A STUDY OF THEMES AND MAJOR SYMBOLS
IN THE LATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

ABSTRACT
SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

By
FARHEEN AFZAL

Under the supervision of
Dr. RASHMI ATTRI
(Associate Professor)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY
ALIGARH (INDIA)
2016
Abstract

The thesis will embark on a study of W.B. Yeats’ poetry in order to explore themes and major symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. The thesis deals with the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. The Volumes of poetry discussed in this thesis are from *The Wild Swans at Coole* to *The Last Poems*. The thesis also, evaluates the themes in the poems as well as symbols used in the poems from each Volume of poetry. All the eight Volumes of poetry from *The Wild Swans at Coole* to *The Last Poems* are discussed in this thesis. All the Volumes of poetry have been examined at the levels of poetic devices, themes, symbols, thematic concern, style, form, and Content. In 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The poetry of Yeats has been greatly influenced by Spenser, Blake, Shelley and the Pre-Raphaelites. His interest in varied subjects makes his poetry interesting and intriguing. The approach that Yeats has to both Science and Religion is unorthodox and gets united at the level of magic. Keeping in mind the development of his poetic style, his works can be divided into four phases. The young Yeats started writing in the tradition of the Pre-Raphaelites and consequently his early style is ornate and has a dream-like atmosphere. But his style gets altered and the second phase is characterized by his adopting the idiom of common speech. The third phase is marked by the development of private symbols and is inspired by his interest in theosophy, psychical phenomenon and mysticism in general. In the final phase of Yeats’ career his style attains greater austerity and there is remarkable precision in the use of language.

Irish legends, folklore, myths, politics, theosophy, psychical phenomenon, mysticism all provide material for his poetry which is rich in the use of themes and
symbols. The private symbols developed by Yeats give depth to his work. Yeats’ symbolic system displays the principle of conflict in the life of the individual as well as in that of human civilization.

The first chapter begins with an Introduction to the poetry of W.B. Yeats. An attempt has been made to trace the roots of poetry and some autobiographical elements are also, discussed in this chapter. The Introduction traces Yeats’ life from his childhood till his death.

The second chapter entitled *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *The Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) discusses and examines themes and symbols in these two Volumes of poetry. Theme of death is discussed in the elegies present in Wild Swans. Poems like *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death* and *Shepherd and Goatherd*. The present study further aims at observing points of political concern and theme of War as used in poems *Easter 1916*, *On a Political Prisoner*. Theme of Love is shown in the poems, as *Solomon to Sheba* and *Solomon and the Witch*. The Title poem of *The Wild Swans At Coole* the symbol of Swan as symbolised by Maud Gonne is used. Major Robert Gregory symbolises Renaissance man and a man of action with a lonely impulse. Love lyrics such as *Solomon and the Witch* and *Solomon and Sheba* is also seen in these Volume where Love is symbolised in various aspects. *Second Coming* symbolizes Civilization.

The third chapter of the thesis deals with the symbols and themes used by the poet in *The Tower* Volume of 1928. This is the richest Volume of his poetry. He reached almost the submit of his creative excellence. Yeats saw the tower as a universal symbol. The title poem *The Tower* discusses it. Symbol of Helen of Troy
which represents Maud Gonne is shown in the poem *Leda and the swan*. Theme of war and death is shown in poems like *Meditations in Time of Civil War* and *Nineteen hundred and Nineteen*. These two poems on War also represent the political themes and themes of destruction. *The Meditation in Time of Civil War* in this poem he transforms violence into a powerful vision that symbolises the blood dimmed tide. The Dance symbol is used in the poem *Among School Children*. *Sailing to Byzantium* discusses other major symbols in this chapter. Unrequited lust and Danger is another theme used in this Volume. Byzantium is used as a symbol. Cathedral gong symbolizes the force and power of the spiritual world. Theme of life or Death in life is discussed in this poem.

The fourth chapter analyses Yeats’ another Volumes of poetry namely *The winding stair and Other Poems* published in 1933. *Words for Music Perhaps* and *A Woman young and Old*. *Words for Music Perhaps* with its Crazy Jane and Old Tom the Lunatic showed a new aspect of Yeats’ poetry. Theme of death is discussed in the poem *In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz* and *Death. A Woman Young and Old* which consists of eleven poems is also discussed in this chapter. The heart of the poems of Volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* is Byzantium poem which discusses major symbols like Golden Bird and other symbols. Tower symbol is also used in this Volume. *Blood and the Moon* is another poem in the Volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* which discusses Burke, Swift as the symbols of glorious Ireland. In poem *Veronica’s Napkin* Berenice’s Hair is used as a symbol.

The fifth chapter deals with another two Volumes of poetry namely, *A Full Moon In March* (1935) and *The Last Poems* (1936-39). The last phase shows that
the antinomy between the real and the ideal, between the body and the Soul, between the self and the anti self, between the recluse and the man of action, is not really resolved, but there is an attempt at transcendence with a cold, almost stoic detachment. *The Gyres* is one of the basic symbols in Yeats’ poetry which is discussed in the poem *The Gyres*. Theme of old age and death are used in many poems of these two Volumes. *Parnell’s Funeral* discusses death of Parnell as well as a political scenario of that period is also shown in this poem. *Supernatural Songs* which consists of twelve poems is also included in the Volume *A Full Moon In March*. These Songs are a sequence of twelve poems divided between sexually saturated mystical philosophizing and a more straightforward lyricism. In *The Last Poems*, *Cuchulian Conformed* Cuchulian symbolizes loneliness, exaltation and defeat. In this same Volume *The Last Poems*, *Under Ben Bulben* horsemanship as a unifying symbol. The role of the legendary figures with the exception of Cuchulian was handed over to such heroes as Parnell who receives ample treatment in *Parnell’s Funeral* and other two poems of *The Last Poems*, which are dedicated to Parnell are *Parnell* and *Come Gather Round Me Parnellites*.

The sixth chapter assimilates the observations of preceding chapters and binds these into a comprehensive whole in order to arrive at a definite Conclusion about the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. Themes and symbols used by Yeats in the last eight Volumes of poetry.

An extensive volume of research has been carried out on the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. The majority of these works focuses on the themes and major symbols which Yeats’ uses in his later poetry. This thesis explores his concern for sex, love, marriage, war, death, political issues and human relationships all are discussed in his
poems at full length. Yeats’ with his innovative ability to create a fine symbolic system for his poetry. His poetry is very remarkable not only from Socio-political but emotional as well as psychological point of view.

The last phase shows the completion of a pattern into which many different threads have been woven, but prevailing imprecision is not one of harmony and fulfillment. The tone is intensely tragic and defiant gaiety proves a mask worn in disappointment.

This thesis is a humble attempt to add a new dimension to the study of themes and major symbols in the later poetry of W.B.Yeats.
A STUDY OF THEMES AND MAJOR SYMBOLS
IN THE LATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

THESIS
SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

By
FARHEEN AFZAL

Under the supervision of
Dr. RASHMI ATTRI
(Associate Professor)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY
ALIGARH (INDIA)
2016
Dedicated

to

My Parents
(Syed Afzal Ali and Mrs. Aftab Zaidi)

&

Grand Parents
(Syed Mukhtar Ahmad and Syeda Sarwari Begum)

This thesis is many ways more theirs than mine
Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, “A Study of Themes and Major Symbols in the Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats”, submitted by Farheen Afzal for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in English, is an independent and original piece of research work carried out under my supervision. This research work has not been submitted, in part or full, to any university/institution for any degree.

(Dr. Rashmi Attri)
Supervisor
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my deepest thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Rashmi Attri, for guiding and encouraging me right from the beginning of the project up to the period of giving this dissertation its final shape. I thank Dr. Samina Khan and Dr. Mohammad Asim Siddiqui for their valuable suggestions from time to time. I express my gratitude to Dr. Sami Rafiq and Dr. Shehla Gauri for their affectionate support and encouragement. I am grateful to the chairperson of the department, Prof. Seemin Hasan for her support and cooperation.

It is because of the initial assistance of my senior and cousins, Dr. Javed Ahmad Lone, Dr. Sadaqat Ali, Dr. Nida Zaidi and Dr. Yusra Zaidi that I could begin my work in good mood. It is also important here to mention the names of my friends, Colleagues and batch mates, Dr. Adeena Hasan, Dr. Mohd. Yusuf Ansari, and Smrity Sharma for their companionship, support and encouragement.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the patience and constant support given to me by my husband Mohd. Danish. I would also, like to thank my Mother-in-Law Mrs. Neelofar Hamidi. My thanks are due to all my teachers for their constant encouragement. I also, wish to thank the members of the staff of Maulana Azad Library, A.M.U. Aligarh. And Seminar Library, Department of English, A.M.U., Aligarh for their cooperation and assistance.

My profound gratitude is due to my parents, my Father Syed Afzal Ali, and my Mother Aftab Zaidi and my Grandparents my grandfather Syed Mukhtar Ahmad and my grandmother Syeda Sarwari Begum. But for whose loving encouragement and help the present study would not have been seen the light of the day.

I am thankful to my office workers M. Suhail Ishaq, Aqeel Ahmad and Seminar Librarian Mr. Parvez Rafi Khan for helping me. I thank once more Smrity Sharma and Dr. Nida, for proofreading my thesis.

Mrs. Farheen Afzal
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One</th>
<th>1-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Two</th>
<th>21-62</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Wild Swans at Coole</em> and <em>Michael Robartes and the Dancer</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Three</th>
<th>63-96</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Tower</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four</th>
<th>97-126</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Winding stair and Other Poems, Words for Music</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Perhaps</em> and <em>A woman Young and Old</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five</th>
<th>127-152</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A Full Moon in March</em> and <em>The Last Poems</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Six</th>
<th>153-164</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliography</th>
<th>165-167</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One

Introduction

William Butler Yeats was born on 13 June 1865 at Sligo in Sandy Mount, Ireland as the first child of John Butler Yeats and Susan Mary Pollex Fen. His father was a successful barrister at that time, while his mother stayed at home to look after the new born baby. Susan Pollex Fen came from a wealthy Anglo Irish family who owned a prosperous milling and shipping business in County Sligo. Thus, his early childhood was spent in the midst of the rich and plentiful flora and fauna of the County of Sligo. Yeats’s own quiet shy temperament seemed to correspond to the peaceful, kind and generous surroundings where nature was endowed with all the tendencies and soothing pleasures of an uncontaminated existence.

During 1868 the Yeats’s shifted to London and remained there for seven years. Although many more such trips were made to London, but Yeats never lost touch with Sligo. The children thought of Sligo as their home, rather than London. The holiday in Sligo were filled with boating, fishing and exploring the lush green woods. Yeats would explore the hills of Howth with a green net slung across his shoulder. He had a Wordsworthian interest in the luxuriant manifestations of nature and very often, took pleasure in discovering flowers and insects and could spend whole day in the hill paths and glades without the glimpse of a human face. It was that his soul was fashioned.

There peasant and squire alike live in an old world, rich in folk-lore and folk song. The boy’s imagination entered fairy land, and he was bewitched for life into a longing for magic. From the very soil of ancient Fire he drank the dream of the noble and the beggar man and forever after the modern world seemed to him vulgar, and not real in any essential way. (Collins 14)
These close contacts with nature had a formative influence on young Yeats's mind. Nature was full of adventure and mystery for Yeats and it supplied the images and symbols of his earliest poems. While for Wordsworth, Nature was a teacher and companion that brought comforting effects, Nature to Yeats was the threshold of primitive folk-lore and the stronghold of fairies and supernatural beings. Getting away from the rich, imaginative and even wild world of nature and being confined to the restricting and rigorous discipline of school life must have proved to be a shock and an unnatural change to Yeats's gentle and impressionable mind. His love for the world of nature and the world of fairies menaced by the pull of reality of every day existence must have made him very unhappy indeed. (Yeats, Autobiographies 5-6)

His formal education began under his aunts, who because of his engrossment in his own thoughts, had supposed that he has been lacking in intelligence. But the truth was that he was not deficient in intelligence which his aunts had observed in him, because of his withdrawal from the world of reality. In fact, his mind had an obsessive pre-occupation with the world of fantasy and dreams which, of necessity, required of him to be a recluse and a lover of solitude. This dream world was connected with the folk-lore with which the woods and glens were associated. It was on account of his pre-occupation with dreams that Yeats did not have a pleasant experience of his school life. His gentle disposition as a dreamer did not find a congenial environment in school. In Sligo, he went to Dame school where he felt that he did not have much to gain.

Later on, when the family moved to London Yeats was admitted to a Day school, Godolphin Hammersmith. His experience in this school was more disappointing than the one in Sligo. At Sligo at least he had the satisfaction of being in contact with nature. Yeats, being gentle in disposition had to face a lot of
harassment from his peers. He finally befriended one of the finest athletes of the school, Cyril Vesey. Besides, being his friend and protector, Cyril Vesey also, shared Yeats’s love for the living world of nature, the woods, and the insects. Perhaps the interests that the two pursued compensated in some way for the constricting and suffocating effect the school discipline had on Yeats’ young mind.

In 1881, Yeats joined the High School at Harcourt Street. Here, unlike the Godolphin there was no harassment and Yeats could at last have the time and leisure he had wanted up to this time we find that Yeats’s only obsession was with Entomology and he was not particularly bright in literature. He finished school in 1883 and regretted that his father had sent him there. He attributed his being poor in literature (Greek and Latin) to his not having much time for it. He believed that, had his father kept him at home and tutored him in Greek and Latin, he would not have to approach the classics through poor translations. His father, in pursuance of his belief that a little training in Art is a must for every young man, put Yeats to attend classes at Metropolitan school of Art in Kildare street London. But it proved to be a dissatisfying experience for Yeats, for he realized that his real interest was not in Art but in the classics and poetry.

The dreamy atmosphere of Yeats early poems and the passionate intensity of the later poems owe much to the influences of his early life. Among his earliest influences the most significant was that of his Grandfather, William Pollex Fen. Yeats’s response to his grandfather was that of adoration mixed with awe. He looked up to him as a God and always nourished in his mind, paradoxically a feeling of distance as well as nearness. At a later stage in his life Yeats has recalled his grandfather’s image like this: “He had a violent temper and kept a hatchet at his
bedside for burglars and would knock a man down instead of going to the law.” (Yeats, *Autobiographies*)

Yeats’s delight in passionate men manifested in his poems and plays must have had its origin in the memory of his grandfather. The domineering personality of William Pollexfen and his extraordinary reticence combined with the intensity of living naturally affected the young Yeats’s mind. His grandfather’s influence on his mind was primarily emotional; his father John Yeats’s influence was intellectual and progressive. Yeats inherited his attitude towards personality largely from his father. Both father and son believed that personality was not merely the individual’s complex of distinct external characteristics and mannerisms but a mass of instincts, appetites, longings and intuitions, resting on the firm basis of five senses.

Like his father, Yeats believed that emotion and intellect had a creative purpose rather than a dead appendage to man. Servile devotion to an abstract intellectual principle would destroy the human soul just as effectively as servile religious adherence destroys the mind. Yeats abided by his father’s principles that the artist must be encouraged to change his intellectual convictions from day to day so long as he maintains the integrity of the soul. The integrity of the soul for Yeats meant probably was an unswerving devotion towards Irish nationalism. Yeats’s poetic mission was actually two fold in the way of freeing the soul from the fetters of religious dogma and cultivating the imagination to let it cross the boundaries of restrictive abstract intellectual principles. This is perhaps one of the reasons for which modern critics have called him “The Last Romantic.”

As his art matured Yeats became more and more convinced that art is the concrete expression of personal experience and that one of the smaller objectives of poetry is the beauty of speech. As late as 1899, Yeats still believed that the true course
was to ‘liberate the arts from their age and from life’. (Collins17) Poetry began to be not just a criticism or confirmation of life it became a revelation of a hidden life. Here, it is important to note that Yeats’s father also, introduced him to the imaginative literature (during his school days) by reading aloud to him Scott and Macaulay.

He also absorbed Balzac, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and the pre – Raphaelites, Darwin, Wallace, Huxley and Haeckel. His father had a collection of literary works in his personal library from which he also, introduced him to History and Geology subjects that became a passion with Yeats during early youth. Yeats complained that as a young boy he had been deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom he detested, of the simple minded religion of his childhood. This had driven him to make a new religion out of Irish myth and poetry. (Yeats, Autobiographies 14)

Other influences during Yeats’s early life were relatively minor as compared to those of his father’s and grandfather’s. These influences were related to a multitude of Sligo relatives Pollex Fen and Middleton cousins. Among his Sligo relatives was a Middleton cousin Henry Middleton, who inspired the character of John Sherman in a novelette by the same name published early in Yeats career. Henry Middleton become a noted eccentric later on, but Yeats’s relations with him never faded out. Another major and lasting influence during Yeats’s early youth was that of George Russell, known as A.E. Yeats met him while he was in the Art school in London. A.E. was a poet and mystic, besides being an artist. He sketched his religious inspirations instead of imitating the models. Yeats and Russell wrote in rivalry and as a result contributed richly to each other’s literary genius. It is well known that A.E. was a close collaborator with him in the establishment and growth of Abbey Theatre.

In 1885, Yeats became the co-founder of the Dublin Hermetic Order. 1885 was an important year, in Yeats’s early life marking the first publication, in the ‘Dublin
University Review’ of his poetry and the beginning of his interest in occultism. In 1885 Yeats met John O’Leary a famous patriot who had returned to Ireland after twenty years of imprisonment and exile for revolutionary nationalistic activities. O’Leary had a keen enthusiasm for Irish books, music and ballads, and he encouraged young writers to adopt Irish subjects, Yeats, who had preferred more romantic settings and themes, soon took O’Leary’s advice, producing many poems based on Irish legends, Irish folklore and Irish ballads and songs. O’Leary’s preoccupations with the literary revival, however, brought a new zest into his writings. O’Leary, who died in 1907, had become for Yeats a kind of symbol of national integrity. He stood high in the councils of the Fenian Brotherhood and for a time Yeats shared lodgings with him. In 1887, Yeats was working at the British Museum on an edition of Irish fairy and folktales. He genuinely believed in the existence of all the supernatural beings. He believed also, that these beings were within the reach of humanity on primitive plane civilized humanity could neither see nor comprehend these supernatural beings. He himself has said in his essay The Celtic Element in Literature that once all people in the world believed that trees were divine and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among shadows. “They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a God thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels.” (Yeats, Essays and Introductions174)

His interest in folklore shows that he was in search of something beyond the established realm of poetic reality. His was a concrete purpose, to build up a new poetic tradition –His search for some philosophical idea, some tradition of belief older than the church, took him wherever his fancy led. Eastern philosophy and religion had a vague and distant lure. He was attempting to create a new religion, one of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from
their first expression. (Menon 12) Yeats believed that those imaginary beings were created out of the deepest instinct of man to be his measure and his norm. For Yeats they became a medium to express what was nearest to the truth.

In 1894, Yeats went to Paris and saw Viller’s Axel; he also met Bergson and Verlaine. Axel became for sometime his model and Villiers’ saying, ‘As for living, our servants will do that for us was used as an epigraph for ‘the secret rose’. The same year Yeats met in Lissadell the poetess Eva Gore Booth and also, Constance Gore Booth, who later played a leading role in the Irish literary movement, Yeats had discovered some literary talent in her and had become her mentor.

He came in contact with Walter Pater and Mohini Chatterji. Their philosophies were strong influences which lasted throughout his life. But somehow, the two opposing ideologies mitigated in Yeats’s personality. Pater accepted the dream world as real while Mohini Chatterji’s Samkaric abstraction rejected the objective reality as merely a dream world.

