house, family, and religion. But he failed to revive a unified Irish tradition in which he could root these individual triumphs. (Ibid. 66)

We notice that transitions are oddly elusive, and that certain lines stand out with a force only partly explained by their context. It was in 1897 that Yeats first felt totally at home in Coole Park, home of his patroness and life-long friend Lady Gregory. Her great house hidden in trees, with the strangely beautiful lake in its grounds, was profoundly satisfying to one side of the poet's nature. Aristocratic, Protestant (and therefore remotely English, though Lady Gregory delighted as much as Yeats in Ireland's magic and folklore), it symbolized everything gracious, ancient, outstanding that attracted his loyalty. Maybe everything in him which loved beauty, revered heroes, celebrated high achievement, cultivated friendship, hated vulgarity, found a mirror here. 'We were the last romantics', as he wrote much later, in another poem from Coole - and 'the last romances' carries connotations, that were not specifically English (though Yeats admired and learned from Blake and Shelley), but those of a 'romanticism' related to medieval, Celtic and still older traditions, where courtesy flourished, openness to wonder nurtured the mind and spirit of man, and patronage, such as Lady Gregory provided for Yeats and his peers was not an anachronism half-dreamlike to contemplate. Coole Park appealed also to the feeling for genetic purity which haunted later plays such as *Purgatory* and even seduced Yeats to the first stirrings of political fascism, though conceivably it sensitised him also, at a level we can now see as more fruitful (certainly less disturbing, fifty years later), to some of the insights of Jung. (Dyson 3-4)

There were, naturally, tensions between these aspects of the poet and his no less passionate republicanism, occultism and rejection of all forms of Christian and English influence other than any which could be seen to contain some remote debt. Christianity provided an occasional image, however changed by context; Shakespeare, Spenser, Shelley and other English poets receive Yeats's homage, as masters of the language in which his own work was felt and conceived. 'The Wild Swans at Coole' is typical in its total exclusion of irrelevant tensions and its use of the central image to explore a particular, complex mood. (Ibid. 4)

The first stanza suggests a ritual re-enactment, attuned to 'autumn', as also to the poet's acceptance of the last phase of life. The word 'their' establishes a truth cyclical in nature, yet new to the poet. (Maud Gonne had rejected his proposal of marriage for the final time – a proposal made after the execution for treachery of her husband, John MacBride; Maud Gonne's illegitimate daughter had likewise rejected his proposal. After this bizarre episode, Yeats had surprised in himself relief at the refusals and, accompanying this, confirmation of the truth so long resisted, 'Oh, who could have foretold/That the heart grows old?'). A mood of melancholy coloured his momentous decision to marry Georgie Hyde-Lees, and to make Thoor Ballylee his home. From now on, an autumnal mood colours most of his verse, along with increasing energy, as if some charm to recall the spring, or stabilise eternity, is the unflinching quest. 'Mirrors' in l. 4 combines momentary calm with a hint of illusion. In this temporary stasis, we are led on to the more personal ritual described in the final lines, an annual counting of swans. The memorable 'nine-and-fifty' is highly distinctive of the poet's predilection both

for the meticulous and the capricious. We have it on Lady Gregory's authority that George Moore had once forgotten 'Yeats... and everything else in the delight caused by a great clamour of wings and die snowy plumage of thirty-six great birds rushing down the lake, striving to rise from its surface'. Yeats, now making *his* 'nineteenth' count, uses similar phrases, but a different number. Is it possible to count up to fifty-nine exactly, as the graceful creatures float and maybe interweave, with no margin of error? The need for exactness is perhaps a precondition of the 'All' in l. 4 of the second stanza, and the 'All's changed' in l. 3 of the third, as well as of the apparent concreteness of the poem's conclusion, concealing (as it artlessly does) the sudden transposition of birds and man. On the other hand, the difference between George Moore's even number, and Yeats's odd, may signify the importance that there is one swan not included in the pairings ('lover by lover' -stanza iv). I think of 'The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven' (floating, out of context, from 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'); of the exquisite image of the dying swan, alone, in die third section of 'The Tower'; and of the one swan of power in 'Leda and the Swan' – along with the reference to 'daughters of the swan', tacitly identifying one of Leda's two tempestuous daughters with Maud Gonne, the solitary swan who never paired with Yeats, in 'Among School Children'. It is impossible to know Yeats without cross-references of this kind acquiring a powerful, if elusive, suggestiveness across the poems; and here, certainly, the man himself is led solitary at the poem's end, when no swans remain. (Ibid. 4-5)

In the second stanza, the phrase 'before I had well finished' emphasizes, now, the contrasting theme of flux and inevitable confusion, casting doubt back upon the exact numbering. Yet 'All suddenly mount', with its powerfully rising cadence, places the power of the swans decisively inside time and change; and the last two lines of this stanza, as well as offering visual brilliance, yoke together 'clamorous' with the inescapable price of action - 'scatter' underlining the necessary end of harmony, even as harmony forms itself ('great *broken* rings'). (Ibid. 5)

The conjunction of 'great' and 'broken' is precisely the poet's response to this ritual, the contradiction in his empathy. The third stanza moves from 'brilliant' to 'sore'; and though the first word describes the 'creatures', and the second the poet's 'heart', the two come together in 'All's changed': a phrase redolent of much to come. We sense that it is the poet who has changed and that, surreptitiously, the birds are now excluded from the process, so that the 'bell-beat of their wings' can acquire a mythic changelessness, against which the poet's 'tread' succumbs to the depredation of time. In the fourth stanza, the birds are fully mythic – and note that, achieving the humanly unattainable 'Unwearied', with the fidelity of 'lover by lover', they also take on something of 'cold'. In fact, the marvellous placing of 'cold', causing the reading voice to pause and register, before it passes on to the qualifying 'Companionable', allows the poet a strangely effective device. This is not the transformation back from myth to reality, so powerfully heralded by the same word ('Cold pastoral') in Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'. Rather, 'cold' can, after the pregnant pause, become allied to 'Companionable' and 'climb' – and can then co-exist with 'hearts have not grown old', 'Passion or conquest, wander where they will' - a potent accumulation of the heart's desires which the heart of man, at least, will never achieve. (Ibid. 5-6)

We might feel that the birds are left with the best of both worlds: the world of reality where, in each of nineteen years, actual swans have known their moment of beauty and fullness; and the symbolic world, where this freedom is a permanence possible only in myth. We should recall also, however, that the word 'cold' is usually a good word in Yeats. The line 'Attend upon them still' is, in strict syntax, descriptive, but it has something of the force of the poet's blessing. No doubt, these powerful cross-currents prepare the way for the final stanza, where the transposition of birds and poet is completed, but without any apparent change of mood or reference. 'But now they drift' — and the 'now' is forever since, in their eternalised state, they will continue to 'build' and 'Delight men's eyes' beyond all reach of change. Even so, the conjunction of 'drift' and 'still' serves, beyond its visual clarity, to underline paradox: 'Mysterious, beautiful' may suggest not simply the birds, but the equivocal status of eternity itself. The poet remains in time, and 'when I awake someday/To find they have flown away?'

is an ending finely judged to tease. We conclude not with the poet grown, older, remembering swans of yesteryear, but with swans of his own transforming, outlasting himself. The final triumph, Dyson asserts, is that he casts the ending in the form of a question – forcing us to envisage the reality of the future men (and so of the undying swans), even though the 'lake's edge or pool' not only will not, but cannot, exist. 'Awake' could refer to the poet's return from art to life, and from dream to reality; or it could here be a direct synonym for death. Either way, we are left with the prevailing mood of melancholy. A new dimension of greatness appears in Yeats's art. (6-7)

The next poem, 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', is written about the death of Lady Gregory's brother. On 23 January 1918 Major Robert Gregory of the Royal Flying Corps (as the R.A.F. was then called) was shot down when returning to base in Northern Italy. These sixteen lines are not an implicit lament for a personal friend, but the presentation of Robert Gregory, who speaks as a prototype fulfilling everything which Yeats most admired. To start with, Gregory possessed psychic second sight which gave him a premonition of his death – a faculty Yeats believed in and admired. As a reason for fighting he gave no shallow political emotions, neither hating the Germans nor loving the English. This was an astonishing view for First World War times, when most young Englishmen thought it their duty to die for their country. Gregory's roots were specifically in his estate at Kiltartan, where he realized the poor would not benefit whether the war was lost or won, and he was sufficiently aloof to be uninfluenced by cheering crowds or political demagogues. This solitary detachment could be consummated in the 'tumult of the clouds', the lofty height from which he could view the conflict in its true perspective. He had thought it out, and been struck by the paradox of death in life, which alone could bring him fulfillment. So he made his decision with cold, dispassionate bravery, knowing the consequences. (Malins 84)

Despite his love for Kiltartan as his 'country', Gregory had spent much of his youth in England and France, having been educated in Harrow School, Oxford University and the Slade School of Art. His all-roundness at sports is not mentioned in this poem. But sooner or later, his sporting talents had to be brought to terms with his ability as an artist; by the age of thirty-seven, when he died, his versatility had evidently precluded his becoming a dedicated painter, if either the quality or quantity of his work is any indication. It is doubtful if he ever would have been a successful painter, and this is what Yeats sensed: so the implications of the last four lines of the poem. There is a conflict in the same personality between the subjective vision of the artist and the anti-self or objective viewpoint of the sportsman-soldier. This inevitably leads to the paradox of death in life, in the last line of the poem, which Gregory determines to resolve in the only possible way – by heroic death in the clouds. (Ibid. 84-85)

It is a magnificent, short poem, showing Yeats's development as a poet in verse absolutely suitable to his living in the Ireland of his day, rather than in any Celtic dream world. A strong statement is secured by the many rhetorical repetitions:

Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
which mount until the climax of
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;

with its sudden trochaic foot on 'Drove' itself urging forward the internal rhythms. The four-footed lines, nearly all end-stopped with tight rhymes, give the poem an inexorable finality, like death itself; and as two-thirds of the words are monosyllabic, this proud simplicity makes it hang in the memory. (Ibid. 85)

The next poem, 'The Phases of the Moon', is one of Yeats's mystical poems: each human life corresponds to a stage in a cycle of twenty-eight incarnations analogous to the phases of the moon. The full moon of Phase 15 symbolizes a superhuman condition of pure subjectivity during which a being's

body and soul become one completely beautiful and self-sufficient form; the unseen moon of Phase 1 stands for a similarly superhuman state of utter objectivity during which a being's essential stuff is beaten up into the primal dough in preparation for a new cycle. Between these extremes the being progresses through a series of material incarnations, deriving its changing selves and masks from changing proportions of objective and subjective influences (what Yeats had previously designated the solar and lunar principles). From Phase 2 to Phase 8 ('the first crescent to the half') the being moves toward Phase 15 but remains close enough to Phase 1, that its nature – and masking 'dream' – stay mainly objective: 'the dream/But summons to adventure, and the man/Is always happy like a bird or a beast.' Later, as the being pursues the mask of 'whatever whim's most difficult/Among whims not impossible,' its subjective powers grow so strong that even 'His body moulded from within his body/Grows comelier.' Eventually, such physically potent specimens as Achilles and Hector metamorphose into more mentally powerful figures (e.g., Athena and Nietzsche) as the soul begins 'To die into the labyrinth of itself.' After Phase 15, the process reverses: the being withdraws from its solitude and into the world, pursuing the mask of 'whatever task's most difficult/Among tasks not impossible' as it sinks back on the 'deformity' associated with Phase 1. Between the physical deformity of Phase 26 and the mental deformity of Phase 28, emblemized by the Hunchback and the Fool, the potential Saint incarnated in Phase 27 may 'escape' the cycle for good by renouncing both subjective selfhood and the objective world, thus opening the way to permanent harmony with the cosmic oneness. For those not ready to be saints, the wheel continues to spin. (Holdeman 69)

These doctrines are not as bizarre as they at first may seem. Reincarnation features not only in the Theosophical and Cabalistic teachings familiar to Yeats but also in such major religious traditions as Hinduism and Buddhism (not to mention the classical wisdom of Pythagoras and Plato). Since the time of Descartes, moreover, most Western philosophers (and many Western poets) have shared Yeats's preoccupation with the relationship between the mind's subjectivity and the objective, exterior world. In sum, the poet's convictions are rooted in well-established traditions. By imagining a cosmos in which beings move between union with other spirits (at Phase 1) and absolute individuality (at Phase 15) until they are ready to escape into ultimate harmony, he balanced his longing for cosmic oneness against his fear of losing his selfhood. He also correlated differing states of the soul with differing degrees of physical beauty without yielding to the notion that persons perceived as ugly are made so by evil spirits. Still, there is no avoiding the fact that many find his views outlandish and unappealing. The most sympathetic usually take the same approach to his religion that some take to his politics, focusing their admiration on the power with which he dramatizes his unusually intense perceptions. 'The Phases of the Moon' provides a good opportunity for indulging such admiration. Only a few of Yeats's subsequent works focus so completely on the forbidding occultism that flowed through his wife's pen. But readers who neglect the rudiments of this lore will have difficulty appreciating the cosmic assumptions that underlie his later writing. (Ibid. 69-70)