It was on January 30th, 1889 that he met Maud Gonne, the fiery radical nationalist and an Irish revolutionary. Charles Stuart Parnell, had died and Yeats met Maud Gonne on her way to the funeral, dressed in black and profoundly moved Yeats’s attitude towards Maud Gonne had a great deal to do with the state of mind that generate his early poetry. She becomes symbol of beauty; Yeats became increasingly passionate about her who became his muse and source of unrequited love. He proposed to her at least three times, in 1899, 1900 and 1901 and was rejected each time. He dedicated his early love poetry to Maud Gonne, Rose and Helen of Troy are adequate symbols for her, for like Helen Maud Gonne is beyond praise or comment. His love for Maud Gonne has been frustrated by her revolutionary zeal.
Maud Gonne the “Helen” and “Phoenix” of his poems was also a poetic symbol of Ireland.

In 1903, Maud Gonne married Major John MacBride, an exiled Irish patriot and Irish revolutionary. Yeats’ bitterness is apparent in many poems after the event, though his rejection in 1899 had left its mark. The anger against MacBride flared up again in *Responsibilities*. After two years in 1905, Maud Gonne separated from MacBride and Yeats again proposed her. In 1916, he once again became a staunch exponent of the Nationalist cause inspired by the Easter Rising, an unsuccessful six-day armed rebellion of Irish republicans against the British in Dublin. MacBride separated from Maud Gonne participated in the rebellion and was executed afterward. Yeats reacted by writing *Easter 1916*.

After MacBride’s death, Yeats visited Gonne in France, and for the final time, asked her for the marriage she declined, having once again become more interested in radical nationalism than in the role of poet’s wife. His love for her, and its pain, became a persistent feature of his poetry. Later, however, in 1917 he again proposed to Maud Gonne’s step daughter Iseult Gonne and she also rejected him.

On October 21, 1921, he married Georgie Hyde Lees, a 24 year old English woman he knew through Olivia Shakespeare’s social circle and Golden Dawn. Only four days after the wedding he came to know that his bride produced ‘automatic writing’ this together with a mass of memories of earlier occult investigation and continuous and excited reading in history and its byways’ became the raw material of *A Vision* (1925). *A Vision* is an unusual philosophical work about mysticism and his bizarre concept of history. The book helped to explain the obscure symbolism of his later works. It presented the dualities often expressed in his later poetry.
According to C.M. Bowra, Yeats in his symbolism combined a mood of other worldliness derived from Celtic legends with an external descriptive manner that recalls William Morris, and to a less extent Keats. Through his friend Arthur Symons, Yeats met Mallarme and through Symons’ translations he came to know something of symbolism and its aims. To Symons, the propagandist of Symbolism in England, Yeats was “the Chief Representative of that movement in our country”. (Bowra 184). Encouraged by this enthusiasm and feeling that he was in the only movement that was “saying new things,” Yeats adapted what he conceived to be Mallarme’s doctrine to suit his own views and wrote poetry accordingly. It is clear that he had discovered an untouched domain of ideas for his poetry, but what gave form to his poetry was the influence of the symbolist movement. It was through Arthur Symons that Yeats came in contact with this movement. The Symbolist Movement called for a new technique of expression, and a new style. Yeats’s own theories of symbolism were derived almost wholly from, those of Symons. (184)

In two essays, Symbolism in painting and the symbolism of poetry, Yeats willingly accept the view that symbols are essential to poetry and lays down his general principles.

All Art that is not mere story-telling or mere portraiture in symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which medieval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles in complex colours’ and forms, a part of the Divine essence.

Yeats does not regard poetry as complete in itself, with its own ritual and its own meaning. He sees it as part of a larger experience, as a means of communication
with the spiritual world which lies behind the visible. For him the poet is almost: a medium, an interpreter of the unseen, and his poetry is the record of the revelations is given to him. Yeats is the man who had been brought up among folk tales and magical legends was curiously confirmed in his beliefs when he met the new theories from France. They supplied him with reasons for his own view of art and encouraged him to pursue the hieratic manner which he desired.

Yeats has some original remarks about the use of symbol he distinguishes as Mallarme did not, between two kinds of symbolism, the symbolism of sounds and the symbolism of ideas. The first class contains emotional symbols:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions, and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocation and yet is one emotion. (Bowra 185)

This passage is, in spite of its transcendental phrasing, of great importance in Yeats poetry.

Memory becomes a kind of reservoir, not merely of the poet’s own experiences in the past, but ultimately of all human thought and experience; since this lives on and can be called down, as it were, into present by dream, vision, or image; which in their turn can be definitely cultivated. The emotions
are ‘indefinable and yet precise’ which is the highest art of the symbolist poet, and which he achieved in the great period and after. The phase of Celtic symbolism is what Blake called ‘a dark mystery’; it lightens and clears until he relies on a few dominant images, closely linked to his own life, and established by repetition. It is through symbols that Yeats thinks; for the symbol becomes the means by which the reality which is no more than guessed at can be indicated and perhaps defined, though, the symbol he can satisfy his instinct for the dramatic moment, the crystallization of the historical element in a dramatic irrational world. (Henn123)

Yeats limits the use of symbols to the expression of emotions but Yeats, closeness to ordinary life despite is magical airs isolate the emotions as a special field for symbol. The second class of symbols is that of ideas and about this Yeats says: As pointed out by C.M. Bowra,

There are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, for ideas mingled with emotions … If I say “white” or “purple” in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I bring them into the same sentence with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity or sovereignty. Furthermore, innumerable meanings, which are held to “white” or to “purple” by bonds of subtle suggestion, alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep.
casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on
what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy
violence. (Bowra186)

Yeats recognizes that works call up associations, and though he has his own
opinion of what such a process implies; his account of it is true to experience. Yeats
does not go so far, he maintains that a symbol may stand for an idea and play a
corresponding part in poetry. At the outset he rejects the drastic view which excludes
as much thought as possible from verse.

Yeats has his vision of what this new poetry will be. It will be marked by a
return to imagination to the state between waking and dreaming it will cast out
energetic rhythms and seek “wavering meditative, organic rhythms”; it will pay great
attention to technique and employ; if they are necessary even obscure and
ungrammatical forms, but it must have the perfection that escapes analysis the
subtleties that have a new meaning every day. As, said by Bowra,

Poetry is to be a record of a state of trance; it must take endless
pains to be secured its effect by the right rhythm and the right
associations; for otherwise the state of trance is broken. This
theory partly re-states some of the fundamental principles of
lyric poetry, partly introduces the revolutionary notion that a
poem is a charm or instrument of enchantment. (Bowra, 187)

Yeats finds the symbolist doctrine to his taste not only because its high
standards appeal to his artistic sense but because its mystical claims appeal to
something mystical in him. It is not aesthetic rapture, not pure vision, not creative
ecstasy, but a belief in powers behind the visible world, powers that are evoked from
dream and trance for Yeats poetry is a communication with spirits, with an unseen
order of things. The poet is one who conducts the passage from one order to another and finds words for these mysterious messages.

Yeats’s symbols are all taken from a common stock and mutually related. Yeats normal method is to take some figure or creature of legend and through it to express some state of mind of his own. In the first edition he appears in different characters, as Aedh, Hanrahan or Michael Robartes according to the part that he plays, but in later editions these characters, are reduced to “he”. The crisis in his soul are depicted through legend. When he wishes to get away from ordinary life and feels the fierce fascinations of dreams, the influence that shakes him is figured in the Sidhe, the fairy people who travel in the wind and seduce men from their habitual lives. (Bowra 188)

According to T.R. Henn, a poet can establish his symbolism, and suggest its values, by one of the three methods. He can relate it, directly, or obliquely or sometimes negatively to such myths or history as already command a reasonable measure of acceptance; weighing the readiness of response against the loss that changes in cultural background is constant, he can be assured of an immediate response. When, for example, Yeats sees Maud Gonne in terms of Helen, there is acceptance, but the full significance of the lines

Another Troy must rise and set,

Another lineage feed the crow.

Helen in his poetry symbolizes Maud Gonne up a kind of image-cluster in which Troy serves to illuminate the beauty of Maud Gonne. ‘Was there another Troy for her to burn?’ And to form a stable recurring point for the revolution of the gyres of history in terms of The Second Coming. Much classical history can be so ordered and
recombined to produce this recognition of its basic symbols, and to suggest still more complex values through other combination of them.

Secondly, he can use the so called archetypal symbols, water, fire, cavern, arrow, horse, and so on, relying on the constancy of human experience of dream and fantasy and vision in which such symbols appear. The penumbra of light thrown round the focal point of such a symbol will be usually deeper and more complicated than that supplied by history or myth; and the poet may achieve an inner conviction of the validity of his symbols through observing a constancy or recurrence, or ‘dispersed coincidence’ in dream or vision. His work will suffer, perhaps, in communication; because, while simpler symbols such as Moon, Sun, Dancer and Helen of Troy are reasonably clear without further explanation the interpretation tends to grow conventional, as when the audience is an order of initiates; or unduly imprecise, as in much later romantic poetry.

The third method is to create a personal mythology and a related symbolism, in the manner of Blake; and here success will depend on a gradual building up to determinant points of meaning through the use of symbols in varying contexts. This most difficult task will be hampered still further if the meanings themselves vary from context to context, and still more if the symbols give no traditional clue by their derivation or sound. Thus Blake’s arbitrary use of Oothoon, Enion, Athania or Orc forms a considerable obstacle; and if the labour involved in the necessary study appears likely to be inconsummerate with the result in the significance it proposes to establish, the myth will fail. Yeats used all three methods. (Henn119-120)
Yeats himself had very definite theories, as to the uses and effects of symbolism. He believed that symbols were effective in evoking emotions which so often were more subtle and complex. Yeats used natural symbolism very freely throughout the years, using flowers, trees, birds, animals and even fish to carry their own message and their own image. Flowers are used frequently and effectively. The rose is variously used to symbolize the spirit of beauty, transcendental love, perfection in any sphere. Rose symbolizes Maud Gonne. Or sometimes rose symbolizes Ireland. Poppies symbolize dreams and forgetfulness; lilies symbolize innocence and purity. Trees and parts of the trees are frequently used symbols as is not uncommon, Yeats uses the falling leaves as the symbol of mortality, but also uses them in the special sense of fading and dying love. The ceaseless fluttering of the leaves is used to represent the troubles and distractions of the world. A hazel wand and a hazel tree represent wisdom. The withering of the boughs is used to symbolize despair. A green branch represents Knowledge and learning.

Gyres, symbolizes any of the opposing elements that make up the existence, such as sun and moon, day and night, life and death, love and hate, man and God, man and woman, man and beast, man and his spiritual counterpart or ‘diamon’. (Ellmann, 153)

The two principal threads run through almost all of Yeats later poems; preoccupation with age, youth and beauty leading to the central antinomy between sensuality and asceticism, and a grappling with the crisis of the present civilization, leading to a vision of the dark future of humanity. Confronted with the problems of modern humanity and with his own descript age, the poet seeks a safe anchorage, the Tower and Byzantium poems are expressions of this craving for escape from this
ailing civilization and become related to *The Second Coming* and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* poems like *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory* and

The different levels of intensity, are also, an attempt to escape from the present into the splendor and glory of the past. Thus the later poems reveal one principal thought. A certain deliberateness of outlook, an ironical zest and vigor and a wringing back of all that is obviously romantic, redeem them, however, from sentimental escapism, relating them to poems like *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, which in spite of an obvious ambivalence, express the poet’s immeasurable lust for life”.

(Chateerjee100-101).

All these above mentioned poems will be discussed in other chapters in detail and will be analyzed the themes as well as major symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. Yeats’s concept of the imagination must be considered here. In *The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry* he writes:

“I have observed dreams and visions very carefully, and am now certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not, and that its commandments, delivered when the body is still and the reason silent, are the most binding we can ever know”. (Yeats, *Essays and Introductions, 65*)

William Blake influenced Yeats’s philosophy of the imagination and reality considerably. Blake, as Yeats points out in *William Blake and the Imagination*, believed imagination “the first emanation of divinity.” Therefore, Yeats remarks of Blake,

The reason, and by the reason he meant deductions from the observations of the senses, binds us to mortality because it
binds us to senses, and divides us from each other by showing us our clashing interests; but imagination divides us from the mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts. (Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 112).

As stated before, study is limited to the later works of Yeats though one does realize that for a full resolution of the problem I am trying to examine it is necessary to explore the Christian imagery and themes in the poet’s earlier works as well. Scholars have pointed out that the poet’s themes and symbol are fixed in youth and renewed with increasing vigor and directness to the end of his life. “This continuity” as Ellmann notes, “is more surprising because it does not strike the reader at once, as does the continuity of other poets like Wallace Stevens, E.E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot” (Ellmann 1) An examination of the revisions of the texts of poems will bear out the fact of the continuity of themes and symbols in Yeats’s works. However, for reasons of convenience Critics have drawn a line of demarcation at the period of The Wild Swans at Coole, (1919) which is commonly regarded as the point of departure from the twilight world of Yeats’s early poems to the later poetry in his new realistic vein.

In the matter of symbols, which are our main concern, The Wild Swans at Coole marks a period of transition if not a major division. Ellmann observes that two symbolic structures can be found in Yeats works, the first built up from boyhood, and retained until after 1900, the other accumulating mainly from 1915 to 1929. The period from about 1903 to about 1914 lacks, as says Ellmann “a clearly articulated structure though it has elements of both the early and late ones and towards the close of Yeats’s life from about 1935 to his death in 1939, the power of the second
symbolic structure is noticeably abated”. (Ellmann 63)

The early structure was largely made up of familiar symbols treated in an unfamiliar way, while the later structure contained much less common symbols which Yeats made to seem familiar. The later symbolic structure, beginning with *The Wild Swans at Coole*, till *The Last Poems* which is included in this thesis, consists of less common symbols.

The purpose of each of these chapters is to discuss the themes as well as major symbols in the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. The present thesis, consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, the introduction traces Yeats’ life from his childhood till his death. Some symbols are also discussed but not in depth because these are discussed in other chapters. All the poems from volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* to *The Last Poems* have been discussed in the consecutive chapters.

Chapter two consists of poems which discusses themes as well as major symbols of two volumes of Yeats poetry entitled *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) the fruits of change were manifest in all their strength. Yeats had found a new power of plain statement and wrote with directness about familiar and elementary passions. The Thesis discusses and tries to explores the use of themes and symbols in the poems. Chapter three consists of *The Tower* (1928) the most important aspect of his life during this period was that he became a “Public Man” being an active and controversial senator of the Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928. In 1923 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. It had reblossomed in *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, but the flowering came with *The Tower*. The poetry of *The Tower* period is rich because of the fullness of Yeats’s life, because his style was reaching maturity at the same time as his life. The poems of the twenties therefore deal with many of his interests,
politics, philosophy, friendship and love but they are all *The Tower* poems the work of a personality and a public figure who is writing for an audience. These two volumes are generally considered to be the peak of Yeats’ achievement.

*The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), *Words for Music perhaps* and *A Woman young and old* are included in chapter four and *A Full Moon in March* (1935) and *Last poems* (1936-39) or death poems as referred by many critics, are included in chapter fifth.

Chapter six is the conclusion and the final chapter of the thesis which summarizes the findings about the themes and major symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats.
Works Cited


Chapter Two

*The Wild Swans at Coole and Michael Robartes and The Dancer*

There were, in fact, two *Wild Swans* volumes: a Cuala edition of twenty nine poems and the play *At the Hawk's well*, published on 17 November 1917; and a Macmillan edition of forty six poems published on 11 March 1919- this now appears dated 1919, in *Collected Poems* –and in both volumes Yeats took trouble about the selection and order of the poems. “With the publication of the second version of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Macmillan edition of forty six poems in 1919, deliberately, ‘different’ Yeats presented himself to his public”. (Donoghue and Murlyne, 55). He had married, and been found by the Instructors of *A Vision*. Marriage, to so occultizing a temperament as Yeats’s had to represent sea-change, but his poetry did not change as much as the man did, or felt he did. There is, first, the personal story of Yeats’s relationship during the wild swans’ period. After being rejected by Maud Gonne twice Yeats eventually married Miss Georgie Hyde Lees in October 1917. “Whom he first met in 1911, and with whom, as he says in *Under Saturn*, he was to be very happy .His attempts to formulate his astrological and occult speculations into a ‘system’ also date from this time, for his wife had the gift of ‘Automatic writing’ a fact delighted Yeats”. (Cowell,Raymond, 53). Poems of this volume reflect all these situations.

Ageing is a theme common to many of these poems but in each group the stress is very different. In most poems to Maud the fact of age means a loyalty sustained, a hard victory over time and change, in those to Iseult it means lost vitality, shrinking horizons, the pain of accepting these .The title poem, *The Wild Swans at Coole* dated October 1916, rises from the complex mood in which Yeats began what
was to be his last solitary year of bachelorhood. As Jeffares, indicates, “The poem’s dominant emotion is not frustrated longing for Maud Gonne, but sorrow that the poet’s passion for her is dead”. (Jeffares, commentary 154). A man of fifty one looks upon the same scene he saw at thirty two. He comes to the scene again after having proposed marriage again to the same woman as nineteen years before, and after being refused, yet again. But his primary awareness is not of a dismal, almost ridiculous continuity, between an earlier and a later self. Discontinuity dominates, for the depression of nineteen years before was at the refusal, but the depression of 1916 is for not feeling depression at the continued refusal. His heart has grown old, and to soreness is that it should have aged. Though written during the transition of the poet’s style, it already anticipates the theme of ageing in *The Wild Swans at Coole*.

Their hearts have not grown old;

Passion or conquests, wander where they will,

Attend upon them still.

In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats recalls, it for deliberate contrast, for his depression and apparent loss is that he no longer shares this vision of the relation between poet and swan. Yeats too sees in the swans his antithetical quest fulfilled, but his regret is that for him the passionate or outward-bound aspect of the quest is forever over (Bloom, 191-192).

It is of considerable critical importance that the stanza acknowledging this now the fourth of five in the poem, was in the poem’s first appearance the final stanza, so that the plangency of accepted defeat ended the poem. Yeats chose at first to put his emphasis here, upon his ancient love for Maud, the central passion of his life, being extinct and placed it last altering absolutely the poem’s significance.
Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquests, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

Evidently, Yeats chose at first to put his emphasis here, upon his ancient love for Maud, the central passion of his life, being extinct. In revision, he took the poem’s central stanza, and placed it last, altering absolutely the poem’s significance.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what rushes will they build,
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

Ellmann speculates that, by putting this stanza at the end, “Yeats made it possible to read it symbolically so that his awakening would be his death.” (Ellmann, Identity, 253) This is possible, but unnecessarily stretched. Awakening here is not death but the end of antithetical consciousness, the complete breaking with the Shelleyan influence. The prophecy was not fulfilled, perhaps because such an awakening would have been a death in life for Yeats, even after love was dead.

It is in The Wild Swans at Coole, that we witness Irish landscape transmuted into poetry of a high order. Applied to this poem, the following judgment by John Middleton Murray is certainly ungrounded:
“... The Wild Swans at Coole, is indeed a swan song. It is eloquent of final defeat; the following of a lonely path has ended in the poet’s sinking exhausted in a wilderness of gray. ... He is empty, now. He has the apparatus of enchantment, but no potency in his soul.” (Murray, 77-78). Built upon Irish scenery, it transcends the merely local. The first stanza anchors the poem in a particular setting:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine—and—fifty swans. (Collected poems, 147)

The actual description of Coole lends concreteness to the scene, a scene that exists in the world. The swans, which Yeats had seen during his stay at Coole, offer him symbols that unite time with the timeless.

Moving on in a tone that verges on the conversational, the second stanza contains the whole difference between the quality of casual conversation and the quality of great poetry:

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings. (Collected Poems, 147)

Making use of and transforming Irish landscape, the poet re-creates with precision, poise and economy scenes before which the drama of his inner world is
played out. The success Yeats achieved here foreshadowed the upsurge of his creative vitality in the years to come. Integrated with the scene that has particularity and precision is the theme of age, so effortlessly introduced in the second stanza with a skillful transition from the present to past tense. At the thought of approaching age, the poet feels a sense of regret, which is aggravated by the sight of ‘brilliant creatures’:

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread. (Collected Poems, 147).

In the following stanza, the passage of time is contrasted with timeless nature, here symbolized by the swans. His soul’s weariness, resulting from his long drawn-out love affair with Maud Gonne, is juxtaposed with the swan’s unwariedness:

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old (Collected Poems, 147).

Making the poet feel more acutely and painfully the gap opening up between himself and timeless nature, the swans ascend to the level of emblems. By now, they have come to stand for passion and vitality:

Passion or conquests, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.
At another level, the swans also stand for inspiration and the poet’s creative relationship with nature. With the fear that one day they will have gone, the poem closes, first turning the swans into some primeval pattern:

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful . . .

Then rising to a question which, although in some degree wistful, is very penetrating in its expression of Yeats’s awareness of time and process:

Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

It is one of the first poems in which Irish landscape offers the poet the warp into which he weaves his personal drama and the universal theme of time and age. The ‘trees’, the woodland paths’, ‘the brimming water among the stones’, the ‘nine and fifty swans’ all give the poem a particularity that embodies the universal.

With the title poem, discussion naturally turns on the meaning of the symbolic swans(Donoghue, Denis and Murlyne, J.R. 61-62) this finally, can only be decided by their relationship to the poem as a whole which at least offers one a reasonably secure line of interpretation. The poem’s speaker (the’ I’ is usual, dramatic, not biographical) calls the swans ‘lovers’ upon whom ‘passion or conquest attend’ and describes them as explosively vigorous, at one with the physical universe of water and air. To the speaker, the swans are also, his youth, and the annual counting rite amounts to a familiar kind of magic which keeps him in illusory contact with it.

When the swans lift from the lake they establish their independence of this personal meaning and two recognitions
then follow: 1) that he must soon lose his present slight hold over “passion or conquest” but that (2) the swans will still delight other men will nest and build in other lakes. In following their imaginary flight into a future which excludes him the speaker thus begins to transcend his own nostalgia and despair. (Donoghue, Denis and Murlyne, J.R. 62). The action of the poem embodies his discovery that far from commanding the swans he is commanded by them and must resign himself to the situation they represent: physical emotional life as an order of transcendence.

The Gregory poems which consist of the group of poems. Yeats wrote on Major Robert Gregory’s death: In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, Shepherd and Goatherd bring us to this main preoccupation of the poet in the poetry of his later years. Yeats’s treatment of the theme of death and symbols in these poems as well as in other poems is certainly an important topic to be explored in connection with the study of his major themes and symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats.

In Memory of Major Robert Gregory is a great elegiac poem, “something new and important in the history of English poetry, because it never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting, and the people in the poem do not disappear as people as they do, for example, in Shelley’s Adonais (Auden, W.H., Permanence, 313) At the same time, Yeats raises the tragic death of Robert Gregory to a level of universality by extending his subject, by seeing his hero as the ideal man, and by lamenting the death of the young hero who is the “emblem for the immense defeated possibility of war slaughtered youth.” (Untrecker, 133) This
elegy is unique in the English language by the conspicuous omission of a characteristic common to all other well known elegies that preceded it. Other poets like Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson conclude the poetic lament with a note of consolation which often comes from the comforting hope and belief that the soul of the dead finds infinite peace and joy in the world beyond grave. An extreme example of this can be seen in *In Memoriam* which ends with the happy peal of wedding bells. Even Shelley, who was branded an atheist, devoted the last section of *Adonais* to the reflection of the ‘white radiance of eternity’. Yeats, on the other hand, deviates from that usual practice, as a result of which there is in his elegy no mention of an after-life to relieve his sorrow. This is so not because he had no faith in a life after death, but perhaps because he thought that his belief in the cycle of reincarnation could not provide him with any kind of comfort as the Christian heaven or Neo-Platonic immortality did for Tennyson and Shelley. Hence, in the last stanza of the Yeatsian elegy we still hear ‘the bitter wind that shakes the shutter’ (Collected Poems, 151). And see the poet standing there struck dumb by sorrow. The last line of the poem, ‘but a thought/of that late death took all my heart for speech’ (Collected Poems, 152) as Kermode remarks, “has a heavily retarded monosyllabic movement with the clustered consonants grievously impeding utterance”. (Kermode, Frank 39)

In the poems related to Major Robert Gregory we see for the first time Irish scenery, people and events acting upon one another, finally coalescing into a rich and complex whole. There are further examples to illustrate how Yeats’s association with the Irish supplied him with themes that fired his imagination, giving its poetry depth and sincerity. Apotheosized by Yeats as one of the most celebrated Irishmen, Major Robert Gregory, the hero of these poems, is Lady Gregory’s son. He was killed in action on the Italian front on January 23, 1918. The death of such a talented young
man, whose mother was the poet’s close friend, naturally elicited much genuine and profound emotion. And it is this sort of emotion that gives *In Memory of Robert Gregory*, its impact. The poem in Frank Kermode’s words is

Yeats’s first full statement of what he took to be a complex and tragic situation; the position of artistes and contemplatives in a world built for action, and their chances of escape . . . After it, for twenty years, Yeats’s poems, whenever he is using his whole range, are identifiable as the work of the master of the Gregory elegy. (Kermode, 30)

His success in writing such a great elegy is primarily due to the ‘complex and tragic situation the death of Robert Gregory offered him. Yeats thinks of Gregory first as an artist, and then of his uniquely varied powers, which suggest the simultaneous possession of both action and contemplation’:

When with the Galway foxhound he would ride

From Castle Taylor to the Roxborough side

Or Esserkeley plain, few kept his pace;

At Mooneen he had leaped a place

So perilous that half the astonished meet

Had shut their eyes; and where was it

He rode a race without a bit?

And yet his mind outran the horses’ feet. (Variorum, 326)

Enumerating Robert Gregory’s facts, putting them in an Irish setting, the poet goes on to create a symbol of a man who embodies the ideal of the Renaissance. The man of action and intellect ceases to be a particular person. He is mythologized, embodying Unity of Being and the aristocratic ideal, a man who is able to live life
whole, and see vision whole, encompassing all that Lionel Johnson, John Synge and Pollex fen saw:

We dreamed that a great painter had been born
To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn,
To that stern colour and that delicate line
That are our secret discipline
Wherein the gazing heart doubles her might.
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
And yet he had the intensity
To have published all to be a world’s delight.(Variorum, 327)

Like, Sidney, he is conceived as a young aristocrat who achieved in a very brief life span a unique versatility and fulfillment, and so established a pattern by which human perfection might be recognized.

Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
And all he did done perfectly
As though he had but that one trade alone.
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
As ‘twere all life’s epitome.

Having opened at the personal level and risen above the personal, the poem finally closes with a personal note:

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
Or boyish intellect approved
With some appropriate commentary on each;
Until imagination brought
A fitter welcome, but a thought
Of that late death took all my heart for speech. (Variorum, 328)

It is, as Auden has remarked, “something new and important in the history of English poetry. It never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting . . . and at the same time the occasion and characters acquire a symbolic public significance”. (Permanence, 313)

In next poem, An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, the moment of death is the moment of insight, the unique instant of epiphany; in other words, it is the moment of completeness, of Unity of Being. The airman, Gregory, did not die for Ireland, neither law nor duty bade him fight, but he rushed to his own end in the delight of heroism, which was his own choice and which alone renders a futile war meaningful. At the time of his death he attains that singular moment of perception that balances all, past and future, life and death:

A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death. (variorum 328)

This balancing all, life and death, anticipates what Yeats later wrote of his own death, ‘Cast a cold eye on life and death’ (Under Ben Bulben). While it is hard to see any clearly definable philosophical treatise on the theme of death in these poems, one can discern the poet’s own attitude towards death as he was approaching his end.
He saw as a part of the heroic ritual, and life becomes complete only when it willingly embraces death. Just before his death in 1939, Yeats wrote to Lady Elizabeth Pelham: “It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put into a phrase I say, ‘Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.’ I must embody it in the completion of my life”. (Wade, Allen, 922)

Since Yeats was aware of the truth that he embodied and which he could not know, one would expect that part of that unknowable truth is his poetry which in turn was the meaningful part of his life. Perhaps, in exceptional moments of perception or epiphany, as in the final moments in the life of the Irish airman, one gets a rare glimpse of that incommunicable knowledge. It may be that Yeats implies that any attempt at communicating that knowledge through philosophical reflection on the theme of life and death and the truth embodied in these facts would be futile.

Also, drawing upon that the tragic situation of Robert Gregory is An Irish Airman Foresees his death, having been celebrated in the elegy, the man of action is now presented in another perspective, which emphasizes his lonely impulse of delight. Above politics and in pursuit of the pleasures of action, the hero ascends to a moment perception when nothing else matters.

I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A wasted of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death. (328)

How the death of an Irishman widens the range and increases the complexity of Yeats’s poetry can be seen by looking at all the poems related to Robert Gregory. While In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, An Irishman foresees his death, and Shepherd and Goatherd celebrate the hero, mythologizing him as a symbol of the
perfect man, the renaissance ideal, man of action with a lonely impulse. The poem *Reprisals* explores the tragic situation from a different angle by commenting on the futility of Gregory’s death:

Some nineteen German planes, they say,
You had brought down before you died.
You called it a good death. Today
Can ghost or man be satisfied? (Varorium, 791)

The poet’s attitude to the hero’s sacrifice differs from that in the elegy or *Shepherd and Goatherd*, in which the hero is glorified and exalted. Here, however, he is described as one serves no purpose; for violence, atrocities and murder still continue:

Half drunk or whole mad solidery
Are murdering your tenants there.
Men that revere your father yet
Are shot at on the open plain.
Where may new-married woman sat
And suckle children now? Armed men
May murder them in passing by
Nor law nor parliament takes heed. (Varorium, 791)

In the four poems which are discussed, Yeats succeeds in achieving multiplicity of expression. Apparently, incompatible attitudes get their proper treatment: one taking the form of a great human monologue, another looking at death from the airman’s stoic point of view, the third discussing it in a pastoral dialogue strangely wedded to theosophical beliefs, the last attacking the hypocrisy of the British. These distinct modes of rendering experience, the different attitudes
expressed, through multiple dramatic techniques that may, on the surface, be contradictory are made compactable in his comprehensive dramaturgy. Though he is treating the same subject, each poem places the poet at a different distance from it, and at a different point of view—from the personal reminiscence and self-dramatizing of In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, to austere dramatis persona of An Irish Airman foresees his Death. They suggest the range, the comprehensiveness of his mature poetics. “Yet, this ‘classic locus’, as Thomas Parkinson puts it, is the result of the death of an Irishman (whom he knew and admired warmly), an event that deeply touched him”. (Parkinson, 17).

However, while holding this conception of life and death, Yeats tried to explore the theme of death in some of his works. Shepherd and Goatherd is another one of the Gregory poems in which the shepherd portrays Gregory’s life while the goatherd traces the soul’s progression after death. In a language appropriate to each of the two characters, the young shepherd and the old goatherd, Yeats presents a moving and witty dialogue in which he speaks both as a young romantic and as a hardened realist. The young shepherd ‘sings always of the natural life’ whereas the goatherd sings of the supernatural, of ‘the road that soul treads/when it vanished from our natural eyes’, and, what is more, he has ‘talked with apparitions’. The song of the goatherd is concerned, in Yeatsian terminology, with the dreaming back. According to his conception, death is nothing but an unwinding of the spool. The last of the Gregory poems, Reprisals, can hardly be called a poem on the theme of death. Presumably it deals with the death of Robert Gregory, but his death, is only a peg on which the poet hangs his fury at the Black and Tans who were ravaging his estate and ill-treating the peasantry. Addressed to Gregory, it is an angry poem in which Yeats makes powerful use of the ghost rather than the soul of the dead man. The poem
concludes by urging the dead hero to ‘close your ears with dust and lie/ among the other cheated dead’. In short, it is a poem proclaiming the futility of death. As Ellmann says, “The poet, a Buddhist one moment, a stoic the next, and a spiritual the next, can look at death as well as other images with changing eyes”. (Identity of Yeats, 232)

In the Gregory poems, to sum up, Yeats looks at death not from a well thought out and coherent philosophical or religious position but from shifting points of view that suits the occasion and emotional context of the poem. If in one he idealizes the perfect man—the synthesis of all that is best, ‘Soldier, scholar, horseman’—in true elegiac fashion, in the next he sees death as the moment of perception as well as of perfection of life. While in one poem he talks of the immortality of the soul and its cycles of incarnations, in another he affirms the futility of death, and urges the soul of man to lie still in its tomb and be utterly dead. Further evidence of the poet’s shifting positions regarding death can be seen in certain other poems, too.

For instance, In Memory of Alfred Pollex fen another elegy in the Volume The Wild Swans at Coole concludes with the dominant symbol of the “visionary white sea-bird” crying out against the very fact of mortality, ‘Lamenting that a man should die; And with the cry I have raised my cry’. (Collected Poems, 177). While the concept of death as an inevitable completion of life is acceptable to Yeats, he often cries out as in this poem against the very idea of the mortality of man. He admires people who defeat death by living in joy and laughing into the face of Death. Mabel Beardsley was one of those who, like the Irish mythological heroine Grania, Achilles, Timor, Baber and Barhaim, lived in joy and when death came laughed in its face and died in a graceful and meaningful way. Upon a Dying Lady is a tribute to this woman who lives her life as a play which does not end with physical death but has a soul that
will fly to ‘the predestined dancing place’. She believes in the immortality of the soul and hence she courageously stares at approaching death with the confident hope that she will triumph:

She would not have us sad because she is lying there,
And when she meets our gaze her eyes are laughter-lit,
Her speech a wicked tale that we may vie with her,
Matching our broken-hearted wit against her wit,
Thinking of saints and of Petronius Arbiter. (Collected. Poems, 177)

Mabel was very religious, strictly Christian in Faith. In a letter (January 8, 1913), which reveals the genesis of the poem, Yeats reports a conversation he had with her. *Upon a Dying Lady* was has written between 1912 and 1914 about Mabel Beardsley, the sister of one of the most extremes aesthetes of the Nineties, who was dying of cancer.

As pointed by Raymond Cowell,

Yeats speaks of her and her brother’s ‘Passion for reality’, a passion achieved through the intensity of art. In the face of death, through art, not conventional religion, Mabel Beardsley is able to face up to reality gaily. Her artist friends surround her with drawings, dolls and happiness, and though, in the third section, the priest has his day on a religious festival, she takes most joy in the artists and their dolls. Having ‘lived in joy’ she, the poet says in the sixth section, will be able to laugh into the face of Death. (Cowell, 61)

and in the final section the poet addresses Death directly:

Pardon, great enemy,
Without an angry thought
We’ve carried in our tree,
And here and there have brought
Till all the boughs are gay,
And she may look from the bed
On pretty things that may
Please a fantastic head.
Give her a little grace,
What if a laughing eye
Have looked into your face?
It is about to die.

Here the human relevance of art and literature as Yeats conceived of them is being made explicit: their intensity gives a human being a standpoint from which some degree of control over life is possible; through art and literature man can make himself more than the trembling victim of incomprehensible forces such as age and death. But if literature is to have this value, it is clear that it must be more than the mere reflection of human joy or sorrow; it must be a conscious refashioning of experience. This question of whether literature is a direct reflection of life or not is the subject of this elegy although a new form of tribute is shown by Yeats in this poem.

As, pointed out by Raymond Cowell, Yeats formulation of these attitudes was helped by his marriage, from which arose a stronger sense of the distinctive value of feminine qualities. “This fact is reflected in the increasingly, important part played by woman in his poetry of the next twenty years: Sheba and Crazy Jane, Mabel Beardsley, Iseult, Constance Markiewicz-apart from Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne—occur, some frequently, in his poetry”. (Cowell, 59) The evolution of this positive
attitude to life, which Yeats was continuing in this volume, necessarily involves for a poet as conscious of his audience as he was, constant changes his relation to this audience and in *The Fisherman* he presents the kind of man who, he thinks, would appreciate the intense, unadorned poetry he is trying to write:

May be a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun–freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth
And the down–turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, ‘Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.’

The recognition that this man does not exist is a brave one, for Yeats is desperate to find an alternative audience to ‘the living men that I hate’. What this imaginary fisherman symbolizes is an apparently detached intensity; fishing is an activity of quiet concentration, the absolute antithesis of the favorite pastime of Yeats’s rejected audience, politics. The apparent paradox of the fisherman’s intense
detachment is paralleled by the cold passion of the poetry. Yeats hopes to write for him and his kind.

In the poem *The fisherman* as, Raymond Cowell has pointed out that,

> He had explicitly, abandoned the idea of writing for his own race, but here, recalling his fierce arguments with Maud about the people, he goes a long way towards suggesting that his own detached analytical attitude to the people is inferior to the emotional, uncomplaining, realistic love that Maud feels for them. (Cowell, 60).

Yeats’s argument with himself on this question of his relation to the people is to recur later in such a poem as *Meditations in Time of Civil war*. Having turned his hopes to despair, Irish disputes added to his style a Swiftian breadth and energy, opening his eyes to the vast difference between his ideals and reality:

> The living man that I hate,
> The dead man that I loved,
> The craven man in his seat,
> The insolent unreproved,
> And no knave brought to book
> Who has won a drunken cheer,
> The witty man and his joke
> Aimed at the commonest ear,

The result is a more resigned attitude to his audience, a wish to write for

> A man who does not exist,
> A man who is but a dream.
At the same time, his aristocratic awareness of his own singularity gives sap to the conception of the fisherman, a lonely figure:

Although I can see him still,

The freckled man who goes

To a grey Connemara cloth…

To call up to the eyes

This wise and simple man (variorum 347-348)

Besides representing isolation, self containment, natural life, as opposed to social squabbling, the fisherman also stands for the race the poet could have wished to write for. Accompanying the change in tone, there is a corresponding change in style. The last two lines of the poem describe the kind of poetry Yeats wanted to write:

‘Cold/and passionate as the dawn’ (Collected Poems, 167). The fisherman is exactly a poem of this kind. It is, as Unterecker has remarked, “no more sentimental moonlit verse”. (Unterecker, 140)

The theme of such a poem, coupled with the melancholy and resignation as mentioned, could well have led Yeats back to the dream-like poetry of his youth. Yet, clearly this does not happen. In its own way, The Fisherman poem and others like it are as far from the lush, decorative writing of his youth as anything in his previous period of controversy.

What Yeats considers to be cold is, in fact, the increased poise and discipline he has attained. Likewise, the passionate quality he aimed at is manifested in the poem. The short end-stopped lines with their sledge-hammer repetitions, reinforced by the complete absence of internal pauses, fall in a mounting barrage of indictment. The metrics and the verbal pattern make the emotion both exact and alive. The central
section powerfully suggests a systematic “beating down”, rising inexorably to its embittered climax:

The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down.

The only poem he wrote about war is *On Being asked for a War Poem*, which is negligible when compared with *Easter 1916*.

I think it better that in times like these
A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter’s night.

It has strictly speaking, nothing whatever to do with war. It is perfunctory and, as Hazard Adams says, just “an Irishman’s oblique answer to an Englishman’s request”. (Adams, 173) Yeats was not interested in the war, that the war did not affect his poetry, is at once clear in his reply to Henry James in 1915.