Yeats's 'Easter 1916', from 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer', takes for its subject an event that had a deep impact on Yeats, the Easter 1916 insurrection. This 'I' is Yeats himself, for once a poet without a mask. Or is it Yeats wearing his bardic mask? Normally he is far too conscious of our kaleidoscopic roles as men ('in the course of one revolving moon... chymist, fiddler, statesman and buffoon') to use an 'I' which is directly himself. In the Wordsworthian sense, he is the least 'personal' of our poets. But here, he makes a very near approach to the personal – possibly because the theme passionately attracted him, and the bardic role was very particularly his own. (Cox and Dyson 59)

'Easter 1916' is about war, but not about the Great War. Yeats was much more interested in the grievances of his fellow Irishmen, against England than in the major European conflagration raging at the time. The events described are simple and well known. In the Easter of 1916 a number of men and women died in Dublin, during a famous but premature rising. This poem is Yeats's celebration of them as martyrs to the Irish cause. The poem is not, however, about the justice of their cause, which is played down to a surprising degree – as, indeed, is the very dubious nature of its success. What really

interests Yeats about these deaths is the 'terrible beauty' to which they gave birth. The poem is an exploration of the meaning and nature of heroism. (Ibid. 59-60)

The literal meaning is easy enough to grasp, since the whole purpose of the poem is to state it. But there are certain other meanings as well, apparently opposed to the plain literal sense, which one detects in images and symbols, as well as in overtones of a somewhat elusive kind. These secondary 'meanings' are just as fully realised, it is important to notice, as the literal one: to suggest that the poet thinks one thing, but feels another, would be very wide of the mark. In fact, he thinks and feels both. If there *is* a contradiction, it is none of his making. The complexity belongs to life itself, not to his art. (Ibid. 60)

'Easter 1916' is a poem of Yeats's late period. All the ornateness of his early style has been left behind. At first glance the diction is almost bare, so unobtrusively is every word in its proper place. The words seem indeed to belong together in an indivisible unity, very much like the components of a picture, or of a great building. The poem might almost have been chiseled. In its closing lines Yeats rehearses the names of the dead as a man might carve them, deeply and incisively on stone:

I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be ...

It is as though he is actually gathering these martyrs by his own craftsmanship into 'the artifice of eternity', as he himself asks to be gathered in 'Sailing To Byzantium'. The very austerity of the verse has now become grand and sonorous, to match the full development of its theme. (Ibid. 60-61)

But the verse is much more flexible than it appears; in the central section of the poem it takes on a remarkably lyrical intensity. Basically it is a very simple structure, with three stresses in each line. There is a simple but insistent rhyme scheme (a/b/a/b) which supports our sense of the poem as an artifact – something made – rather than as a direct report of experience, even when half-rhymes instead of full rhymes are used. This has much to do with Yeats's approach to war, as a simple comparison with Wilfred Owen shows. In Owen's poems there are assonances and half-rhymes to mirror the waste and incompleteness he records, the pity of war. But in 'Easter 1916' we find full-blooded rhymes, the measured, triumphant progress of the lines – a mirror of glory. It is instructive to scan the lines, and to notice how delicately the metre shifts and moves with the meaning, most of all in the middle section, where the poem's ambivalence is chiefly to be found. (Ibid. 61)

The poem begins descriptively and casually. Yeats has met 'them' as passing acquaintances, and thought next to nothing of it. Dublin is toned down to wintry colouring 'grey/Eighteenth-century houses', and the reference to 'counter or desk' underlines the routine, even dreary nature of the meetings. At this stage he is still the Irish Wit, living in an essentially comic world of passing nods, mocking tales and gibes. He develops his picture of the everyday scene as a 'casual comedy', a world of fools

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn.

This is to be contrasted with the heroic world of death and glory, co-existing with the comic world, and waiting to break through – suddenly, totally and irreversibly – as the 'terrible beauty' of the refrain. (Ibid. 61)

This breakthrough is the poem's theme, and it brings Yeats to ground very familiar to him: to the contemplation of a moment *in* time which, by a dramatic and heightened significance, removes itself *out* of time; a moment of choice, or of creation, or of sacrifice when creatures of flesh and blood transcend themselves and their normal lot. (Ibid.)

All of this is foreshadowed in the first appearance of the refrain, after which, however, Yeats returns for a time to his memories. The 'they' of the poem were no saints as the world judges, or as Yeats had reason to judge, himself. One was a young man of great promise, one a beautiful woman

grown shrewish, one a personal enemy of the poet ('He had done most bitter wrong/To some who are near to my heart'). But good and bad as they may be, in the world of motley, their death removes them all to another dimension. The perspectives of the 'casual comedy' yield to other, and grander perspectives of heroism; all alike are to be numbered in the song. (Ibid.)

And so (moving for a moment over the poem's middle section towards its end) the poet celebrates their death, which, looms larger and greater than their lives, lie does not celebrate, as has already been emphasised, their success in death. Their death did not achieve its aim and might even, Yeats suggests, have been 'needless':

For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said....

He celebrates their death as a consummation, an end. It is their willingness to die which has lifted diem into the heroic realm, and made them the subject for a song:

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead...

This, then, is the poem's literal meaning, which so clearly engages the *whole* of the poet's creative energy, his thought and feeling alike. But also, and perhaps necessarily with a theme of this kind, there are other thoughts and feelings awakened by the contemplation of heroic death. There is awareness of waste and decay, of earthly promise sacrificed to one great but frozen moment in time. A memorial may commemorate heroism, but its marble inscription is as cold as the bodies lying beneath. And might it not be better to live, even in our small and motley world, than to lie in grandeur among the dead? Yeats returns many times in his work to this particular point, where his celebration of Art, Intellect, Heroism – the things that are tinged with eternity – is held in tension by an opposing enchantment: of youth, love, transience, 'whatever is begotten, born and dies'. The dilemma is not peculiar to Yeats. Poets always have been, and always will be caught up in the great dialogue between Time and Eternity; in the striving of ecstasy to reach out to permanence, across the gulf inexorably set between them. (Ibid. 62-63)

Any reader will know the pervasiveness of this theme. A critic, however, will be concerned with the specific occasions when it turns *successfully* into poetry. Most men have experienced at one time or another the great commonplaces of the human predicament; very few have turned such experiences into unique and unforgettable words. It is one such instance we are looking at now. Yeats's refrain is our best clue to the poem's *total* ambivalence, with its fusion of 'terror' and 'beauty' into one new whole. This 'terror' is not simply the terror experienced by the martyrs themselves at their moment of death. It is also, and more importantly, the metaphysical terror with which the rest of us contemplate such a moment, wondering, from inside time and our own mediocrity, was it worth it? Was the exchange of living flesh and blood for this graven glory a fair exchange after all? Our very doubts may be simply cowardice; or they may reach beyond the glory to something too mockingly unanswerable to be borne. The most beautiful moment in the poem comes in its third section, which moves against the literal meaning not in crude statement, but in the delicate suggestiveness of image and symbol. Here, the heroic becomes

Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream...

and this 'enchantment' links the moment of death with the 'one purpose alone' which led up to it. The whole alchemy, of living men and women transmuted into undying symbols, enters into this image of the stone. But 'stone' is a cold word; and if the stone 'troubles' the living stream, the living stream has warmth and magic of its own. Indeed, the poetry becomes now a celebration of the stream, against which the stone stands out motionless and black, a fitting symbol of the frozen heart. We are caught up in the wonderfully delicate rhythms of life—in the reiterated 'minute by minute', where the movement of horse and cloud and stream link life and transience inextricably together. The movement is too subtle to be pinned down as onomatopoeia, but certainly it enacts its content, offering us the very feel

of life. Here, then, is the world of change and delight; and it is the stone in the centre that strikes chill. The opposition between casual comedy and meaningful heroism is balanced now by this very different opposition, between liting beauty and the motionless dark:

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart...

... and it is no accident that Yeats sees the singlemindedness of sacrifice leading to death as a 'stone', no less than the death itself. Both are symbolised by the stone, our response to which runs directly counter to the poem as a whole. (Ibid. 63-5)

The moment you see this, the ambivalence is everywhere apparent. In lines 28-30 it is said of one of the martyrs 'He might have won fame in the end...' yet the whole force of the poem appears to be that he *did* win fame in the end. What sort of fame does Yeats hint at here?—some other kind, it seems, than that of life knowing itself sacrificially in one supreme moment of death. And at the end of the poem, the word 'bewildered' is highly significant:

And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?

Explicitly, Yeats is saying it doesn't matter: what if they *were* bewildered, he asks? But 'bewildered' and 'died' are strong words, especially with the felt coldness of the stone behind them. Even the image 'To murmur name upon name/As a mother names her child' is not wholly unambiguous. Might the poem be in some sense a lullaby, helping us to forget the dead, even as we honour them? (Ibid. 65)

What one is left feeling is that the poem is a marvelously unified and moving whole. If there *is* a tension of opposites in it, then this is a very faithful reflection of life itself. The poet celebrates heroism finely and memorably, and what more can we ask a poet to do? He extends our awareness and sensitivity to life, he makes something new and beautiful for our delight. There are limits to what we can reasonably expect. (Ibid.) Yeats goes back to the bardic tradition of his ancestors when he says 'I write it out in a verse'. The first person gives the lines the power of incantation capable of creating a wonder for those who died: immortalizing them in verse:

Now and in time to be'
Whenever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The mood of millenarian anxiety that opens pervades 'The Second Coming'. This poem's immense popularity arises partly from the sheer thrill induced by its blasphemous vision of the stony Egyptian sphinx slouching towards Bethlehem to take the place of Christ, a vision that draws readers into its uncanny interior with three-dimensional imagery similar to that of 'Easter, 1916'. Here, a voice breathless with elated horror evokes a 'pitiless' beast stretching its limbs at the focal point of a space inscribed by reeling desert birds and their shadows far below. The poem gains additional appeal from its finely calculated ambiguity, which encourages readers to interpret it in relation to their own experiences. Because falconry is the sport of kings, critics have often construed the opening image as another of Yeats's laments for the demise of aristocracy, but nothing confirms this. The significance of the 'blood-dimmed tide' and 'ceremony of innocence' also lies open to question. The poet's drafts allude to the execution of Marie Antoinette and the Russian Revolution, but finished versions specify only that 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' Yeats wrote the poem in January 1919, a time when the destructive legacy of World War I was infusing most of Europe with apprehensions of radical change. 'The Second Coming' encapsulates the era's mood of crisis. (Holdeman 77)

Later readers, Holdeman says, have discovered farther-ranging applications for the poem's evocation of cultural collapse. In 1958, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe titled his requiem for the breakdown of Igbo culture *Things Fall Apart*, and even now one can scarcely pick up a newspaper

without coming upon a reference to a center that cannot hold, a politician who lacks all conviction, or a passionately intense fanatical movement. Like *Calvary*, it reflects the belief that Christ's birth 'twenty centuries' ago precipitated an epoch of objectivity that reached its apogee in modernity's scientific materialism, an epoch soon to be overtaken by a renewal of the subjective impulses Christ's 'rocking cradle' 'vexed to nightmare.' The poem's connection to this theory comes across most clearly in its reference to a 'gyre,' the gradually widening spiral shape that Yeats's later work uses to represent the ebb and flow of the subjective and objective principles. In *A Vision*, he draws an analogy between the cyclical fluctuations of these two principles and two interpenetrating gyres configured so that the narrowest point of one coincides with the widest point of the other (see page). One gyre stands for subjectivity, the other for its opposite; as one expands the other contracts until finally an extreme is reached and the process reverses itself. The combined effects of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the ongoing turmoil in Ireland suggested that Europe was beginning to witness the chaotic onset of just such a reversal. The resulting poem dramatizes an intensely conflicted state of mind, mingling excitement at the prospect of a new era with horror at the violence its coming will entail. (77-78)

'Sailing to Byzantium' opens the volume by dramatizing a speaker who has repudiated the 'sensual music' of his home country to travel to the place and time identified in *A Vision* as the destination Yeats would most wish to visit 'if [he] could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where [he] chose.' The poet's fascination with the early medieval city now known as Istanbul had begun during a trip to Italy in 1907, when he had seen Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna. By the time he wrote *A Vision*, he had come to regard sixth-century Byzantium as a city in which the waxing subjective gyre had fostered 'Unity of Culture':

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... absorbed in their subject-matter and that 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 many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image.