“It is the only thing I have written of the war or will write, so I hope it may not seem unfitting. I shall keep the neighborhood of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, hoping to catch their comfortable snores till bloody frivolity is over”. (Letters by Allen Wade, 607)

In the poem *Ego Dominus Tuus* as Raymond Cowell points out that this is a dialogue poem where ‘Hic’, the defender of the subjectivity of art, is opposed by ‘Ille’ who declares that literature should be independent of the artist’s personal life, indeed the antithesis of it. Great literature, ’Ille’ says, is impersonal reflecting the
great poet’s desire to hammer out for himself an imaginative, as opposed to his, often unsatisfactory, personal identity:

*By the help of an image*

*I call to my own opposite, summon all*

*That I have handled least, least looked upon.*

The poem’s theme, like treatise, is mastery; of what sort is the poet’s and how does he attain to it? The strength of *Ego Dominus Tuus* is that Yeats evades the constriction of his still rudimentary doctrine. Hic, the primary, objective soul or Owen Aherne figure is allowed something of the common sense of his stance. Ille, who has inherited the magic book of Michael Robartes, does not deny that he is ‘enthralled by the unconquerable delusion/Magical shapes’ (Collected Poems, 180). This may echo Arnold’s *Scholar Gypsy*, urged by the poet to ‘keep thy solitude’ while ‘still nursing the unconquerable hope Yet ‘delusions magical’ are cast on Cuchulian, the aim and result being his fight with the sea. Yeats could have chosen ‘unconquerable illusion’ as with the ‘manifold illusion’ that hoops civilization together in the late poem, *Meru*. But here, in *Ego Dominus Tuus*, “he allows without argument, the antithetical quest to be termed delusion. Even, Ille, just before the final invocation of his anti-self, permits an objectivity to destroy the possibility of his writing another book like that of Robartes” (Bloom, 197-198):

*Because I seek an image, not a book.*

*Those men that in their writings is most wise*

*Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts* (Collected poems, 182)

Ille’s admission is ironic, for the wisdom he acknowledges is blind and stupefied, or so he would believe, or have us believe. It is the wisdom presumably of nineteenth-century liberal humanism, of those who would find themselves and not an
image, and so have lost all conviction. The subjective Ille again echoes *The Scholar Gypsy* when he attacks the ‘modern hope’ of self-discovery and self-expression:

That is our modern hope, and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,
Lacking the countenance of our friends. (Collected Poems, 180).

This is a profound complaint, and a reader of the earlier section of the *Autobiographies* of Yeats will hear the personal reference in the last two lines. Essentially, “Yeats is rejecting the Wordsworthianism that was a powerful element in Victorian literary culture, with its champions in figures as great as John Stuart Mill and George Elliot. Hence, the echo deliberate or not, of the striking phrase ‘halcreate’ from *Tintern Abbey*” (Bloom, 199)

Early in 1916, Yeats read or re-read most of Wordsworth’s major poetry, reaching conclusions upon it striking like those of Hallam in his Tennyson essay that had so influenced the young Yeats. The conclusions are guarded, but severe:

He strikes me as always destroying his poetic experience, which was of course of incomparable value, by his reflective power. His intellect was commonplace, and unfortunately he had been taught to respect nothing else. He thinks of his poetic experience not as incomparable in itself but as an engine that may be yoked to his intellect. He is full so a sort of utilitarianism and that is perhaps the reason why in later life he
is continually looking back upon a lost vision, a lost happiness.

(Letters to J.B.Yeats, in Hone, Joseph, 295)

Yeats, in *Ego Dominus Tuus*, explicitly opposes a lost sprezzatura, ‘the old nonchalance of the hand’, and implicitly chooses Shelley’s ‘subtler language’. In the 1925 *A Vision*, Robartes traced these characters on the sands of Arabia, and the 1923 poem, *The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid*, was printed in the first *A Vision* under the title of Desert Geometry. The source in Yeats is in his first Shelley essay, back in 1900, where the examination of Shelley’s ‘ruling symbols’ begins with the image of Cynthna, archetype of Maud Gonne, tracing antithetical in the sands:

“At a comparatively early time Shelley made his ‘imprisoned Cythna’ become wise in all human through the contemplation of her own mind, and write out this wisdom upon the sands in “signs” that were clear elemental shapes, whose smallest change ‘made a subtler language within language….”*(Essays and Introduction, 78)*

When Yeats knew how he misrepresented Shelley scarcely matters. These are the ‘misrepresentations’ of poetic influence, instances of the clinamen or creative swerves. The source-passage in *The Revolt of Islam* presents a very different subjectivity than Ille pursues. “Shelley’s vision rising here from the wreck of hope is of the mind in its own place, unconquerable and unassailable, because its calm reflects all the reality, including sympathy, justice, truth, and other ideal goals”. *(Essays and Introduction, 78)* Yeats takes from Shelley, as always only what he needs, to employ against the nineteenth century poetic humanism Yeats seeks to overturn. Hic, inadequately embodies, justly linked Wordsworth and Shelley in his regard. But what Hallam and Yeats found in Shelley is there, poetry of sensation conceptual images. Yeats divides, as always the means of Shelley’s poetry, from its revolutionary and humanistic ends. Ille’s attack upon the modern artists who ‘are critics, or but half
create’. The kernel of the poem is Ille’s ‘by the help of an image’, Yeats is caustic in calling this ‘a sort of utilitarianism’, and perhaps it was, but utilitarianism of the spirit. Hic does not argue, at this point, the case for the nineteenth century poetry. He will do that later in the poem, presenting the natural humanism of Keats. More cunningly, he puts forward “the chief imagination of Christendom’, Dante who in A Vision will occupy the most fortunate of phases for a poet, phase 17, where Unity of Being is most possible, where the other major poets in residence are Shelley and Yeats himself. Dante is supremely relevant partly because his Convivio is one of the apt models for both Per Amica and AVision, but mostly because the Comedy can be thought of as an utter self finding. Ille’s answer is as unsatisfying as Yeats’s account of Dante in Per Amica is. The Dante of the poem is a ‘spectral image’, opposite in being to the natural man Dante. Though the example is unconvincing, the principle Ille extracts is expressed with Yeats’s most majestic and unanswerable rhetorical authority:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?(Collected Poems,182)

Yet Ille’s rhetoric is too strong for our skepticism; our struggle against it is ‘the struggle of the fly in marmalade’ (Collected Poems,181). What has begun in Yeats is that marvelous style one fights in vain, for it can make any conviction, every opinion even, formidable out of all proportion to its actual imaginative validity. Thus, Hic, offers Keats, with his love of the world, his deliberate happiness, as being
rhetorician nor sentimentalist, Ille, Yeats replies with a wholly inadequate Victorian misrepresentation of Keats, in no sense even a creative misinterpretation, but the verbal gesture remains convincing. We know as Yeats hardly cared to know, that Keats was not an ‘ignorant’, man who made ‘luxuriant song’, but Yeats makes it difficult for anyone to see his nonsense as being just that here nonsense. What saves *Ego Dominus Tuus* from its own unfairness of judgment is more than powerful rhetoric however, for the final exchange between Hic and Ille concerns what matters most in the poem: the value of the antithetical image. Hic speaks the conventional wisdom of Poetic influence, but not the truer wisdom one must grant Yeats as having learned:

A style is found by sedentary toil
And by the imitation of great masters.

Ille knows the esoteric truth of Poetic Influence that a style finds a strong new poet not by imitation but by antithetical swerve, which for Ille leads to the mysterious one, the antiself. The poem has come full circle, returning to the magical shapes of a doctrine of visionary images, to the emblems of tower, lamp, open book, moonlight, and the grey sand by a shallow stream.

For instance, the traditional Christian Eucharist symbol, ‘bread’, associated with Dante in *Ego Dominus Tuus*.

Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread (*Collected poems, 180*)

The last few poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole* are recognizable as poetic expositions of his private philosophy outlined in *PerAmica* and; later in *A Vision*. The dominant and recurring symbolism in these poems are the Tower and the Dancer which loom large in the verse of Yeats. Also, there are symbols drawn from
Christianity which, in a lesser way, serve to tie together in several poems. Aherne implies that Yeats who seeks the bread of truth in book or manuscript will never find it in his life, and so, urges Robartes for whom the truth is his daily bread, to speak just enough to disillusion the poet. While the bread imagery has some of the Christian spiritual tone, it is used more as a poetic metaphor than a religious symbol.

Just truth enough to show that his whole life
Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
Of all those truths that are your daily bread. (Collected Poems, 184)

Aherne and Robartes, in the poem, are tiresome properties, easy ironies by which the poet may mock himself. Robartes expresses contempt for poets in general, as well as Yeats; they have found “mere images.” Yet the irony is as much bent against the occult Robartes; they sought only images, and the ‘true song, though speech’ the occultist chants is the huge, mere image of the Great Wheel. Critics, rightly focus upon cryptic account Robartes gives of Phase 27, the Saint because there is a hint of escape from the Wheel’s turnings here:

Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents.
The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow
Out of the up and down, the wagon wheel
Of beauty’s cruelty and wisdom’s chatter-
Out of that raving tide—is drawn betwixt
Deformity of body and of mind. (Collected Poems, 187)

In Blake’s Milton, one finds the fullest and likeliest source for Yeats’s twenty phases, in the twenty eight churches that mark off the divisions of fallen human history. In less schematic form, this Blakean Wheel or Circle of Destiny is presented in The Mental Traveler, cited by Yeats as a prime source for A Vision. When Blake’s
Milton the archetypal poet, resolves to descend again into history and nature. He is compelled to put on the Shadow or Covering Cherub, a twenty-seven-fold darkness under which we dwell. The Twenty-seventh-Church is called “Luther” the Protestant phase of Blake’s own time, and equivalent to Yeats’s Phase 27, or the Saint. For both Blake and Yeats the twenty-seventh fold of the Shadow offers the possibility of release, but Blake passionately means it, while for Yeats it is only another irony. For Blake, the twenty-eighth Church is Apocalypse; else the Circle must turn around again always, so Phase 28 is the Fool, deformity of mind, a last waning before the darkness of terrible god, Phase 1. This is complex irony of the close of The Phases of the Moon. The laughter of Aherne, at the expense of Yeats, is hollowness, for the finder of mere images, the poet, never expects to find anything but endless cycle, the spinning of the Great Wheel by the Gnostic composite god of history, deity of a meaningless death and an absurd life.

As Raymond Cowell points out that, The Phases of the moon written in 1918, what he later called “a text for exposition” This poem provide opportunity for the exposition of his ‘system’, Yeats imagines a quarrel between himself and his creations, Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne. Thus the situation of the poem is that Robartes and Aherne, seeing the poet labouring at his poetry in the tower, mock his efforts to transcend the inescapable cycles of life.

Robartes explains to Aherne that life can be described in terms of twenty-eight lunar phases. Roughly speaking in the first fourteen phase’s soul seeks subjective self-fulfillment, particularly after Phase Eight, and in the second fourteen seeks social integration, particularly after phase Twenty-two.

(Cowell, 62)
The division between these two movements is the full moon:

Before the full

It sought itself and afterwards the world.

Although the fifteenth phase, in its balance of the subjective and objective forces, gives a hint of possible perfection, this balance cannot be maintained, Robartes says, and so poet is wasting his time in his efforts to create some kind of permanent beauty. It is saved from mediocrity by the conclusion, when the power of the poet is dramatically demonstrated. These creatures were created by the poet, and they are visible only by the light from the tower window. At the end of the poem they are dismissed by the poet, as he finishes his labours: “The light in the tower window was put out” Read in conjunction with *Ego Dominus Tuus*, this poem is an assertion that through a poetic image of ‘anti-self’ the poet can achieve a victory over the apparently meaningless cycles of life. In great poetry, the poet achieves, permanently, that balance of personal emotion and artistic control, of the antithetical and primary impulses, that the fifteenth phase of the moon hints at. Thus the expositions of his system, *The phases of the moon* complement each other and assert the supreme power and relevance of literature and art.

As pointed out by Raymond Cowell, The kind of poetic image that can help the poet to achieve this stability and equilibrium is presented in the final poem of the volume; *The Double vision of Michael Robartes* of 1919. “It is in many ways a triumphant poem, celebrating the poet’s resolution, through the poetic image of the dancer, of the conflict between intellect, as represented by the sphinx, and heart, as represented by the Buddha”(Cowell,63). Explaining this poem in *A Vision*, Yeats says these figures represent, respectively: ‘the mind’s self begotten unity, an intellectual excitement’, and ‘the outward looking mind, love and its lure.’ Going on, he says they
stand so to speak, like heraldic supporters guarding the mystery of the fifteenth phase’. At the start of the poem, Robartes is torn by these conflicting forces, but the dancer, symbolizing a fusion of intellect and heart, spirit and body, gives a glimpse of the unity of being of the fifteenth phase which mitigates his agony:

O little did they care who danced between,
And little did she shy by whom her dance was seen
So she had out danced thought.
Body perfection brought,
For what but eye and ear silence the mind
With the minute particulars of mankind?
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As’twere a spinning-top. (Collected poems, 193)

The opposites are here resolved into a unified activity, where each receives it due, without being allowed to predominate over the other. After seeing this vision, Robartes no longer feels the helpless pawn of unknown faces but is elated by this poetic reconciliation of ‘the commonness of thought and images/That have frenzy of our western seas’(Collected Poems,194). This poem is Robartes’s ‘arrangement’ of his vision into a ‘song’ of gratitude; the sceptical Robartes is now finally converted by the poet. Once again, then, a volume of Yeats’s poetry ends on a note of optimism and assurance; the questions are answered, and the conflicts resolved, for the moment at least.

Yeats can be seen progressing from a fear of age and death and a pervasive feeling of inadequacy and helplessness, to a sense of the irrelevance of age and death and a conviction of the power of his poetic art. Of course, there is no complacency about these attitudes, for the poet recognizes the tendency to accept life negatively, to
submit to the cycles of existence, and also sees the immense difficulty of achieving a reconciliation of the warring forces within the human personality. This volume shows that the poet’s struggle for meaning is no different from the ordinary person’s struggle for identity, so that the relevance of literature becomes very obvious. The greatness of this Volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* is that “it presents the doubts and obstacles of the struggle without negative pessimism, and the ultimate triumph without arrogance or complacency”. (Cowell, 64-65)

In the Volume, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) embodies an equally remarkable achievement, It centers on a set of political poem *Easter 1916*. As pointed out by Harold Bloom,

> It is placed in Yeats’ career between two much richer Volumes *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *The Tower* (1928), this would be a justly neglected book if it were not for the fame of *Easter 1916* and poems like *The Demon and Beast* and *A Prayer for My Daughter* which serve as ironic prologue and tendentious epilogue for *The Second Coming*, while the other lyrics largely fail, whether as political poetry or as explorations of the poet’s vision of Daimonic love. (Bloom, 313)

The Volume begins with the title poem, *The Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. In this poem, Yeats touches upon the possibility that even the dancer may be contaminated by abstract intellectualism. In this poem the dancer’s symbolic qualities are more specifically described as feminine qualities, women being more capable than men of uniting mind and body:

> Live in uncomposite blessedness,

> And lead us to the like-if they
Will banish every thought, unless
The lineaments that please their view
When the long looking-glass is full,
Even from the foot-sole think it. (Collected Poems, 198)

The poem is a dialogue poem between Robartes and the dancer, and the dancer is not entirely convinced at the end of the poem that Robartes’ views on woman are valid. “This first poem, then, is one of threat to the qualities through which Yeats had achieved confidence and balance in the previous Volume”. (Cowell, 65). This poem enacts a dialogue between Michael Robartes and a woman whose occupation as a dancer constitutes a significant detail. Because dance makes art literally from the human body, Yeats saw dancers as emblems of the unity of body and soul associated with Phase 15. Here, Robartes contends that woman fulfill their destinies when they reject ugly opinions and thus make their bodies into beautiful vessels for supernatural wisdom. In achieving ‘uncomposite blessedness’ they lead to the like. This isn’t quite the same as suggesting that woman should be dumb and good-looking, but it comes uncomfortable close. Two things preserve the poem from an utterly devastating feminist critique. As pointed out by, David Holdmann, first it affirms the human body in terms that avoid the usual implication that women’s bodies are less pure than men’s: the Renaissance paintings and sculptures praised by Robartes honor both male and female sinew. Second, it dramatizes the dancer getting the better of Robartes at every stage of his argument. When he asserts an elaborate allegorical interpretation of a painted altar-piece, she deflates him in one line. By the end,

Her witty objections have so agitated him that he finds himself in the ironic position of supporting his criticisms of learning with citations from learned texts. The poem creates a real
dialogue, in which the poet pits a represented of one part of his mind against a female antagonist who appears well up to the challenge. (David Holdmann, 76).

As Cowell says, “this Volume, however, goes on to show how beautiful women may lead men to new levels of intensity and insight through sexual union, and Solomon and Sheba and An Image from a past life records such moments of sexual intensity and their significance”. (Cowell, 65).

In the next poem, Solomon and the Witch, this presents another verbal sparring match between male and female interlocutors. “Solomon half jokingly tells Sheba that sexual intercourse can spark the end of the world if the lovers perfectly unite. Sheba deftly replies that she’s willing to give it a try” (David Holdmann, 76). In Solomon and the Witch (1918) there seemed an acceptance and contentment; he had forgotten his worries over the possibility that he had hurt both Maud and Isuelt and had found tranquility:

May be the bride –bed brings despair,

For each an imagined image brings

And finds a real image there (Collected Poems, 199).

The fine poem, Under Saturn’ being addressed to his wife, continues this theme of female wisdom while also pointing in new directions. Explaining his saturnine mood to his wife, the poet says that it is caused not by sad memories of lost love and youth, but by his sense of having betrayed an early vow to serve, in some way, his native region of Sligo, and implicitly, Ireland. This poem with its nationalist hints, which was written in November 1918, prepares the reader for the explicitly political poem, Easter 1916, written between May and September 1916.
In the next poem, *An Image of the Past*, Yeats might seem to imply that, his still his imagined image in mind and that Mrs. Yeats was disturbed by this when He hears. This is again a dialogue poem between *He* and *She*. The language of this poem reverts to the romantic and languorous ethos of the early love poetry written to Maud Gonne and Diana Vernon.

As, Cowell writes in the Poem *Easter 1916* a note of self criticism which prevails in *Under Saturn* is again conspicuous in this poem, for he begins by saying that he has been guilty of complacent detachment in his attitude towards him and his fellow Irishmen. The poem is a Political poem which discusses war. As David Holdmann says, Ireland had already been convulsed by violent exchanges between the Irish Republican Army and ill-disciplined British forces who often targeted civilians in retaliation for guerrilla attacks. *Easter 1916* opens by recalling Dublin before the Rising as a spiritless, disunited city that found its fitting emblem in the mottled grab of a fool. There, the routines of modern commerce ‘among grey /Eighteenth century houses’ had so camouflaged the ‘vivid faces’ of the Rising’s future leaders that the poet remembers greeting them with ‘polite meaningless words’ even while thinking ‘Of a mocking tale or a gibe / To please a companion /, Around the fire at the club’. (Collected Poems,203). Now, after the Rising, everthing has changed: it no longer matters that the poet’s old friend Constance Markievicz has traded her youthful beauty for shrill-voiced activism that Patrick Pearse and Thomas Macdonough might have mastered poetry’s ‘winged horse’ or even that John MacBride ‘had done most bitter wrong/ To some who are near my heart.’(Collected Poems,203). In sacrificing themselves all of the Rising’s leaders have resigned their parts in the ‘casual comedy’ of the nation’s former life. Yet their transformation has produced both beauty and terror, a mystery the poet contemplates by means of the third stanza’s symbolic
landscape. In contrast to the more static, two-dimensional descriptions characteristic of Yeats’ earlier verse, this stanza creates a fluid virtual space that draws us deep into its interior. Using the intersection of the ‘living stream’ and the crossing road to evoke a two–dimensional plane, it lifts our vision up and down the third dimension occupied by the horse and rider, the birds, and the shadowing cloud, depicting all of these as moving. It thus not only invites us into a beautiful landscape but also brings home the contrast between the living, moving world and the unchanging stone that symbolizes the hearts of the fallen rebels. This stone gives the world a new center, a permanent locus of meaning and interconnection.

The concluding stanza dramatizes the poet’s struggle to face the implications of this insight. No English language poet surpasses Yeats when it comes to building up a stanza’s power by shaping its grammar, imagery, and argument into a single unflattering current. Here, however, he employs an unusually halting moment to express his anguished uncertainty. After daring to imply some blame for the fallen heroes; he quickly falls back on one of the polite, meaningless conventions elegies usually employ. “For anyone who believes that artists have an obligation to model complex responses to complex events even when the audiences clamor for simple reassurance, Easter 1916, surely must stand as one of Yeats’s finest achievements”. (David Holdeman,73-74).

The next poem, On a Political Prisoner a work inspired by Constance Markievicz, the rebel officer reproached for shrillness in Easter1916. Constance and her sister Eva Gore Booth hailed from a landed Anglo-Irish family based in County Sligo, and Yeats had known them since his youth. He came to regard both sisters as exemplars of an Anglo-Irish gentry that had increasingly neglected its duty to mask Ireland’s peasant energies with upper-class refinements. The sisters’ rejection of
conventional gender roles added to their fascination. Eva campaigned for women’s rights and also wrote poems. Constance played such a key part in rebellion that only her status as a woman saved her from the firing squad. On a Political Prisoner’ begins by picturing her in a prison cell. Like Easter 1916 it climaxes in a description of a three dimensional scene centering on a symbol: a ‘rock –bred’ bird ‘balanced on the air’ at the moment of its first flight. “The poem associates this bird with the harmony Markievicz realized between her individual and group identities when her ‘youth’s lonely wildness’ upheld the traditions of her class by to stone, Yeats wonders if she can recover her innocence” (David Holdmann, 74-75).It contrasts her imprisonment with her former freedom, and asserts that she foolishly sacrificed this former freedom, and asserts that she has foolishly sacrificed this freedom for the sake of mere abstract theories. The poem is a superb piece of technical achievement. “The starting point, the symbol of the grey gull which came to the prisoner, is used to illustrate the change which had come upon the life of the Countess”. (Jeffares, Norman, 189). The use of the adjective ‘grey’ suggests the monotony of the prison, yet the gull is in the poet’s mind a means of returning to the contrast of her youth.

At first it may not seem especially problematic: nothing in its critique of Markievicz’s activism explicitly blames her for violating gender norms. The Leaders of the Crowd, applies similar criticisms to others whose sex remains unspecified. The hatred of abstract fanaticism is the central theme of this poem He says that, the demagogic leaders lack, the self –knowledge produced partly by solitary study, which is necessary in political leaders. The lamp of self-knowledge, ‘the student’s lamp’ is contrasted with the false misleading light of rhetoric and fanaticism that these leaders hold before the people: ‘that lamp is from the tomb’. (Collected Poems, 208).
In the poem Demon and Beast, Yeats’ persuasive suspicion of facility, of intellectual or emotional short-cuts, is present in his self-analyses as well as in his attitudes to others, as is shown in this poem. The poem describes how the artist is momentarily seduced by the beauty and profusion of nature into relinquishing his proper task. He is suddenly abandoned by the passions that ensured his subjectivity and his power to create; he grows objective his mind becomes a vessel, instead of a vortex of energy, the fountain’s basin instead of its abundant jet. According to Harold Bloom, Demon and Beast, has a deliberate homeliness, and a cunning clumsiness about it. After so many heraldic birds swans, herons, and hawks peacocks – a non-symbolic gull and a mere duck charm readers.

To watch a white gull take
A bit of bread thrown up into the air;
Now gyering down and perning there
He splashed where an absurd
Portly green-pated bird
Shook off the water from his back (Collected Poems, 209-210).

In the poem Second Coming, of January 1919, Yeats again expresses his suspicion of political fanaticism:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Collected Poems, 211).

January 1919 was the month in which the Irish constituent Assembly, comprising the elected Irish M.Ps from Westminster met independently, in defiance of England, to declare its Republican sympathies, an act which provoked the formation of an English security force, the Black and Tans, which was to be responsible for the ‘terrors’ of the next two years. As pointed out by Cowell, thus the
prophetic, apocalyptic tone of the poem was justified by subsequent events. In the poem Yeats expresses his theories on the rise and fall of civilization in the terms later propounded in *A Vision*.

A civilization begins with a moment of inspiration or revelation, such as the birth of Christ, and its progress is like the unwinding, or ‘perning’ to use the dialect word Yeats was fond of, of thread wound on a cone or ‘gyre’. Thus, at first a civilization is very narrow and intense, like the apex of a cone, but it gradually loses its impetus, broadens, so dissipates its energies. As this happens, an opposite inspiration, which has been gaining strength from an initial state of inactivity and almost powerlessness, which is represented by a cone whose apex is at the centre of the base of the other cone, takes over and begins a new civilization, one inspired by an antithetically different force from the civilization it is succeeding. (Cowell, 69).

Surveying the contemporary anarchy in Ireland and indeed throughout Europe, Yeats feels that the forces of Christian love are almost spent, and that a new, more brutal, force is about to take over:

And what rough beast, its hour came round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. (Collected Poems,211).

The terrifying cosmic nature of this vision of impending brutality is, in itself, a justification of Yeats’s efforts in writing *A Vision*, as is the superb opening image in which the diminishing impetus of Christianity is conveyed through the idea that
Christianity is like a falcon that has lost touch with the falconer, and is thus lost and directionless:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,

The falcon cannot hear the falconer. (Collected Poems, 211).

This sense of impending anarchy is never far beneath the surface of Yeats’s poems in this period. In the Second Coming he had seen ‘the ceremony of innocence’ being drowned by ‘the blood dimmed tide’. Poetically, all the meaning of the poem is in the calculated collision in the last line of the words ‘slouches’ and ‘Bethlehem’.

A Prayer for My Daughter is a poem on Yeats’ daughter. The same vision, presented apocalyptically there, is presented with magnificent humanity and paternal concern. Yeats’ first child Anne Butler was born in February 1919 and this poem was written between February and June of that year, when the Black and Tans were beginning to make their presence felt in Ireland. In the poem, he considers what the future might hold for his baby daughter, immensely vulnerable as she is:

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

Out of the murderous innocence of the sea. (Collected Poems, 211-212).

This evocation of danger and threatening unknown forces is particularly impressive because it is so obviously written by a worried man; In such a place, his daughter could align herself with life-giving forces, making herself independent of sterile political debate. The comfort Yeats gains from this thought is reflected in the casualness of the contractions and the confidence of this as compared with the
opening stanzas. This poem is probably Yeats’ most convincing presentation of the values of the Anglo-Irish tradition, for when this tradition recurs after this he is very conscious that it is threatened by forces that might soon overwhelm it. Actually behind the details of this prayer for his daughter, of course, are his memories of Maud Gonne, who comes to symbolize in Yeats’ poetry the tragedy of beauty and grace distorted by politics, arrogance and intellectual hatred.
Work Cited


Chapter Three

The Tower

This chapter deals with the themes and symbols of the Collection poems of The Tower published in (1928). One of the richest volumes of Yeats’ later poetry. Yeats purchased the Norman tower named ‘Thoor Ballylee’ situated at Gort near Coole Park, in 1917, which marks the beginning of new preoccupations, touched upon in Michael Robartes and the Dancer, but fully explored in the poems of The Tower of 1928. Yeats saw the tower as a universal symbol of ‘a mind looking inward upon itself’ and was aware of the vogue the symbol enjoyed at that time. Yeats wanted a symbol.

Quite apart from its symbolic significance, however, the ownership of the tower made Yeats ‘officially’ part of the land owning Anglo Irish Protestant minority, an allegiance he had felt in the twenty years since his first meeting with Lady Gregory, and which he clung to during the Civil War when this section of the community was the particular target of the Republican forces, in their resistance against the 1921 settlement. (Cowell, 74).

Symbolism and realism, metaphysical speculations and contemporary social comment, jostle against each other in the poems of The Tower. Although his mind was ‘looking inward upon itself’, Yeats wanted to test the findings of his introspection against reality. The poems collected here cover a period, from 1926 to 1928 and again are arranged architecturally, each poem contributing to Yeats’ continuing argument with himself and to the development of the book, from the uncertainties of Sailing to
Byzantium to the almost arrogant confidence and assurance of Meditations in Time of Civil War.

Like all his Collections, this one reveals both continuity and innovation in themes and style. The themes in this Collection reflect both his own life in this period, and certain perennial concerns which never left him; his style shows his continuing search for a distinctive poetic voice. The most important aspect during this period was that he became ‘a public man’, being an active and controversial senator of the Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928. In the senate he formed another important and revealing friendship, that with the authoritarian and much-hated Kevin O’ Higgins, whose assassination in July 1927 distressed and embittered Yeats. During this period, he got inclined towards authoritarian forms and methods of Government in the belief that only harsh measures could fend off impending anarchy, and he was even attracted to Mussolini’s Fascism.

During this period in 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for literature, an honour he relished immensely. And yet, concurrently with this public activity, he was pursuing even more vigorously the intricacies of his ‘system’.

The Poems taken from The Tower Volume discussed in this chapter are Sailing to Byzantium, The Tower, Meditations in Time of Civil War, Nineteen hundred and Nineteen, Leda and The Swan, Among School Children.

It is precisely this combination of public activity with his heightened metaphysical speculations that gives Among School Children its exciting contrasts and modulations from the particular to the general, the contemporary to the timeless. In his emotional life, in spite of the happiness of his own marriage, the marriage of Iseult to a man he thought ‘a dunce’ Public life, ill-health, and proximity to death, emotional
bitterness, marital happiness, metaphysical speculation: all these elements contributed to the controlled richness of *The Tower*. But underlying all these elements are the complexities and perplexities which Yeats encountered in his exploration of the relation between the world of Imagination and the real world.

*Sailing to Byzantium* is a poem which reflects the interest in Byzantine art felt by Yeats since his visit to Ravenna, a city whose churches contain the finest of all Byzantine mosaics, with Lady Gregory and her son in 1907.

In the Twenties he deepened and intensified his knowledge by reading several of the books available on Byzantine art and civilization, which were increasingly fashionable. This interest and reading were part of his search for what he now called ‘Unity of Being,’ a state in which art and life interpenetrated each other, and which he thought he saw in Byzantine culture (Cowell, 77).

In *Sailing to Byzantium* the poet expresses his desire to leave the sensual world and the young at their gallantries, and sail to Byzantium, the holy city of unageing intellect. He seeks to escape the physical process of birth and death, and once out of the clutches of time, he will not take any mortal shape, but become a golden bird and sing of the past present and the future. The Byzantium-image is subtly associated with the image of the golden bough on which the mechanical bird will be set and this interlinking immensely increases the complexity of meaning and overtones. The gleaming bough that unlocks of Aeneas the gates of Hades also illumines the dark process of life and death; he learns, with agony and despair, that each departed spirit has to prepare himself for another pilgrimage among the children of men; there is ordained for each a ghostly penance, which endures for a thousand
years, until the heavenly essence has been cleansed of every stain and memory of Unhallowed fellowship. The image-complex and the aura of words also reveal new meanings. ‘Hammered’ implies effort and striving, gold ‘implies purgation, melting and sifting of baser metals; ‘gold mosaic’ and ‘gold enameling’ signify precision and hardness, ‘Holy Fire’ symbolizes a mode of purification through suffering. The gyre-image symbolizes the revolution of historical cycles. The reference to ‘dying generations’ and ‘the artifice of eternity’ links the poem with Keats *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. This bringing together of apparently disconnected images suggests the tortuous process of thought and feeling. In the first two stanzas, a nostalgic yearning for a vanished youth and a mocking self-pity are mingled with a carving for unageing intellect and disgust for the physical process of existence. In the last two stanzas, the desire to escape into the artifice of eternity is accompanied by an agonized acceptance of the fact that life is an inexorable cycle. The poem thus ends on a mingled note of hope and despair, and a craving for the effort and purification, although not explicitly stated, is suggested evocatively through the interaction of the auras of words and images.

*Sailing to Byzantium*, is a personal poem in which with a chorus of symbols the poet attempts to remake himself. This world of dying generations and sensual music is set against the unified city of the immortal soul. The poet or his Persona has left this world of flux and longs to be gathered into ‘the artifice of eternity’. “It is a symbolic voyage from the material world to the spiritual one. In other words, the poem is a meditation on timeless existence or eternity as against ‘Among School Children’, which in the words of V. S. Pinto is a meditation on existence in time, and the world of becoming”.(V.S.Pinto,107).
In his brilliant analysis of *Sailing to Byzantium*, Elder Olson says, that “in this poem an old man faces the problem of old age, of death and of regeneration, and gives his decision” (Permanence, 257-269). Olson sees the poem, “as a resolution of contraries—the condition of sensuality active and spiritually passive youth, and of physically impotent and spiritually active old age resulting in the vision of a wholly desirable mode of existence which “amalgamates the positive elements and eliminates the negative elements of both nature and art …” (Permanence, 257-269). The poem, no doubt, is born of the poet’s own sense of loss and decay. While lamenting the loss of his youth, he feels that age and death are unendurable. “An aged man is but a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a stick” (Collected Poems, 217). A mere scarecrow and it is ridiculous for him to ding ‘that sensual music.’ He must learn a new song, the spiritual song of the soul, and so he comes to the holy city of Byzantium which alone can be the new singing school. He now beseeches the sages of that ideal world to be the ‘singing masters of my soul’. In the midst of his prayer to the sages and thoughts about the soul and ‘God’s holy fire he feels the throbbing of his human heart which is “sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal.” (Collected Poems, 217) Here is a tension dramatized in the speaker: while he is desperately trying to find another center, to beat out a new and meaningful mode of existence for his aging life, he is pulled in the opposite direction by the obsessions of that sensual world. At this point he seems to admit that it is futile to learn the new song, and so abandoning the plea for instruction from the sages, he prays for death, to be gathered into ‘the artifice of eternity’. But this is only a momentary solution.

In the final stanza, electing the body for his next incarnation (which has an ironic touch as we shall see later); he chooses to inhabit an artificial Byzantine bird that will sing. All that he wants is to be out of nature, to escape all physical
reincarnation, to remain imperishable, and at the same to retain his human soul to sing about the world of flux, the condition of being human. If there is any reconciliation of the opposites reached at the end, it is that he will sing of time while remaining immune to its influence.

Olson would have us take this poem as a happy resolution of all the problems of the old man, whereas Simon Lesser argues that if there is a solution at all, it is a negative one and that the poem is ‘a cry of agony’. (Lesser, Simon, 291-310) It seems that the truth lies somewhere between these two extreme positions. Admittedly, the poem starts with a cry of agony over physical decay, and the realization that one must find a new center which will sustain him in his old age. While searching for such a center, the poet chooses a golden bird for his soul to inhabit. Yeats seems to have used his characteristic irony which should caution us against an over-optimistic interpretation of the conclusion. Immersion in art is a compensation for decay in old age, but, as lesser points out, no claim is entered in the poem for the proposition that old age is a happier time than youth. Even when the poet seeks refuge in ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’ (Collected Poems, 217). He cannot forget his fascination for the world of flux, for poet is ‘sick with desire’. So the poem ends with the bird’s song, not of eternity or immortality but of ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’(Collected Poems,218). Perhaps it is this fact which has forced B. L. Reid to place this poem in the line of the poet’s tragic emotion (The Lyric of Tragedy, p-179).

Furthermore, if the persona is identified with the poet as is often done, it is difficult to believe that Yeats would seriously want to be a golden bird to be set on a bough to sing in order to ‘keep a drowsy Emperor awake’. As lesser admirably puts it, “A fairy-tale quality of momentary attractiveness the last stanza possesses, but as
soon as one thinks of the golden bird as the eternal incarnation of a once-living poet, all the luster vanishes.” (Reid, 179).

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep the drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come (Collected Poems, 217).

A question arises pertinent to the discussion and related to the theme of the poem: Is this a poem about afterlife? The answer would depend on the way one interprets the poem. This certainly is a rich and complex lyric which has already yielded several interpretations. This poem can be taken as dealing with transition from sensual art to intellectual art or with the poet’s coming to terms with old age and death. Taken aesthetically, the poem would yield Yeats’ brilliantly original insight into the nature of Byzantine imagination. Byzantium, then would symbolize the achievement of Unity of Being through art. The golden bird and its song would represent the poet or the artist and his work of art. Even the obvious religious imagery takes on a different symbolic meaning. God in the third stanza ‘O sages standing in God’s holy fire’ (Collected Poems, 217) stands, as Ellmann comments, “less in the position of the Christian God than in that of supreme artist, artificer of eternity and the holy fire.” (Ellmann, *Man and the Masks*, 258). He is thus also the poet and the human imagination which is something in Yeats’s system described as a maker of all things. As for the emperor was himself a God as well as a man. Finally the Golden
bird, symbol of the reconciliation of opposite, symbolizes the poem itself, the created artifact, the protagonist, who fades into it and the poet, who becomes what he creates. The poem is a veritable chorus of symbols, all contributing to what Yeats long ago declared as his endeavour, to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art’s sake. The sages to whom the prayer is addressed live somewhere in the poet’s imagination; they are also artists who teach the soul to sing and thus the traditional religious imagery is transfused with aesthetic meaning. The poet’s cry is for a transformation of his art as well as of himself (Ellmann, 258). Kenneth Burke thinks that the vision of immortalization, not as a person, but by conversion into a fabricated thing, is an intensified version of Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn. He says that in the Byzantium poem it is “not a religious immortality that is celebrated here, but an aesthetic one. It is ‘beauty,’ ‘lunar.’”(Permanance, p-234).

The last stanza is the crucial one in determining if the poem is about an afterlife. The pagan concept of reincarnation is introduced not as a doctrine but as a poetic tool. It would be a mistake to suppose that the poem as a whole or the final stanza is a declaration of a doctrine about escaping the cycle of rebirths as enunciated in Hinduism, or getting out of the earlier cycles to escape into the Thirteen Sphere of the Yeatsian system. The concept of reincarnation is only a poetic machinery through which is a mixed feeling of desire to transcend the tyranny of time and of exasperation at the painful enchantment of the sensual world from which he tries to tear himself away. It is not emotion put into doctrine from outside as Yeats often neither does nor doctrine presented as emotion but it is a poem in which a doctrine is subsumed purely for the sake of creating poetic effect.
Making this idea clear are some of the symbols, especially those in the last stanza. The poet wants to renounce all physical incarnation, and so he elects the imperishable golden bird for his next and last reincarnation. As we have already seen, he is not serious about this idea of reincarnation. This is clear from the ironic description of the bird as set on a golden bough to sing like automation. Lesser is right in pointing out that the golden bird and golden tree illustrate the syncretistic nature of Yeats’ Byzantium symbols. The conventional forms of Byzantine images seem to deny the nature from which they derive. As Gordon and Fletcher claim,

“Those images were designed to express the divine, the supernatural, the transcendent realm which opposes the flux of time and nature.” (Lesser, Simon, 291-310). The symbol thus conveys the permanence of the artist in his work of art. Also, Byzantium is the city of Holy Wisdom, a Christian symbol, and at the same time a meeting place of the cultures of East and West. The theologically rooted city of Byzantium may serve as an image of the Heavenly City where the soul can dwell happily. The golden tree of Byzantium may have its origin in the Hebrew Tree of Life. This tree-image also connects Byzantium with the hermetic imagery of the Golden Dawn which provided the poet with the symbol of the Tree of Life. The golden bird, too, is hermetic imagery which represents the purified soul. It is also a personalized “symbol of the intellectual joy of eternity, as contrasted with the instinctive joy of human life” (Bradford, Curtis, 93-130). Thus, one can see that in this complex imagery of the incarnated bird set on a tree in Byzantium there is an interpenetration of Hindu, Hermetic and Christian symbolism.