This privileged realm – similar to the new subjective world Yeats hoped would slouch out of modernity's turbulence – has been forged into unity by spiritually inspired artists. The speaker of 'Sailing to Byzantium' seeks it for the sake of his soul. For him, the soul can only learn to 'clap its hands and sing' by studying artistic 'Monuments of its own magnificence' in a city made 'holy' by its golden mosaics. He regards these monuments in the same way Yeats had long regarded symbols and masks: as magical icons empowering him to call down otherworldly 'sages' who will 'Consume' his mortal attachments and gather him 'Into the artifice of eternity.' (Ibid. 82)

Though the poem's speaker may initially come across as a man on the verge of transcending mortal desires, careful analysis suggests latent difficulties. When he links his rejection of 'That... country' to his body's tattered state, he implies that, were he in his prime, he would gladly sing the song of sex and birth and death. In the first stanza he associates this song with a cohesive world where all things enact their natural destinies; he also bespeaks suppressed attraction to this world with the ear-pleasing sensuousness of his vigorous rhythms and alliterations. Further hints of persistent desire for the body surface in stanza two, where he describes the soul in bodily terms, as something having hands and wearing clothes. In stanza three, he asks the sages to unfasten him from his body only after requesting them to 'Come from the holy fire' of their unearthly reality and 'perne' part way into his. Thus it comes as little surprise to learn in stanza four that he has no wish to exist 'out of nature' without a 'bodily form' or without communication with the temporal sphere. Though he now pursues spiritual purgation, he intuits that, as a spirit, he will crave contact with mortals, with 'a drowsy Emperor' and his court. His incipient understanding of this inversion recalls Yeats's longtime belief that material and spiritual beings hunger to consume each other. The speaker's yearning for 'God's holy fire' is no doubt

deeply in earnest, but he has already begun to apprehend the truth that translation to the spirit realm offers no sure cure for mortals 'sick with desire.' (Ibid. 82-83) One can only be attained by abandoning the other.

The next poem, 'Byzantium', from 'The Winding Stair and Other Poems', is perhaps the most extreme example of Yeats's third period, a masterpiece of density and evocative but mysterious detail. References to the history of the Holy Roman Empire blend with aspects of Yeats's own philosophy in a glittering, intense traffic jam of brilliant ideas. In essence, the poem is an ecstatic vision of the spontaneous creation of spirits in what Yeats to see as the furnace of heaven. The dolphin was the Byzantine guide to the other world. The idea of 'handwork' in the poem is a common one in Yeats's later work. (Mundra 49)

The poem was written in 1930 after a lapse of about three years from the date of his writing 'Sailing to Byzantium'. 'Byzantium' was begun and completed in Italy. Its preliminary notes were recorded in the poet's diary of 1930 under the heading 'Subject for a poem', and is dated April 39. In the interval between 'Sailing to Byzantium' and the present poem, the poet had further developed intellectually. Byzantium, therefore, is naturally an improvement upon the earlier composition, 'Sailing to Byzantium'. (Ibid. 49-50)

Despite being somewhat obscure, 'Byzantium' rejoices in the distinction of being one of the greatest poems in the domain of poesy. Its great merit lies in the fact that it can be read by and casts its spell upon the casual reader even before he can understand its extremely fine symbolism. It is rich in symbolic wealth. (Ibid. 50)

Byzantium was the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. It was famous for its mosaic art and gold enameling. But in this poem Byzantium is not a city of concrete reality. It is a creation of the mind which exists in imagination only. It is a place beyond the world of teeming millions, free from the limitation of time and space. (Ibid.)

The two poems have many points of superficial similarity. In both the central object is the Dome of St. Sophia at Byzantium, with other details and images that are common. Both are the poems of escape from a world of flux to a kingdom of permanence and in both the poet is trying to solve a personal problem. In the first he seeks to quell the desires troubling his heart in old age, while in the second he 'wanted to warm himself back to life' after a severe illness which brought him very close to death. (Ibid.)

Yet the poems are fundamentally different from each other and the distinction finds support in the fact that the Byzantium of the first poem is that of about A. D. 550, the period mentioned in the famous description in *A Vision*, a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato; in the second poem it is that of about A. D. 1000, towards the end of the first Christian millennium. 'Sailing to Byzantium' describes the voyage to the 'country of the mind' while Byzantium is a presentation of an ideal state beyond life. (Ibid. 50-51)

'Byzantium' is a contemplation of death, of rather of the ideal state of death. The metre adopted is significant from this point of view. While 'Sailing to Byzantium' was in the eight-line stanza form common to many meditative poems of Yeats, 'Byzantium' adopts the metre that Yeats used only in his most deeply felt poems of death and birth. (Ibid. 51)

Byzantium is Yeats' most esoteric and obscure poem, his Divine Comedy short of the vision of Hell. But while in Dante the movement is vertical and we ascend from the lowest to the highest, in 'Byzantium' it is just the reverse. After the preparation in the first two stanzas, we mount at once to Paradise and then descend to Purgatory and finally come to the drink of the vast ocean, symbolizing human life with its conflicts and turmoils.

The poem opens in the silence of the night, when the great song of St. Sophia has announced the time appropriate to spiritual meditation and divine revelation. The images of day-time, such as the drunken soldiers of the king, reminiscent of the savage British soldiers terrorizing the Irish peasantry, stained with the blood and fury of the busy, day-light world, have gone out of sight. The noises and

images peculiar to the night in a great city, such as the song of night-walkers and brawl of the revelers have also melted in the calm atmosphere. The poet is now face to face with the great Dome of St. Sophia, which suddenly assumes the aspect of the sky, bedecked with the light of moon and stars and looking down upon the human life on the earth with multiplicities, love and hate, strife and confusion, peculiar to the every-day life of men and women. (Ibid.)

As the poet contemplates the Dome of 'Divine wisdom' with a secret desire to explore its mysteries, he describes an image floating before him. It is faint and vague, a shadow in comparison with a concrete human body, but an image when compared to a shade. The poet keeps its identity deliberately. This much is clear that it is one of the spirits from the Land of the Dead, which like the 'Sages in God's holy fire' in 'Sailing to Byzantium' can retrace their steps and come to the earth, which they have left behind. They have become purged of the memories of the earthly life which were woven round them like the 'mummy cloths' round the Egyptian mummies or the skein of thread round the bobbin. This spirit, with a mouth without moisture or breath can summon other ghosts from Hades as the shade of Tiresias does in Homer's Kingdom of the blessed to help Ulysses. The poet needs a guide to lead him to the various regions of the kingdom of the dead. Such a guidance was prescribed by all the mystic and occult systems. (Ibid. 52)

The poet hails the superhuman guide, who is antithetical to man, living the life of man's death and the death of man's life, and starts on his pilgrimage under the felt presence of this' spirit.