Next poem of this volume is The Tower which is Yeats’ one of the best poems, and is more impressive than Sailing to Byzantium though it has less reputation at this time. Yeats aspires here towards being ‘a new species of man’, but in this poem’s
earlier moments he knows well enough that he belongs to an older species, the artists who long to be their own contraries, yet never attain to the condition of the daimon. *The Tower* is primarily a poem about an excess of imagination, or perhaps an imagination, in excess of its historical stimuli, and its Anglo-Irish excursiveness is hardly a poetic virtue, not being handled by Yeats with much saving irony. The poet is growing old, but his vision refuses to darken, and his ear and eye continue to expect an impossible sublimity.

The rebuilding of the Tower, Thoor Ballylee, near Lady Gregory’s place at Coole, was a gesture, too: half believed in, half- mocked at, but serving as a symbol, by turns cosmic and absurd; viewed with that peculiar irony that was necessary to preserve the sense of mystery. For the Tower was never finished; and a great empty room remained at the top. Yeats used to say that *A Vision* would be finished when the room was finally restored; neither was ever completed. But, in mockery or not, it could be shorten history for him. (T. R. Henn, 12-13).

He could pace upon the battlements where the crumbling stone, or a Jackdaw’s nest at a loop-hole, gave other images-

> And send imagination forth
> Under the day’s declining beam, and call
> Images and memories
> From ruin or from ancient trees,
> For I would ask a question to them all (Collected Poems, 219).

By 1928 *The Tower* had served its purpose as a symbol. The influence of Blake on Yeats is seen throughout his poetry. The central theme of *The Tower* is the
“poet’s reaction to his own physical infirmity wrought by Time. He has lost his bodily strength and yet he cannot accept his old age without remonstrance. The paradox is that with his decreasing vitality, he has gained immensely in powers of the mind, in the gift of imagination”. (Chatterjee, 104).

He continues to know that less than all cannot satisfy man, yet his decrepit age threatens to make his desire merely grotesque. The minute particulars the Muse demands would make of the poet an object of derision, yet how can ‘imagination ear and eye…be content with argument and deal/In abstract things?’(Collected poems, 219) To this apparently insoluble dilemma the meditative second part of the poem provides no resolution, but it provides something better, a thorough rejection of all self-pity and all imagination-destroying remorse.

Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an Ear and eye
That more expected the impossible-
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly (Collected Poems, 218)

Out of the past, both from history and from his own creating, Yeats calls forth ‘images and memories’, to ask them two questions: do all humans rage against growing old? And more complexly, is it accomplishment or frustration, the woman won or the woman lost, most engages the supposedly mature yet still fantastical imagination? The two questions may seem finally to be one, for Yeats’ art as early as The Wanderings of Oisin was founded upon a rage against growing old, and upon the Shellleyan conviction that the most poetic images are necessarily those of unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. Confronting his own Hanrahan, his reckless antithesis, Yeats asks ironically for all the knowledge that the mythical after-life can gain one of the
labyrinth beings of other selves. The labyrinth image is from Blake, but Hanrahan, is not a very Blakean figure, for he never explored the intricate, great labyrinth of another self, any more than Yeats did. Self annihilation, finally learned by Blake’s Los, was not possible for Hanrahan, or for his creator, for any man. What is immensely moving here is Yeats’ clear self condemnation, for he implicitly states a failure of desire on his part in his love for Maud Gonne.

The second section of *The Tower* is distinguished by its rich symbolism. It shows that the tower is chosen not simply as the emblem of ‘thought’s crowned powers’, but also as the focal point from which may be viewed the turbulent stretches of life, past and present. Like Hanrahan, he turned aside, and could not give all to love. Far in the back ground and yet relevant, is Shelley’s similarly conscious failure in his *Epipsycidion*, where the limitations of selfhood triumph over the poet’s intense love for Emilia Viviani. Hanrahan, in the story *Red Hanrahan’s Curse* felt “a great anger against old age, and all it brought with it,” but his struggle with self never proceeded far enough for him to accept the four sacred emblems-cauldron of pleasure, stone of power, spear of courage, sword of knowledge- that could have been his” (Mythologies, 241). Taken together, the four attributes would have unified him in the image of a Blakean Divine Man, or God. The implication in *The Tower* is that Yeats, like Hanrahan, has failed, but the failure is not less heroic than simpler fulfillment of desire. The past and present are interwoven the canvas gradually widens and assumes a kaleidoscopic pattern. Mrs. French whose servant, divining her wish, clipped an insolent farmer’s ears and brought them in a dish, symbolizes both beauty and an aristocratic pride. The two most significant figures are Hanrahan and Mary Hynes, and in their legends the poet reads the story of his own life. The strange life of Hanrahan a tall, strong, red haired young man has been narrated by Yeats. Mary
Hynes, in whom he finds the replica of Maud Gonne, was a most beautiful woman and an old woman thus describes her in an irresistibly ecstatic language.

“The sun and the moon never shone on anybody so handsome, and her skin was so white that it looked blue and she had two little blushes on her cheeks’ The half-blind Irish poet Raftery made a song about her and described her as ‘the shining flower of Ballylee”. (Chatterjee, 105-106) The story of his peasant beauty and the half blind poet reminds Yeats at once of Homer and Helen and once more the images are mixed up, telescoping the past and the present. Helen symbolizes Maud Gonne.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;

Yet, now I have considered it, I find

That nothing strange; the tragedy began

With Homer that was a blind man,

And Helen has all living hearts betrayed. (Collected poems, 220).

The reference to Helen introduces a new element into the cluster-the image of Maud Gonne and the tragic story of the poet’s love for her. The extraordinary beauty of above mentioned passage is achieved not only by the richness of symbolism, but also, by the sudden shifts of tone, by the purity and simplicity of language and by the incandescent luminousness of the conclusion.

In the third section, of The Tower, as pointed out by Bloom,

Yeats turns to what is left, as his dream drunken Hanrahan could not. Like Hanrahan, the poet has not attained Unity of Being, and so finds himself at the impasse of knowing perfection neither in his life nor in his work. But nothing in the first section, with its conflict of active imagination and fading nature, or in the second with its parallel conflict of imagination
and the unfading self, compels the poet to surrender his
Blakean and Shelleyan pride in the continued autonomy of the
imagination. (Bloom, 351-352)

Whitaker boldly, claims more for Yeats here, and speaks of a pride “that is not
the ego’s apprehensive desire to possess and dominate but the whole being’s exultant
sense of creative giving” (Whitaker, 198). This is to grant Yeats more than he dared to
assert for himself. There is, one needs to admit, much Anglo-Irish posturing and drum
beating in Part third and much purely, Yeatsian striking of attitudes as well. Here, the
poem is in decline and its celebration of “excessive dramatization” that Yvor Winters
has urged so vigorously against Yeats’ work. As Winters remarks of Yeats’ ideal, “the
gentlemen should be violent and bitter… and they should be fond of fishing”
(Winters, 5). Yeats’ ‘upstanding men’ are not attaching themselves to tyrants, but they
are to show equal contempt for historical victims of tyranny, and we begin to feel that
the excited imagination the poet insists he still possesses is perhaps not the most
mature of imaginations. A touch of the Wordsworthian “sober coloring” which Yeats
despised is needed to temper the “headlong light” of an old man’s pride.

After the uncertainties of Sailing to Byzantium. The Tower explores the
possibilities of a different kind of poetic Imagination and as a result achieves some
measure of confidence. As, pointed out by Raymond Cowell,

The poet begins by facing up to the suggestion that with old age
he should turn aside from the more intense aspects of life and
‘be content with argument and deal/In abstract things;’ things
idealistic philosophies of Plato and Plotinus. Here Plotinus a
neo-Platonist of the third century, is linked with Plato as being
out of touch with human life, but when The Tower appeared
Yeats added a note retracting his statement about both of them, saying that he was wrong to ‘see them as all transcendence’.

(Cowell, 79).

In *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats knew something of the dangers of the esoteric uses of the imagination, and so, in the second section of the poem, he brings to life through his poetic powers not golden Byzantine sages but figures from local Ballylee legend. These are his new singing-masters and he calls them to life, as he had the sages, to ‘ask a question of them all.’ These figures teach him, through the glimpse his imagination affords him of their vitality, the folly of turning aside from life, however old one might be, a point reinforced by the implicit counsel of his own poetic creation, Red Hanrhan, who shows him at the end of the second section the folly of being guided by such abstractions as pride, cowardice or conscience. Whereas in the previous poem *Sailing to Byzantium* the sages admittedly at his own request, led his imagination away from life, here the blind poet Raftery and the rest lead him back to life so that, he is reconciled to life, he can declare his faith in man, and ‘mock Plotinus’ thought/And cry in Plato’s teeth’ (Collected Poems, What he cries is that man is at the centre of the world, not abstractions. Thus, in the poem as a whole he accepts life, as seen from the vintage point of the tower battlements, and declares his faith that, provided the Imagination retains its vital contact with ordinary human experience, the conventional consequence of old age, retreat into abstractions from actual life, and need to apply to the poet.

The third section of *The Tower* is important in this respect. There are three main divisions in the poem: his proclamation of faith, will, and own plan of living in old age. He declares the human soul as the creator of not only the phenomenal world,
but also of life and death; other symbols in the poem call for comment because of the associative meanings they take on from other poems.

The swan singing its last song in a glittering stream symbolizes lonely, defiant pride, but its meaning becomes more suggestive and complex when the chain of poems containing the swan symbol: *The Wild swans at coole, Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen, Leda and the swan, Coole Park and Ballylee* are remembered for swan symbol. ‘The proud stones of Greece’ symbolize immutable achievement meant in art and are related to Byzantium. (Chatterjee, 108-109)

These two poems *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Tower* can be seen, as part of the continuing Yeatsian dialectic about the relation between the world of Imagination and the real world, a problem which became acute as, with old age impending, the satisfactions of the real world became less obviously realizable to Yeats the man. The basic question behind these two poems is “If the poetic imagination of an ageing man better employed in helping him to escape the ingratitude and indignities of the real world, by creating for him a timeless, aesthetic world, or in helping him to make sense of the real world?” (Cowell, 80). At the end of the poem *The Tower* Yeats has fended off the aesthetic temptations, but temptation will come in this kind again.

Next poem of this Volume *Meditations in Time of Civil War* is a long poem, which is also considered by many critics, as a political poem, because it is based on Yeats’s own experiences at Thoor Ballylee during the fighting between the Republicans and the Free Stators which broke out in the summer of 1921. This poem is divided into seven parts. The first section of the poem, *Ancestral Houses*, is the poet’s nostalgic recreation of the Big Houses in the midst of current disturbance:
Surely among a rich man’s flowering lawns,
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,
Life overflows without ambitious pains;
And rains down life until the basin spills,
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains
As though to choose whatever shape it wills
And never stoop to a mechanical
Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call (Collected Poems, 225).

Echoing a series of poems on the aristocracy, the Renaissance and the Big House (Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation, To a wealthy Man…The People) Ancestral Houses reveals Yeats’ admiration for the heroic past and the influence of Coole and Castiglione’s Urbino upon him. It is Yeats’ turning to the past in the midst of turmoil. Reality, however, is too oppressive for him: ‘Mere dreams, mere dreams.’

In the following lines, the conflict in his mind lends complexity to his verse, with the turn of thought faithfully registered by such connectives as ‘yet’ and ‘though’, which also, exemplify his passionate syntax:

Yet Homer had not sung
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams
That out of life’s own self-delight had sprung
The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems
As if some marvelous empty sea-shell flung
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,
And not a fountain, were the symbol which
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich (Collected Poems, 225).
In the following stanza, ambivalence, which has been so outstanding a quality of *Easter 1916*, enriches the poem once again:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day… (Collected poems, 225).

While reminding one of the hard-riding gentry whose wasteful virtues Yeats extols, violent men’reiterate the artist’s alignment with the nobility in Urbino and Ferrara. Encompassing a wide gamut of moods (nostalgia, affirmation, and regret over the crumbling of ancestral houses), the poem is woven into a coherent whole by the subtle interplay of images, made possible by his increasingly comprehensive treatment of Irish subject-matter. Fountain imagery in the first stanza, for example, is taken up by the ‘glittering jet’ in the second stanza, which is in turn enriched by words contributing to the same effect: ‘rains’, ‘spills’, ‘rich streams’, ‘fountain’. Woven into the fountain image is the stone image, which suggests that greatness is a compound on the one hand of violence and bitterness and on the other of gentleness and sweetness. The oxymoron, which Yeats regularly resorted to after *Easter 1916* and the stone image reinforce the idea of sweetness out of bitterness. The complex meaning is condensed in an image that registers the unanalysable experience in life and the poet’s attitude which was foreshadowed, as we have seen, in *Easter 1916*.

Heather Glen has taken exception to *Ancestral Houses* for the following reason:

Even where Yeats tries to image the aristocratic life more explicitly-the “rich man’s flowering lawns” and “planted
hills”—the images embody little understanding of what such a life might involve … Though he dramatizes the movement of his own responding mind vividly, he seems strangely unable to convey a clear understanding of that to which he responds … What is missing is a sense of rigorous, defining intelligence. (Glen, 30).

In Ancestral Houses, Yeats does not, try to be explicit, nor does he want to make the picture clear and definite with the kind of detail Jonson introduces in “To Penshurst.” He can paint vivid pictures if he so wishes: witness The Wild Swans at Coole or Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931. However, in this poem, Ancestral houses and the kind of life they stand for are not meant to be particular houses in a particular setting; for Yeats is not aiming at picture-painting or enumerating details on the naturalistic plane. They have wider implications that radiate into symbols. And as such, they need not, and, sometimes, should not be too clear out or too sharply defined, as Glen obviously wants them to be. To enrich the symbolic significance of the life described and suggested in Ancestral Houses, the poet must needs refrain from counting the petals of the flower. That Yeats’ purpose differs from Johnson’s is at once clear if we attach due importance to “And not a fountain, were the symbol which/Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.” (Variorum, 418).

Nor does Yeats lack the sense of rigorous, defining intelligence. Symbols are Yeats’ means of organizing experience and integrating it with his philosophy. If Ancestral Houses is Yeats’ attempt at finding meaning in the past symbolized by rich men’s lawns and escutcheoned doors. My House is an attempt at attaching meaning to his own house, pitching it in the ‘tumultuous spot’ of present-day Ireland. Though threatened by war; his house is linked to the past:
An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can bleak in flower,
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable (Collected Poems, 226).

Apparently turning on his own activity, he is able to define what he sees it to mean. ‘Old ragged elms’ and ‘old thorns’ looked at in the proper context, especially when preceded by the symbolic rose, mirror a larger world outside. The disturbance in

The stilted water-hen
Crossing stream again

Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows…(Collected Poems, 226).

ceases to be mere scene-painting. It is a pointer to the turbulence of the world. Integrated with the same symbolic framework, the winding stair, the house and the candle in

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page . . . (Collected Poems, 226).

Take on emblematic meaning. They express all that the artist’s creative intensity and demonic rage can build in long wars and sudden night that is emblems of adversity. Viewed in the light, many apparently unimportant words—‘benighted’ for example have both literal and metaphorical value. His house and his lonely mind, to put it in simpler terms, are light in the midst of darkness, chaos and disorder. They are emblems that link the past with future generations.

Emphasizing the same ideas as in the first and second sections, third section

My Table which resorts to a different set of symbols which amplifies the ‘glittering
jet,’ ‘ancient bridge ‘and ‘ancient tower’. Meditating upon seemingly trivial objects in time of civil war, Yeats again sees in them symbolic meaning, with the sword standing for art, the product of a stable society which enjoyed Unity of Being.

An equally great success is achieved in The Road at My door, in which Yeats brings the external world to bear upon his own world. Apparently trivial details are turned to account and the consciousness of the poet is faithfully dramatized. Without much effort, the intrusion of the outside world into his private world is introduced:

An affable Irregular,
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were

The finest play under the sun (Collected Poems, 229).

The phrase ‘murderous innocence’ suggests that the murderousness of the sea waves is not designed and calculated, it is irrational force symbolizing the irrational stream of violence that would flood the world. In another poem, I See phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness hover on the tower-top and symbolize the coming emptiness:

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,
Amist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,
Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind’s eye (Collected Poems, 229).

The Tower and many of its furnishings took on deep significance. For example, the winding stair which leads up the tower was an emblem of the spiritual
ascent, with some side reference to the visionary gyres, which could be conceived of as the antinomy of spirit and matter or of heaven and earth.

A Sword given him by Japanese named Sato was a symbol of life, its silk-embroidered sheath a symbol of beauty while outside in the garden flowered ‘the symbolic rose’. Yeats touch turned all to symbol. The rose was one of the symbols he used in the ‘nineties’, but then it was always far off and remote, while he grew on his property. Yeats heads the sections of his Meditations in Time of Civil War that old Castle of the Heroes of which he had once dreamed as a kind of ethereal temple of the spirit is a microcosm where he and his family live, and where life is condensed and controlled by the machinery of symbolism. (Ellmann, 242-243).

Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen is also a poem written during the war. Like Meditations it expresses a negative view of Ireland and the world in general, the sense of loss of culture, gentility and hereditary station, and the fear of war. Despite his earnest wish, he realizes that is impossible to maintain the aristocratic tradition;

Many ingenious lovely things are gone
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
Protected from the circle of the moon
That pitches common things about.

This poem was prompted by incidents which occurred during the fighting between the Irish Republican Army and The British forces Army combined with Irish Police force in 1919. Though a bitter reflection upon the Irish scene and the Irish like Meditations in Time of Civil war, it differs from it in that it brings out more clearly the
problem which violence and war raised for Yeats in his crisis over Irish identity. The impact of the Black and Tan war enabled him to translate the present state of Ireland into a horrifying picture. Violence, the following lines imply, is the order of the Day:

Now days are dragon–ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot–free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pierced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

“As in Meditations in Time of Civil War, he transforms such violence into a powerful vision that symbolizes the blood dimmed tide in which, says Graham Hough, “the decay of the liberal and humanitarian tradition is most searchingly analyzed.” (Hough, 249). The horror of 1917-21 is depicted as a shattering experience. ‘Dragon–ridden’, ‘nightmare /rides upon sleep’ are powerful by virtue of their apparent vagueness.

In the first section Yeats evokes the unexpected brutality of war, moving from the destruction of ancient Athens’s sacred olive and its artifacts to his contemporary Ireland, and then reverting to Athens. As, Raymond Cowell says,

This is the poem of profound and scathing self-criticism and reorientation. Surveying the evidence for the universality of the destructive impulse in all ages and civilizations, he looks back to the optimistic beliefs he had shared with Lady Gregory and
others and makes a cruelly unfair indictment of them
(Cowell, 82):

We too had many pretty toys when young;
A law indifferent to blame or praise,
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong
Melt down; as it were wax in the sun’s rays;
Public opinion ripening for so long (Collected Poems, 233).

The central emotions of the poem are beautifully presented through the
symbolic comparison of the soul to a swan, at once beautiful and pathetic;
The wings half spread for flight, the breast thrust out in pride
Whether to play, or to ride
Those winds that clamour of approaching night (Collected Poems, 235).

Thinking of how ‘cracked pated’ his early ideals now seem, he is tempted to
despair, yet, like the swan, those ideals had a kind of fragile beauty. Nothing is more
typical of Yeats’ mature style, nor more revealing of his emotional integrity and
strength, than the juxtaposition of the beauty and mystery of the swan symbol with the
contemptuous colloquialism, ‘crack pated.’ The tone of self mockery is prominent
throughout the poem, but there is a dramatic change of direction as Yeats turns on the
cynics, the mockers, who are incapable of cherishing any ideals, and says that they
equally deserve and receive mockery. The poem ends with a vision of evil gathering
force as he presents a wild procession of witches, which concludes with a symbol of
universal depravity, the tributes, ‘bronzed peacock-feathers, red combs of her cocks,
offered by a witch to her incubus; his age, Yeats implies offers similar tributes to the
forces of chaos and evil.
In the next poem *Leda and Swan*, where Yeats presents his historical philosophy with immense dramatic force. Yeats tells us in a note on the poem that it began as a political poem, written at the request of an editor of a political publication, and his summary of his original political intention makes it seem likely that it would have been fascist in tone. As Raymond Cowell says, “He begins by saying that the ‘individualist, demagogic movement’ is exhausted and goes on. Metaphor takes over from personal opinion, so that the finished poem—over which Yeats took immense pains—retains no trace of the original political intention.” (Cowell, 84) It presents what Yeats saw as the moment of Birth of Greek civilization—the rape of Leda by Zues, in the form of a swan, an event at once horrifying and awe-inspiring as symbolic of the subsequent course of that civilization:

A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead (Collected Poems, 241).

*Leda and Swan* is another illustration of this method. The Leda-story gives in the form of a myth the primitive Hellenic conception of the Union of the spiritual with the physical. Zeus in the form of a swan varied born Clytemnestra and Helen. This violent portentous union of opposites is depicted by Yeats through a few stark, deadly, catastrophic images. The swan suggests wild sexuality which is reinforced by the description of Leda’s loosening thighs and this takes us to the catastrophic doom of Agamemnon. The terrible beauty of Helen which Homer celebrated in his epic, the flames of burning Troy and the tragic intensity of the Aeschylean triology—all are recaptured in three sharp, precise, staggering images:

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead (Collected Poems, 241).
The burning of Troy symbolizes the end of a cycle and becomes linked with the annunciation image; the Troy image recalls at once the beauty of Helen, and also of Maud Gonne whose revolutionary activities were designed to destroy the old order of Ireland. Helen, Clytemnestra and Maud Gonne are fused into each other and the licking flames of the burning walls illuminate their faces; the vast hiatus of time and space is bridged over and the two epochs are telescoped (Chatterjee, 120).

Helen of Troy symbolizes Maud Gonne. According to Ellmann, Leda would open her knees to the swan and begin a new age. The bird’s rape of the human, the coupling of God and woman, the moment at which one epoch ended and another began, the antinomies engendering breast to breast; in the act which included all these Yeats had the violent symbol for the transcendence of opposites which he needed. (Ellmann, 245-246).

After celebrating it in verse almost as miraculous as the event described, the poet suddenly demands whether copulation has resolved, if only for an instant, that last antinomy of knowledge against power:

Being *so* caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (Collected Poems, 241).

Could power and knowledge ever exist together in this world, or were they, as he had reason to suspect, contraries ever at war? Was wisdom the ripe the fruit obtainable only when the sense of taste was gone.
In the poem *Among School Children*, the structure of the poem more thoroughly reflects the total complexity. During his senate term as Senator Yeats was a member of a government committee commissioned to investigate the state of Irish education, and this poem, of June 1926, is based on a visit he paid to school with a reputation for modern and enlightened methods. St. Ottern’s Waterford, which used the Montessori method with its four to seven year olds and placed a similar emphasis on spontaneity and self expression throughout the school. Though the poem as a whole is, as he calls it in a letter a curse upon old age, the educational content is essential to its meaning. In the first stanza, youth as represented by the children, and age, represented by ‘a kind old nun’ a teacher.

The scene is a schoolroom which Yeats is inspecting. As he looks at the children and hears from a nun about the modern educational methods, he is struck by the contrast between the children and himself, now sixty years old. His mind is carried back to a day in his youth; when his beloved (Maud Gonne) told him of an incident in her school days, they had seemed suddenly, momentarily blended together by sympathy into a sphere or the yolk and white of one shell. “This image of opposites reconciled points the way towards the poem’s conclusion, but lasts only an instant; the recollection makes him wonder whether Maud once resembled these children, and suddenly her image as she must have been when a child floats into his mind”.(Ellmann, 255-256) It gives way to the image of her as an old woman. Both she and he though handsome once, are now old scarecrows.

As Ellmann points out, Filled with horror at the contrast, the poet says that no mother, if she could see her son at sixty years, would consider motherhood worthwhile. Even the greatest philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, are but ‘scarecrows when their fame has come’ and their greatest achievements are nothing.
In the two last stanzas he declares that only images escape the disintegration of age; the mother worships an image of her son just as the nun worships an image of God. Only images are real they are ‘self born’ being perfect and unageing, they mock man’s enterprise they are the symbols of heavenly glory. He explores in stanzas five and six the ravages of time a baby’s shape soon becomes, after a brief period of beauty, an old man’s shape, and stanza six asserts, intellectual beauty and power fare no better. Thus, mothers and lovers are tortured and mocked by images of mortal, transient beauty. The kind old nun by his side reminds him of those who dedicate themselves to religion, but he says, these people of a different kind of image, and of the love felt by those who dedicate themselves to religion but he says these people are no less cruelly tortured, though very differently whereas human images torture mothers and; lovers through their transience and changes, these religious images, which keep a marble or a bronze repose, also break hearts because of their coldness and lack of change. Human love and religious love are both mocked by these images or presences ‘though the kinds of mockery are antithetically different.’ At this point, therefore, the poem is poised on the cruel paradox that both change and lack of change mock and torment mankind. This is a paradox; Yeats attempts to resolve this paradox by presenting images which are more inclusive than the images of the first seven stanzas.

In the final stanza the poet imagines heavenly glory a place, or more likely a state where body and soul are united as he and his beloved had seemed united that day long before. Triumphing in his theme, he changes in the last stanza from declarative statement to apostrophe or secular adoration of the completed symbol of heavenly glory:
Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor blear –eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut –tree, great –rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (Collected Poems, 244-245).

Dance is used by Yeats as a symbol. This symbol of the dance, as seen as a kind of cyclical determinism, a predestined round which all men must tread, has left many traces on his poetry.

Some of the major themes of this Volume The Tower are discussed in this chapter. Magic is primarily spiritual form in this collection, replacing religion as a place to turn in a time of distress. Yeats was brought up in a protestant family, turned to theosophy. Later on, Theosophy, a set of beliefs that declares that all religions hold some measure of truth, tends toward the fantastical in practice. Yeats attended séances and exercised what he called “Automatic writing”. Writing funneled through a poet. These magical trappings are evident in many poems in The Tower, including the speaker’s ability to call on the “sages” in Sailing to Byzantium. Magic provides one possible solution to the crisis that the poet puzzles over throughout this collection.

Fishing is another theme used in this Volume. The activity of fishing appears throughout this collection as a metaphor for youth, life, and heath. Yeats uses it to counteract the images of aging. The most common, variations on the image of “tattered rags on a stick,” is the inverse of fishing. Instead of controlling the rod, a
symbol of virility, the aged man is himself trapped, no longer the fisher but the fished. Fishing holds not only a symbolic but a historical significance for Yeats, who used to fish during his childhood in the hills of County Sligo. The fish leaping in the water is a common trope for fertility, and Yeats’ special mention of salmon leaping upstream is biologically correct and also possible comment on the Irishman’s stubborn and heroic nature. In *The Tower*, Yeats leaves the fishermen his pride in his “will”. Although he is no longer one of the young, he seems to identify with and admire them.

Theme of Destruction also, occurs in this volume. In keeping with the collection’s more general theme of death, Yeats supplements the images of decay with those of active destruction. In addition to nature and time playing an active part in the destruction of the human body, other humans may also choose to destroy one another. In many poems, the speaker seems afraid of the former and horrified by the later. Part of the horror of destruction is an intrinsic belief in the goodness of beauty and the human body. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* Yeats describes the destruction of an ancient statue and the mob’s complete disregard for its beauty or historical significance. Of course the more salient destruction that the IRA and Black and Tans carried out was killings. In mourning the destruction of a beautiful statue, the poet creates a symbol for the slain human and affirms its beauty and significance. Images of Destruction, whether they be killings as in *Meditations in a Time of Civil war* or less direct references, appear most frequently in the more political poems in this collection.

The Moon appears so often in this collection that its significance must be weighed. It is the counter symbol to the destruction that plagues must of the rest of the
collection; it is the female force. But although it is a peaceful symbol, the moon also has an edge of danger. Yeats often compares the moon to a beautiful woman, or draws parallels with Maud Gonne, the woman who refused to love him back. Yeats plays on the word ‘lunacy’ to support the ancient myth that madness and the moon were tied together. This, together with the moon’s feminine associations, implies that woman; too derive men mad. This is in keeping with the theme of unrequited lust.

Unrequited lust is also important theme used in this collection. Part of the experience of aging seems to be the loss of physical attractiveness. In A Man Young and Old, the speaker mourns, ‘my arms are like the twisted thorns/and yet there beauty lay.’ The speaker has been in and out of love but desire for young woman still remains. This is part of the contradiction of a young spirit trapped in an old man’s body. Classicism is another theme used in this volume. A poet so preoccupied with the issue of aging is naturally also preoccupied by the issue of immortality. Critics have explained the shift away from Irish and toward Classical mythology, once again, with Yeats’ friendship with Pound and his interest in the modernist literary movement. Putting this aside however, Irish mythology is much more vague about immortality than Greek or Latin: in which Gods, and some of their favored mortals, live forever. This may explain the hopeful color that references to Juno and Athena add to some of these poems, and the explicitly classical theme. Danger is another theme used in many poems of this collection.

Danger is ever present in this collection, whether it is through age, broken heartedness, or violence. Much of Yeats’ description of danger has to do with a heightened time scheme: all men age, but the speaker in poem Youth and Age seems worried about imminent death. All men die, but the speaker in Meditations in a Time
of Civil War is likely to face sudden death at the hands of intruders. Danger, characterized by a heightened urgency, creates uncertainty, and that is a dominant mood in The Tower. Continuity is represented in this collection by art, especially sculpture. Once this is destroyed by the mob, there is no telling what or whom the mob will destroy next. The mood is not confined to Yeats alone, but is visible in much of the literature written directly after world war first.
Work Cited


Chapter Four

The Winding Stair and Other Poems, Words for Music Perhaps and a Woman Young and Old

This chapter deals with themes and symbols of the Collection of poems called \textit{The Winding stair and Other Poems}(1933), the book, \textit{The Collected Poems of W.B.Yeats} includes \textit{Words for Music Perhaps}, and \textit{A Woman Young and Old}. \textit{Words for Music Perhaps}, which contains the Crazy Jane poems, was published in 1932 by the Cuala Press, but \textit{The Winding Stair and Other Poems}, of 1933 appears first in the \textit{Collected Poems} and, as always with Yeats’s arrangement of his work, this is the logical order in which to consider the two Volumes. \textit{The Winding Stair and Other Poems} marks the transition from a social preoccupation of \textit{The Tower} to the intense, manic vision presented in \textit{Words for Music Perhaps} having as its primary preoccupations a concern with women, particularly Lady Gregory, and with Yeatsian aesthetic, so that the tone is personal but has behind it references to society and to Yeats’s life and thought which are absent from \textit{Words for Music Perhaps} (Cowell, 95).

The Title of \textit{The Winding stair and Other Poems} is probably an allusion to Dante’s winding stair which leads from the ordinary, corrupt world to an ideal, celestial world. The temptation is to climb the winding stair, and leave irksome actualities behind, but Yeats characteristically resists the temptation in favour of ordinary life, even if it can sometimes seem to be merely ‘a blind man battering blind men’. For Yeats, it is clear by now; the Imagination is firmly established as a means of celebrating and vindicating human life, not of escaping from it.
The Winding stair and Other Poems begins with an elegy on Gregory sisters, called In Memory of Eva Gore –Booth and Con Mickiewicz. In this poem as pointed out by, Raymond Cowell, “he uses his poetic powers to insult these two sisters, once the beautiful daughters of Lissadell, now mere shadows”. (Cowell, 96). Their political convictions have achieved nothing permanent, but the poet says he can undo the ravages of Time. Man is at the centre of the universe ‘We the great gazebo built’ (Collected Poems, 264) and the poet proves this by recreating their former beauty, wresting it from the ‘shears’ of Time:

The light of evening, Lissadell
Great windows open to the south
Two girls in silk Kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle. (Collected Poems, 263).

This poem describes what politics or abstract causes could make of a beautiful woman. It laments the ruin of Gore-Booth sisters have fallen into because of their fanaticism. The complexity in tone and feeling is due to the poet’s ambivalence attitude towards the personae’s heroism, which he partly admires and partly harbours doubts about:

Dear shadows, now you know it all
All the folly of a flight
With a common wrong or right. (Collected Poems, 264)

There is tenderness as well as pity. The tension set up between various tones in the poem is comparable with that of Easter 1916 which can be easily explained by his close relationship with the sisters. In the first four lines, Yeats rapidly projects a series of images in a phantasmagoric procession which must be apprehended spatially rather than sequentially; they demand almost simultaneous apprehension despite
limitations imposed by topography. It is as if the speaker breathlessly conjured up those images that most powerfully recall the tranquil beauty of the Lissadell of his youth. The four lines consist of only nouns without verb or an adverb phrase of time. Economically fixed, the images give the poem a contrapuntal effect, which James Joyce has tried so hard to achieve in *Ulysses*. But though they are contrapuntal, they exist beyond the temporal scale and are timeless. Only the essentials remain; nothing is superfluous. Like Symbols, what belongs to every day accident and the ever–changing world has been transformed into a permanent pattern of order and beauty. It gives a complete picture of the two sisters in their youth: light’, ‘windows’, ‘south’, ‘south kimonos’, and ‘gazelle’. The image is one of silky delicacy and warmth, suggesting oriental grace. Ravages of Time, is shown in the poem as time passes beauty is destroyed.

The theme of death or Old age is seen in this poem. Yeats’s keen awareness of old age is marked in these volumes and in this poem. Demise of the aristocracy and despair at the vanity of human grandeur is seen ‘We the great gazebo built.’ (Collected Poems, 264). Yeats poetry explored ‘Nature’. Here in this poem transience in Nature’s beauty is shown as in these lines.

But a raving autumn shears

Blossom from the summer’s wreath (Collected Poems, 263).

Another theme in this poem is ‘Quest for truth which is fundamental, whether experienced through the emotional self, reason, imagination or at the expense of sanity. Truth that is philosophical, the wisdom of old age is shown in these following lines:

Dear shadows, now you know it all,

All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right

The Innocent and the beautiful

Have no enemy but time (Collected Poems, 264).

The poem ends on a wild, exultant note as the poet rejoices in his power to burn through time and its consequences. This is a great poem simply because within it Yeats justifies his claims for poetry by recreating a timeless beauty. What one remembers from the poem is not the unhappiness and gauntness of old sisters but the beauty and grace of their youth.

In the next poem, Death, the tone of defiance continues. This poem is written on the assassination of Kevin O’Higgins, where man confronted with death, behaves not like a ‘dying animal’ but ‘casts derision’ on death. Kevin O’Higgins was the Irish Free State’s Minister of Justice who was shot dead on his way to Mass. He had been in favour of the government’s policy in the civil war of executing anyone captured carrying arms and Yeats regarded him as the one man of strong intellect in the Free State Government. The poet contrasts death of an animal with that of man, and one man of superior worth, in particular. The theme of Death is again discussed by Yeats. He is discussing Irish leader and his death shows his interest in Politics.

In the poem A Dialogue of Self and Soul, Yeats tips the balance in favor of life in this world. While Soul argues for the deliverance from ‘the crime of death and birth’, Self that has the last word in the debate, wants ‘to commit the crime once more’ (Collected Poems, 266) and says that there is no point in escaping from all this rich experience of life:

A living man is blind and drinks his drop.

What matter if the ditches are impure?

What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure the toil of growing up; . . .
I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog –spawn of a blind man’s ditch,
A blind man battering blind man; . . .
I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought; . . . (Collected poems, 266).

Self undoubtedly prefers earthly life, even if that life is cast into a blind man’s ditch, to the heavenly glory which the soul advocates. The self is looking forward to its escape from the cycle of reincarnations into nirvana or the Thirteenth sphere, but on the contrary, comes to the triumphant recognition of the tragic joy, the bitter sweetness that is involved in the acceptance of life. Thus, logically, the poem ends on a fairly happy note:

We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. (Collected Poems, 267).

The moment of insight or sense of beatitude does not exclusively belong to the saint. “In a letter to Mrs. Shakespeare on he says that he gives in poem *Vacillation the* poetic utterance to the same kind of experience” (Letters to Olivia Shakespeare, 785-786 from The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. by Allen Wade) which reminds us of the lines quoted above:

And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless. (Collected Poems, 284).
The same theme of life and after life is picked up in *Vacillation* in which the same characters Soul and Self under the name Soul and The Heart appear. The poem opens by posing a profound question: ‘What is joy’ (Collected Poems, 282). This question is asked in the larger context of the scheme of human life which is full of antinomies. Death, at its best, can only destroy these antinomies; it cannot reconcile them. In the second section the poet attempts to answer the elusive question posed in the first. The symbolic tree, ‘half all glittering flame and half all green’, represents body and soul. The poet identifies himself with the priest in the Attis ritual according to which the priest hangs the image of a God on the scared tree. This act is symbolic of one’s willing surrender of experience for the sake of honoring one’s God, because it is said that devotees of Attis castrated themselves at the festival. By making this sacrifice, one does not attain supreme knowledge, but experiences an ecstasy which one ‘knows not grief’; yet the poet is not certain if this could be called joy. After all, how is it possible for a realist to enjoy unalloyed happiness in the face of the reality of all consuming transience? Even that symbolic tree with its ‘branches of the night and day /Where the gaudy moon is hung’ (Collected Poems, 285) is born out of the ‘blood–sodden heart’ of the mortal man. There is nothing enduring in life; even art like its creator dies its death. Hence the cry ‘Let all things pass away’.

Taking its cue from this idea of evanescence, the Soul enters into debate with the Heart which constitutes the thematic center of the poem. Since all things pass away, the Soul urges the Heart to abandon things that seem and seek out reality which endures:

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.

The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?

The Soul. Isaiah’s coal, what more can man desire?
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!

The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin? (Collected Poems, 285).

The Soul argues that artists should try to escape from the ephemeral aspects of life and aspire to the reality or eternity of the Christian heaven. In other words, the Soul exhorts the Heart to accept Christianity and find salvation there. But the Heart refuses to adopt the Soul’s advice, because the former realizes that a religious man’s blissful heaven is the graveyard of an artist. In the Christian heaven a poet would be ‘struck dumb’. Poetry flourishes only in the ‘Complexities of Mire and Blood’ and not in a heaven where there are no conflicts, anti nomies, or passions but only resolution, peace and happiness. Poets from Homer down to Yeats have been concerned with the tantalizing imperfections of human life, the innate defect or ‘the weasel’s twist’ in man, or what the Soul would call ‘original sin’. Poets are committed to the sinful fire of passion rather than to the purifying fire of heaven.