The third stanza presents the vision of heaven, and the golden bird here, more a 'miracle' than 'an artifice' planted on the star-lit golden branch of the mystic tree, is a purified soul. Its substance is gold, 'the purest and imperishable substance in alchemy,' symbol of the transmuted soul. It is a bird not made by the hand of man, but hammered into shape on the divine smithy in purgatory. The golden tree is the mystic tree whether of Kabbala; where souls or angels have their place, or the Tree of Life in the Christian heaven as described by Rossetti in his 'Blessed Damozel' where the blessed souls and angels reside and the Holy Ghost sometimes settles in the form of a Dove. (Ibid. 53)

It is to be noted that here the dome is only star-lit, the moon is drooped because it is now changed into a, symbol of female fickleness, of the flux in the world. The bird, like the cock in Hades, may cry for a re-birth in the human world if the soul so desires or scorning the conflict and confusion of the human world, the transitoriness of all lives, including birds and flowers, and embittered by the 'moon', emblematic of the flux and also of the frailty of the woman which makes love a torture, the blessed soul may rest content with the imperishable substance of which it is made and the life eternal it has inherited. (Ibid. 53)

The fourth stanza unrolls the spectacle of purgatory, where the souls are flitting about like flames of fire, which is unearthly. It is not the fire raised by faggot for the burning of martyrs, nor the one struck by the steel in friction. It is the unearthly fire of purgatory which no storm can disturb and which purges the soul into the likeness of flame as described by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. To this place of purgation come the spirits from the human world (Blood-begotten; and undergo the process of the gradual liberation through 'dreaming back'.) The dreaming back, in which the soul reviews all its memories, sins and experience, is represented by a dance which, at times, is marked by 'an agony of trance', where the soul burns in the eternal fire of remorse. This fire of agony which consumes the spirits is internal, not external, it burns the heart of the sinner but cannot burn 'a sleeve'. In this sense the flames or the fire-like souls are begotten of flames, that is, the flame raging in their minds. The flames which covers them is the flame issuing out of their own minds. The idea is Platonic. (Ibid. 53-54)

In the last stanza the poet has reached the brick of purgatory and can catch a clear view of the vast ocean of time-and-space-bound life through which 'blood begotten' spirits are seen moving forward on the packs of dolphins, the proverbial escorts of souls to kingdom of the dead. The scene has been familiarized by artists as well as the makers of the Roman tombs. But dolphins themselves are also the symbols of earthly love, 'of the mire and blood' of the mortal life and as such belong to the element of the ocean, which they are traversing. The flood of life beats upon the borders of 'that

smithy', where the souls are purged and shaped and the water of life cannot penetrate: while, on the marble floor, where the souls 'dance in an agony of trance' they are gradually divested of 'that flaming shirt' the agonising and cohesive stain of the fury, passion and lust life which human hand cannot remove, The dancing images are begetting fresh images of their life experiences in the process of 'dreaming back'. Each memory comes back as an image in a dream. In the last line the poet has come back to the shores of the ocean of life, which is agitated by the conflicting claims of flesh (dolphin-torn and spirit (gong-tormented), the extremities between which the mortal man swings like a pendulum which connotes man's life tormented by passion and desire. (Ibid. 54, 55)

The last two poems I would like to consider are 'The Gyres' and 'Under Ben Bulben', from 'Last Poems'. Perhaps the earliest use of 'gyre' in Yeats's own poetry was in the superb opening of 'The Second Coming'. Related poems of the same period turn up a frequent use of the word, and it continues to appear in some of the best poems of the following decade, until by 1935, the probable date of the composition of 'The Gyres', the gyres themselves become the subject matter of the poem. (Koch 78)

It was in 1929 that he wrote from Shillingford to his friend, Mrs. Shakespeare, that he was searching out signs of the whirling gyres of the historical cones in occult books and that by studying them he hoped to see deeper into what was to come. 'My own philosophy', he added, 'does not much brighten the prospects so far as any future we shall live.' By the time of the composition of 'The Gyres' fourteen years later, his pessimism was even more profound, Koch argues. Significantly, it is at about this time that in his letters to Dorothy Wellesley Yeats talks of the spirits of the dead in folklore who are represented as being enveloped in a whirlwind. This whirling metaphor is expanded in 'The Gyres' to embrace the cyclic movement of history which includes not only the spirits of the dead, but dead cultures and civilizations as well. (Ibid. 78-79)

And, if we must further unravel the complex web of associations which the symbol of the gyre carried for Yeats, there are many useful passages in *A Vision*, which point to the common element present in *all* the uses of the word which I have indicated. Thus, for example, in the amusing faked introduction to that alleged mystical book of the sixteenth century, Yeats wrote:

'The anguish of birth and death cry out in the same instant. Life is no series of emanations from divine reason such as the Cabalists imagine, but an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall but a whirlpool, a gyre.'

Later, Yeats attempts to trace various mentions of gyres in antiquity, through Aquinas and up to Swedenborg. All these 'historical' gyres appear to share two elements in common: circular movement and a combination of two opposite movements. Without detaining ourselves to expound the questionable structure of Yeats's 'system', it is nevertheless important to understand that he sees his cones and gyres as the principles of energy which move the Four Faculties, and which generate the patterns of their movements. I do not think that anyone has pointed out that this creative antagonism of opposites which Yeats makes the axis of his cosmology is really an extension of his early and presumably abandoned theory of the Mask, a theory originally centred in the value of conflict to the creative imagination, but now universalized into a dynamic principle which accounts for both human and superhuman growth. That the early vision of this belief was unconsciously working towards its later enlargement is indicated by a revealing passage in 'The Trembling of the Veil', the section of Yeats's *Autobiographies* which deals with the years between 1887 and 1891:

'My mind began drifting vaguely towards the doctrine of "the mask" which convinced me that ever-passionate man... is, as it were, linked with another age historical or imaginary, where he alone finds images that rouse his energy.' (Ibid.)

Now, while these symbolic analogues of Yeats are often arbitrary, unclear, and even absurd, they must be regarded as the efforts of a rich but unsophisticated mind to work out an ethos and a psychology that would order its multiple and perplexing experience. Oddly enough, Yeats was sufficiently given over to a long habit of introspection about his own thought-processes to be aware of this. He had written to his father just before his marriage in 1917 that he was working out a religious

system which was helping his verse by giving him a 'framework of patterns'. And the profound intellectual therapy of this effort—'getting the disorder of one's mind in order'—Yeats put as co-evalent with 'the real impulse to create'. (Ibid. 79-80)

The opening injunction of 'The Gyres' is unambiguous:

The gyres! the gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth;
Things thought too long can be no longer thought.

The gyres, a cosmic phenomenon, are pointed to as event, much as one would call attention to a comet trailing the sky. It is Old Rocky Face who is enjoined to watch. Old Rocky Face is the poet, wearing a very transparent mask. It is he, Yeats, who is old, rocky; it is he, Yeats (stanza two), who is the 'lover of horses and women'¹ and not Shelley's Jew. And the voice that is calling Rocky Face is that 'antithetical self', the poet in his other, prophetic guise. This conclusion is supported by the many poems of the last phase written in the form of an interior dialogue. 'The Man and the Echo', which we shall study as a companion piece to this poem, employs an objective dialogue structure; the voice of 'The Gyres' is a single one which, by a narrative rhetoric, talks for the suppressed aspect of the self here called 'Old Rocky Face'. (Ibid. 80)

By the time Yeats comes to write 'The Gyres', it is himself he sees as the stony face. In a draft of the latter poem which he enclosed in a note to Dorothy Wellesley, the Man addresses the Echo as 'O rocky void'. In the printed version it becomes—and the capitals are significant—'O Rocky Voice'. This is the poet addressing his antiself, Echo. 'Rocky Face' in 'The Gyres' is the identical element in his personality, but deprived of his speaking voice. (Ibid. 80-81)

The pervasiveness of the tower symbol in the poetry of the twenties – significantly, the first decade of his marriage – when Yeats appeared to be at last achieving a relatively outward adjustment, is to be contrasted with the epithets of the thirties, the Rocky Voices, and the Rocky Faces. The conclusion is inevitable and almost every one of the 'Last Poems' tends to urge it: the closing years of his life threw Yeats back upon his introspective habit with an additional intensity possibly effected by the temporary revitalization of sexuality. Thus, it was with a more troubled consciousness of the complexity of this process of 'the mind looking inward upon itself that these poems were written. They were, moreover, a description of the action of this process itself. The fiction of 'The Gyres', then, is the fiction of the split person. And the ecstatic voice which urges Old Rocky Face to 'look forth' is the voice of Yeats's other self. (Ibid. 81)

'A greater, a more gracious time has gone' represents a conclusion Yeats had reached at as far back as 1909 when he had written in his diary that to oppose the new ill-breeding of Ireland, 'I can set up a secondary or interior personality, created out of the tradition of myself and this personality (alas, only possible to me in my writing) must be always gracious and simple...'. What qualities he attached to these adjectives is further intimated when he added 'A great lady is as simple as a good poet'. (Ibid. 83)

In 'The Gyres' Yeats is in effect abandoning personal responsibility for making a reality of such graciousness '... I sighed, but not again'; and putting all the intensity of his wilful old heart into the gyres, those principles of the revolutions of cultures which would restore from the sepulchre certain aspects of the past which he had always connected with 'graciousness'. But in the twenties, let us say, Yeats would have assigned more power to the men of action, the 'lovers of horses and of women', whom he still held dear. Now, he sees them in the service of the gyrating cones of history and as auxiliary forces which, together with these cyclic processes, will contrive a return to the conditions he requires for 'Unity of Being'. (Ibid. 84)

Another mark of the subtlety of the Yeatsian vocabulary is to be seen in the use of 'noble' in this same stanza. An overworked adjective in nineteenth-century poetry, it is entirely unobjectionable here because used as a noun. In this archaic sense it operates as co-evalent with 'workman' and 'saint' and seems to restore an original moral lustre to the persons it denotes, a lustre which we should not so readily credit to the 'nobility'. (Ibid.)

By the time we reach the 'What matter?' of the last stanza, the phrase has become so charged with

scorn and derision that it forces an answer. In this truly apocalyptic passage Rocky Face is told that all the things he values will 'run on that unfashionable gyre again'. 'The dark betwixt the polecat and the owl' is the source from which the new-old order will spring.⁵ It is typical of Yeats's method that he saw no contradiction between the 'irrational streams of blood' as defiling earth and man, and the same instinctual sources ('rich, dark nothing') as generating the new cycle of fulfilment. (Ibid.)

It is the word 'unfashionable' in the last line of the poem which suggests both irony and self-criticism. For Yeats must have known that his mystical 'gyres' were 'unfashionable'—and in a double sense. They were intellectually unfashionable as an explanation of the movements of cultures; this particular gyre was politically unfashionable in a scientific, democratic society. For his motive, 'unfashionable' is a magnificent choice, the only sophisticated word in the whole poem, and by its prose quality setting the poem in time and robbing it a little of its gnomic intensity. Thus, it is really an expository shortcut and, while helpful, reduces rather than heightens the spontaneity of the prophecy. That this was a deliberately contrived effect I have no doubt. For Yeats would be the first to know that we have not now the ears with which to hear a 'pure' prophetic intonation. (Ibid. 84-85)

'Under Ben Bulben' includes many of the major themes of Yeats's life and verse, a formidable list; the wisdom of the occult; the magical Sidhe of Ben Bulben; the eternities of race and soul; the vitality of conflict; the ordered tradition of the arts; the ability of the artist to bring the soul of man to God; the confusions of the modern world; the virtues of the Irish aristocrat and peasant; the horse as a symbol of nobility; the belief in the immortality of the soul and therefore the validity of an unsentimental attitude towards death. (Malins 104)

The tone is set by prominent pontifical imperatives in sections I, II, IV and V. The start of section VI is in quiet contrast until, suddenly, the epitaph, cut 'at his command' includes two further imperatives. The contrasting moods, the diverse subject matter, changing from splendour to levity, give the poem a wildness which Yeats uses deliberately to avoid compassion or yearning. (Ibid.)

It is written in couplets with a loose four-stresses to a line – a rare form for Yeats. Much of the verse is uneven in quality; from the doggerel of

Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top.
or the freakish humour of
Michael Angelo left a proof
On the Sistine Chapel roof,
Where but half-awakened
Adam Can disturb globe-trotting
Madam Till her bowels are in heat,
Proof that there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind:

The fourth line of the above sounds more effective if the final 'g' is silent in 'globe-trotting', for Yeats as an Irishman would have pronounced it in this way. Compare those lines with the sublimity of form and content in

Where everything that meets the eye,
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,
Resemble forms that are or seem
When sleepers wake and yet still dream. (Ibid.)

The opening verse of the poem is difficult and not made easier by eccentric syntax. The confusion lies in the repetition of the word 'spoke' which, to make sense, must have 'the sages' as its subject both times. The allusions are not familiar either. Lake Mareotis (today called El Maryat and situated at the rear of Alexandria) was famous in ancient times for the temple to Osiris-Horus, the god-man who gave to worshippers those numinous emotions which enabled them to identify themselves with the god. The sages, the priests of Osiris, are the inheritors, therefore, of occult wisdom. Then, in

line three of 'Under Ben Bulben', follows the reference to Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas' which has a misleading title as she was not really a witch, as one currently thinks of one, but a fay, naiad, or wizard-lady; in fact, a symbol of the soul, possessing superhuman and magical powers not used for evil, who, during the poem, which is a description of an archetypal journey, visits Lake Mareotis. Shelley tells us not to 'unveil' the Witch from her light, flowing garments, by which he means we should not investigate the story in the cold light of reason and intellect. However, one must add that she lived in a cave, and, Yeats says, 'Shelley could hardly have thought of any cave as a symbol without thinking of Plato's cave that was the world'; and, as Homer also says, caves are symbols of 'invisible power, because caves are obscure and dark, so the essence of all these powers is occult'. In Shelley's poem, Yeats found (when he read it forty years before writing 'Under Ben Bulben') the traditional details and beliefs of Platonic philosophy, including the immortality of the soul. (Ibid. 104-5)

So from the Fay to the Sidhe, the 'pale, long-visaged' horsemen of Ben Bulben, is not such a leap as it seems. What the heroic men and women who gallop through the mists of Ben Bulben stand for, when combined with the wisdom of the Mareotic Lake, is then amplified in the next section of the poem. (Ibid. 105)

'Man stands between two eternities, that of his family and that of his soul', Yeats once wrote to Lady Gerald Wellesley. In this poem, family becomes country (Ireland) and its traditional folk-wisdom, and the soul implies the occult tradition. One can see, therefore, the dualism of the first two verses of the poem here drawn together in this philosophic truth, and understand the two dominant influences in Yeats's writing. This is abruptly followed in the poem by the violence ill death from a rifle – a hint of what is to come in section in, but compensated for by the final couplet of II declaring the immortality of the human spirit and the unreality of death. (Ibid. 105-6) The gravediggers

... but thrust their buried men

Back in the human mind again.

John Mitchel (1815-75), with the Young Irelanders, endeavoured in free Ireland from the political mismanagement of the English Parliament. After an abortive insurrection at about the time of the Great Famine (1845) he was tried, transported and put in jail, where he wrote a journal containing the words quoted, but later returned to become an M.P. He was, therefore, one of that long succession of Irishmen, reaching into our own times, who believe that fulfilment of an end can be achieved only by violent methods. At this point, Yeats has evidently chosen to forget his dislike of Maud Gonne's volcanic passions in politics, and to adopt his anti-mask of the soldier, which he here wears. The unsolved question with reference to the word 'laugh' is whether the fighting-mad man is laughing with or at people, and I suspect it is the latter. (Ibid. 106)

In section IV we have an abbreviated history of European culture is seen through Yeats's somewhat limited vision. But he does rightly see the perfection of Phidias, who was the greatest sculptor in fifth-century Athens, responsible for the ornaments of the Parthenon and the statue of Zeus at Olympus. Also Yeats appreciates the perfection of *quattrocento* (fifteenth-century) Renaissance art in Michelangelo (or 'Michael Angelo' in the mongrel, anglicized spelling which he uses). Apart from being sculptor, draughtsman and architect, Michelangelo's frescoes on the vaulted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican are the finest work of their kind. The panel to which Yeats refers depicts God in majestic flight sweeping through the air, awakening a naked Adam stretched on the earth, and endowing him with life by touching him with the point of His finger. Both Phidias and Michelangelo attained perfection through measurement, order and craftsmanship, a theme enlarged on in 'The Statues' (*CP*, p.375). After Yeats had seen the Sistine Chapel in February 1925 he was obsessed by the work of Michelangelo, taking home many large photographs of the frescoes. Poet and sculptor are now ordered, in 'Under Ben Bulben', to work as Phidias and Michelangelo did, thus translating a vision of perfection, bringing the soul of man to God. As Goethe said, and Yeats may well have read his words although he did not admire his work, 'Phidias created tranquil Divinities; Michelangelo suffering Heroes'. (Ibid.)

Then, as the gyres run on, we are hurried through the centuries to Yeats's favourite artists—a

strange quartet at first sight, but all painters of types of pastoral, visionary landscapes, which had influenced and enthralled him since as a young man he saw Turner's 'The golden bough'. Richard Wilson (1713-82), much influenced after a journey to Italy, by the romantic Italian landscapes of Claude Lorraine (1600-82); Edward Calvert and Samuel Palmer, English painters at the beginning of the nineteenth-century who as young men knew Blake, but it is their later romantic, pastoral etchings and engravings, which Yeats owned and is here remembering. Yeats's interests did not extend to any later artists, when 'confusion fell upon our thought'. (Ibid. 106-7)

Section V starts with orders to Irish poets to 'sing' (repeated three times) of whatever is well made, of the peasants and aristocracy of the past, of the 'indomitable Irishry', and also of an odd lot of people including some whom Yeats can rarely have met, and to scorn 'the sort now growing up', by which he presumably means the middle-class makers of modern Ireland. It is a strangely unacceptable list, even allowing for Yeats's anti-mask. (Ibid. 107)

Section vi has the simplicity of a bare statement, giving reasons for being buried at Drumcliffe; a quiet lyric in contrast with the bombastic rhetoric of the orders given to the poets in the previous section. (Ibid. 107)

What the epitaph means and to whom it is addressed is anybody's guess. It has been much discussed, sometimes receiving interpretations bordering on the fantastic. For example, Virginia Moore calls the horse a symbol of the libido, and then says she thinks it was not a horse, but a unicorn. However, one may well ask, is the horseman one of the galloping sidhe? Is he Yeats's ghost? Is he any passing rider? I take it as having multiple meaning, expressing a wish for cold, dispassionate reaction as the horseman looks at death and passes by. Conventionally, in the pastoral sentiment followed since Virgil's time, the footsore traveller (not usually a horseman), whoever he is, when viewing a tomb has been told to pause or stop – 'Siste Viator' – then to consider his own mortality, remembering that as the dead man is, so will he be. In composing his epitaph, the line 'Draw rein, draw breath' was erased in an earlier draft by Yeats. This line surely would have implied that the horseman was pausing, for drawing rein means this in equestrian terms. As it now is, in the final version, the horseman is at once told to pass by. It is similar in spirit, as has been pointed out, to Swift's epitaph, which Yeats much admired; here the traveller is told to go and imitate Swift if he dare. Yeats's epitaph being so short, little pause would be required even to read it. The words look better on the printed page than on his tombstone, though the letters are well cut, because, for some reason best known to himself, the stonemason carved capitals for the initial letter of 'eye', 'life' and 'death'. This was absurd, as obviously Yeats wished to play all sentiment down, not to exalt the inscription, but to see life and death coldly. (Ibid. 107-109)

V. In Conclusion

It is clear that despite Yeats's unorthodox doctrines and his sometime attachment occultism, he was a poet who sought the unity of both body and soul for the better of the two, although towards his later years he sought freedom from the old, sick body which had become a liability through mystical immortality through unity with art. His style shows a development and a rarely exhibited consciousness, and he was devoted to revising his works. He says,

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake. (Holdeman 52)

It seemed that he revised his poetic output because it was he himself enshrined there. He is a landmark in modern English poetry, and his words will echo long in among Irish reeds.

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