Consequently, in the last section, the poet bids farewell to Von Hugel who in his *The Mystical Element of Religion*, argues that the Christian vision is identical to the artist’s. Yeats admits that his ‘heart might find relief’ in Christian promises is a welcome thing in the tomb. Also, he is one with Von Hugel in accepting ‘the miracles of the saints’ and honoring sanctity. In a letter to Mrs. Shakespeare referring to an earlier version of the last section of this poem, Yeats says “Yet I accept all miracles… why should I doubt the tale that when St. Theresa’s tomb was opened in the middle of the nineteenth century the still undecayed body dripped with fragment oil?” (Letters, 789-790). However, the poet prefers the restless complexities of the here- and now to the salvation and heaven which lies beyond the grave. In the letter quoted above,
Yeats declares that the saint’s choice is not his. He rejects the ‘Comedy’ involved in the life of the saint, who enjoys eternal bliss after death, and accepts the ‘tragedy’ involved in the life of an artist, whose only happy hunting ground is the sinful life of this world, what he calls his ‘predestined part’. Despite the tempting prospect of being released from the Vacillation of his sinful life by the Christian faith, the poet chooses the pagan or Homeric ideal.

I – though heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb play a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has scripture said?
So get you gone, Von Hugel, though with blessings on your head.

The Lion, in Christianity, is a symbol of the Lord, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and the honey comb represents the Promised Land. Here Yeats makes them symbol of the strength of a poet from whose mouth flows the honey of poetry. Despite all his respect for Von Hugel, Yeats finally rejects what scripture has prescribed and celebrates the unchristened living rather than the temptations of heaven.

It is interesting to note that Vacillation is a more poetic and elaborate discussion of what Yeats has said in The Choice: “The intellect of man is forced to choose . . . A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark”(Collected Poem,278). In Vacillation the poet explains why he has chosen the life of an artist, abandoning the heavenly mansion which comes with the choice of the perfection of life which belongs to the saint. As Unterecker, observes, this poem is partially autobiographical.” (Unterecker, 221). The progress of the poem is from Yeats’s
youth the early tree image, through early manhood and middle age ‘fortieth winter’ and ‘My fiftieth Year’ (Collected Poem,283).and finally to his last years of mature wisdom when he makes his final choice. Before he makes that choice, he considers both the possibilities: religion or art. In fact, section seventh of the poem, there is an inner debate an interior dialogue in which he answers to his own doubts. In the last section, dropping the masks of Soul and Heart , the poet speaks in his own voice declaring the dedication of his life to poetry while realizing the risk of losing an eternal heaven involved in that choice.

Next poem is Blood and the Moon as discussed in previous chapter The Tower. The Tower is symbolic against the background of Time, of faded beauty and youth. As, Chatterjee, points out

The Tower symbol, however, takes on many other associations from other poems and represents the poet’s torturous processes of thought. The ‘winding, gyring, spiring’ stair suggests that it requires effort and toil to clamber on and reinforces the image of ‘mysterious wisdom won by toil; the spiral imagery also, signifies that the tower is a part of the revolving historical cycle. ‘ The reference to the famous figures in Irish history, Swift , Grattan , Burke and others makes the tower a symbol of tradition, of national heritage’: Irish history becomes related to Time’s unending march. Elsewhere it becomes a symbol of violence, and of blood thirstiness: (Chatterjee, 111)

A bloody, arrogant power

Rose out of the race

Uttering, mastering it,
Rose like these walls from these
Storm –beaten cottages (Collected poems, 267).

Like The Tower, Blood and the Moon is also, a poem about the need to stand firm, to triumph over meaningless violence and the tides of change and destruction. It is the most direct statement on the poet’s alignment with eighteenth century Ireland. The Tower is turned into a symbol that unifies the present with the past:

I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair;
That Goldsmith and the dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there.
(Collected Poems, 268).

To Yeats, Burke, Swift, and Grattan are symbols of a glorious Ireland, whose people have “created the most of the modern literature of the country and the best of its political intelligence”. (Jeffares, 265). To him, they each represented some quality that he admired:

As, mentioned in Essays and Introductions,

Born in such a community, Berkeley with his belief in perception, that abstract ideas are mere words, Swift with his love of perfect nature, of the Houyhnhnms, his disbelief in Newton’s system and every sort of machine, Goldsmith and his delight in the particulars of common life that shocked his contemporaries, Burke with his conviction that all states not green slowly like a forest tree are tyrannies, found in England the opposite that stung their thought into expression and made it lucid. (Essays and Introductions, 402).
Yeats expresses a similar distaste for the cold aloofness symbolized by the moon, and re-affirms an allegiance to life:

For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
Like everything that has the stain of blood,
A property of the living. (Collected Poems, 269).

As pointed out by Cowell, the poet must assert creative power of the human imagination, not capitulate to pessimism or despair, Yeats constantly implies, and in the magnificently sardonic Three Movements he writes his own version of literary history, seeing an ever-increasing failure of nerve and imaginative strength:

Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land;
Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand;

What are all those fish that lie gasping on the strand? (Collected Poems, 271).

A similar point is made symbolically in The Crazed Moon. “He sees contemporary poetry as being an escapist, concerned only with sources of inspiration long since exhausted, and therefore dying of inanition.”(Cowell, 98-99). The gist of this is expressed in the supremely daring and original image:

Crazed though much child –bearing
The moon is staggering in the sky. (Collected Poems, 273).

The traditional symbol of purity has never been more effectively stood on its head. The third stanza of the poem is reminiscent of The Stare’s Nest by my Window, where Yeats said that his generation’s heart grew brutal from the exclusive fare of fantasy:

Fly catchers of the moon,
Our hands are blenched, our fingers seem
But slender needles of bone;
Blenched by that malicious dream
They are spread wide that each

*Coole Park, 1929* is a poem which is partly engendered by an Irish disturbance of the Civil War. This is a Political poem, on war. Here the poet tries to create ‘emblems of adversity’ out of Coole and asserts his values in the midst of destructive forces:

I meditate upon a swallow’s flight,
Upon an aged woman and her house,
A sycamore and lime-tree lost in night
Although that western cloud is luminous,
Great works constructed there in nature’s spite
For scholars and for Poets after us (Collected Poem, 274).

By now Yeats is absolute master of his craft. The setting, so effortlessly arranged, is comparable with the opening of the Lissadell poem: The first line with the image of the swallow anchors the theme, preparing us for the third stanza, in which people ‘came like swallows and like swallows went’. The landscape described is not merely scene—painting. Put in the context of ‘night’ and ‘nature’s spite’, ‘sycamore’, ‘lime—tree’ and ‘great works’ all evoke symbolic associations.

What Coole has so far meant to Yeats once again finds expression in poetry. All the values the Big House stand for are further emphasized in the third stanza, in which place, people and bird become inter-related symbols, with Lady Gregory as the axis upon which the symbols wheel:
They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman’s powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass point,
Found certainty upon the dreaming air,
The intellectual sweetness of those lines
That cut through time or cross it withers shins. (Collected Poems, 274).

The beautiful cadence of the lines and the graceful movement of the chiasmus in ‘They came like swallows and like swallows went’ collaborate with the beautiful image and liquid sound pattern. The long Vowels in ‘keep’, ‘dreaming’, ‘sweetness’, ‘there’ and ‘air’ would scarcely escape notice to conjure up a perfect pattern of order and harmony. The centrifugal movement of the swallows round compass-point functions as a symbol of coherence, giving Yeats, John Synge, Shaw Taylor and Lane the proper orientation, investing their lives and activity with meaning.

Finally, the poem closes by exalting Lady Gregory, who through Yeats’ mythologizing attains increased stature. Transformed into an immortal and accorded the role as such, she will outlive the house in times of change. The mood of the poem reflects the fact that Lady Gregory had been obliged to sell Coole Park to the forestry Department two years previously though allowed to occupy it for the rest of her life. In the poem Lady Gregory emerges as the embodiment of traditional social and spiritual values, which had provided stability for so long. Although the house itself cannot defy time, the values it represents can, and the ‘dance –like glory that those walls begot’ remains as a rallying point.
The realistic optimism and hope of these lines is very touching, but it is modified in the next poem on Coole Park. *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* where the cruel erosion of time is seen as a challenge to poets, which they are not facing up to:

Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
We shift about- all that great glory spent-
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent. (Collected poem, 276).

All is changed now and the traditional Romantic themes, ‘Sanctity and loveliness’, are too fragile to survive in a ‘darkening’ age. The poet must be masterful, a horseman, controlling time rather than being swept along by it. In these two poems, then, Yeats accepts the passing of *Coole Park* has gone he is more fully aware of the responsibilities of his imagination to recreate positive values for a new age.

Up to this point in this Volume, three possibilities have been rehearsed: Time can be defeated by the power of poetic Imagination; Time can be controlled by the force of tradition or personality, as exemplified by Lady Gregory; or Time can uproot man. This last possibility is explored in *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* but it is soon dismissed as a defeatist thought. But of course, Yeats is aware of the dangers implicit in this concept of a powerful, controlling Imagination. (Cowell, 99-100).

This poem is an attempt to erect an emblem in adversity; it has its genesis in contemporary unrest. Like, *Coole Park, 1929*, it also gives symbolic significance to the topography and incorporates it into his theme—the loss of ‘traditional sanctity and loveliness’ (Collected Poems, 276) lamenting the decline of the Big House, which
stands for order and ancient ceremony. The poem opens with a precise description of Ballylee and Coole, with the relationship between them closely linked to Yeats’s friendship with Lady Gregory. Like most descriptions of Irish landscape in his mature poetry, Coole is fused with symbols. To Yeats, the movement of water is the movement of the soul out of light (life) into darkness (death) and again into light, which anticipates the last line of the poem, where the swan drifts upon the darkening flood swans on dark waters symbolize for Yeats the artist who, dying sings in fading light. The journey of the soul through light, darkness and light is suggested by the sweep of the sentence.

Yeats’s treatment of Coole in this poem differs from that in The Wild Swans at Coole. In the earlier poem, the setting has no tragic association and there is the clear serene autumn twilight. In Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931, we have ‘dry sticks under a wintry sun’ (Collected Poems,275) and ‘Nature’s pulled her tragic buskin on’. The tragic mood, already present in Coole Park, 1929 is reflected by the macrocosm outside.

Yeats’ poetical method is illustrated also, in Veronica’s Napkin which unfortunately has not received adequate attention from critics. There are two basic symbols in the poem: Veronica’s Napkin which is germinal image and ‘Berenice’s hair’. As Jesus Christ was bearing the cross to Golgotha, Veronica offered him her handkerchief to wipe his brow; the image of His face became impressed upon it. Berenice was the wife of Ptolemy iii. During her husband’s absence she dedicated her hair to Venus for his safe return and placed it in a temple. Her hair disappeared from the temple by some unknown means: Canon of Samos, the mathematician and astronomer, explained that it was carried to the heavens and was transformed into a constellation. Both the symbols thus become linked with each other and suggest the
idea of Transformation. The napkin was just a commonplace thing; but when the image of Christ was stamped on it, it became profoundly meaningful. Similarly, Berenice’s Hair had nothing more than sheer physical beauty placed among stars; it transcended itself and acquired a resplendent glory. Veronica was a pious, devoted saint, and Berenice proved herself a chaste, faithful wife. This idea of transformation through devotion is built up through a series of images arrayed against one another. The unfolding of the theme may be observed more closely. ‘Heavenly Circuit’ may be taken simply as the sky, as the poet looks at the sky, he gazes immediately at the stars, and the image of ‘Berenice’s hair’ comes to his mind; the image of pole suggest something self contained and constricts of the idea of Heaven ,while the line

    Symbolical glory of the earth and air! (Collected poem, 270).

Suggests an illimitable canvas.

This image of the heavenly canopy has a close resemblance with the Byzantine dome. The image of ‘the circuit of the needle’s eye may have been taken, transferred from the context, from the Christ’s well known saying: ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than a rich man to enter into Kingdom of God. “The ‘circuit of a needle’s eye’ is contrasted with the ‘Heavenly circuit’ so far as physical dimension is concerned, but spiritually it symbolizes the gateway to heaven.

The ‘Pole’ of the second passage is tethered to the earth; to unbelievers the pattern on a napkin dipped in blood is without meaning, but to Veronica and Christ’s disciples the pattern is an image of Christ himself ,and is of profound spiritual import”. (Chatterjee, 115-116).
This idea of transformation is also the basic theme of *Byzantium*.

In *Byzantium* the poet presents a picture in which the two worlds—human and superhuman—are symbolically set face to face evoking unanswerable questions of philosophy and religion. The poem begins with the ‘the unpurged images of day’ (*Collected Poem*, 280). At the dead of night the ‘Great cathedral gong’ sends the nocturnal wanderers singing out of sight. ‘Drunken soldiery’ and ‘night-walkers’ are images or ordinary objects of experience which constitute the external world, and the ‘Cathedral gong’ symbolizes the force and power of the spiritual world. Similarly, the ‘starlit or moonlit dome’ is set against the fury and mire of man’s existence in the world of nature. The dome being round is the traditional symbol of perfection. By associating it with moon and star, the poet makes a clear reference to Phases Fifteen and One on the Great Wheel of his system, and these Phases represent complete spirituality. Also, this image is full of literary echoes: a reversal of Shelley’s famous ‘dome of many coloured glass’. It reminds of Blake’s *Cosmic egg*, of Coleridge’s dome in *Kubla khan* and also, dome of Santa Sophia which is a symbol of heaven and eternity.

In the second stanza Yeats describes ‘Hades Bobbin’ which is the human soul, ‘Shade more than man, more image than a shade’ which sounds somewhat like Eliot’s *Hollowman*, ‘shape without form, shade without colour’ (*Collected Poem, 280*). The image or shade in the second stanza becomes Hades bobbin which in life is bound in the mummy-cloth of experience and which, unwinding the cloth on its return to Hades, suggests interlocking gyres of the Yeatsian symbolic system. This idea that the soul comes from Hades and goes back to the same place after unwinding life’s experience cannot be claimed as a Christian concept concerning the entrance and exit of human souls, even though the entire idea is couched in Christian imagery. The
‘winding’ path is not only experiences of this mundane world, but probably also the cycle of births and deaths or reincarnations, an idea the poet is so fond of. In the poem *Mohini Chatterjee* which immediately precedes *Byzantium* in the *Collected Poems*, Yeats talks about the cycle of rebirths:

Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth- hour and death- hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet (Collected poems, 280).

It is perhaps this thundering time away after the cycle of reincarnation in order to have the birth-hour and death-hour meet that is referred to in the images of ‘Hades bobbin’, ‘Mummy cloth’ and ‘death- in- life’.

From this succinctly symbolic description of the soul’s journey, the poet goes on to another image of the superhuman—‘Miracle, bird or golden handiwork’(Collected Poem,280)—an image located in the world of art .The golden bird is a miracle accomplished by art; it is ‘the artifice of eternity’ which is far superior to common birds. As Ellmann points out, since “Yeats accepts reincarnation in this poem, he is distinguishing between the ‘birds that sing the common strain of the continuing cycle of human lives and those that scorn the cycle and sing only of escape from it; here were the two directions of his own art.”(Ellmann, 220-221). The bird that scorns aloud ‘all complexities of mire and blood’ is the ideal bird which stands outside the flux of time and sings of escape into eternity from the tyranny of time and space. In the earlier poem, Ellmann says that “the sensual life is separated from the spiritual as Ireland from *Byzantium*, but in the later poem the fury and the
mire of human veins, the teeming images, ‘that dolphin- torn, that gong tormented sea’, flood up to the marbles of Byzantium itself, where they are at last brought under control by ‘the golden smithies of the Emperor”. (Ellmann, Man and the Mask, 273).

Gradually the master image of Byzantium must have assumed dominance of the scene. The completed poem has often been taken as a representation of the after-life, and Yeats wished this interpretation to be possible; but to him Byzantium was primarily a description of the act of making a poem. The poet, who is imprecisely identified with the Byzantine emperor takes a welter of images and masters them in an act of creation. This mastery is so astonishing to the poet himself that he calls the creation of his imagination superhuman. “The image of the Golden bird, ‘more miracle than bird or handiwork’(Collected Poems,280) may be understood to represent a poem, the bird sings, as do Yeats’s poems, either like the cocks of Hades of rebirth – the continuing cycle of reincarnating human life, or with greater glory of the eternal reality or beatitude which transcends the cycles ‘and all complexities of mire or blood’.”(The Man and the Mask, 273-274).

In the fourth stanza, Yeats describes the purgatorial process by which the ‘unpurged images of day’ are refined into purged images of night. ‘Neither Fire ’is the central image in this section’ Flames that no faggot feeds nor steel has lit, / Nor storms disturbs, flames begotten of flame’ (Collected poems, 281).and ‘Agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.’ Ellmann readily agrees “with this fire-imagination parallelism or identification when he says that the passage of the spirits of the dead to the other world and their purification is ‘synonymous with the purgative process which a work of art undergoes.”(Identity, 221-222). These processes are among those which Yeats makes equivalent and symbolical of one another. It is possible that the poet implies a similarity between the perfection of after-life and the perfected work of
art. These two symbolically merge in the image of the ‘dance’ which is again a symbol. Yeats uses dance as a symbol in the previous Volume also in the poem *Among School Children*.

The last stanza is controlled by the twin images of ‘dolphin’ and ‘gong’. They bring flesh and spirit face to face in a problematic way. The dolphin, in occult lore, is a traditional symbol of the material vehicle of the soul for journeying across the sea of life and death towards the Almighty. The spirits of the dead, in the poem, come ‘Astraddle on the dolpins mire and blood’ (Collected Poems, 281). The dolphin, in Elizabethan literature, symbolizes that which lives both in and out of its element. Here, by mentioning the ‘mire and blood’ the poet associates the dolphin with the sensual aspect of life. The ‘gong’ on the other hand, symbolizes the world of spirit or eternity, and it comes from the ‘cathedral gong’ of stanza first. The waters of life are torn asunder by the mire and blood of dolphins that carry spirit after spirit across the sea, while at the same time the sea of life is tormented by the gong of eternity. In other words, life is torn asunder by the mire and blood of dolphins that carry spirit after spirit across the sea, while at the same time the sea of life is tormented by the gong of eternity. In other words, life is tormented by the gong of eternity. In other words, life is an intense conflict; it is a tension between spirit and blood. The here and now of human life is eternally haunted by supernatural presences. The golden smithies of the Byzantine Emperor break the flood of life, drive away the furies of complexity and the dross of mire and blood, and break the cycle of reincarnation. Yet the reality is, the poet seems to say that man remains suspended between flesh and spirit and that life forever is ‘That dolphin torn ,that gong –tormented sea’(Collected Poem,281)which has the last word. It is significant to note that the poem does not end with the serene and tranquil acceptance of the supernatural, as it should after breaking all the bitter furies of complexity by the marbles of the dancing floor.
While it is true that one is not sure of a final explication, *Byzantium* undoubtedly is about the poet’s insistence on the reality of the supernatural. However, it would be a mistake to claim that it is a philosophical treatment of the theme of life after death. It is true that the poet makes use of the ideas of purgation and immortality and of traditional images like dolphin, cathedral gong, fire, water, bird; but these ideas and images are used in a poetic context to yield symbolic meaning for events in creative experience. All these purgatorial images are reminiscent of Dante’s work, and it seems that Yeats in his ambitious moments wanted to be like Dante. But he was painfully aware of the fact that it was an impossible dream to be realized in this science-oriented, fact accumulating world. It is not difficult to see how the traditional symbols undergo a change in meaning as they are used in the poem. To point out one example, water is used to represent life. The image of the Golden smithies breaking the flood does not carry any of the regenerative and spiritual meaning that water is associated with in religion. Yeats makes it ocean of tension and conflict, of spirit and blood, the element of disturbance.

Now, Symbols and themes of *Words for Music Perhaps*, Yeats draws on the peasantry, which is consistent with his early poetics. Much has been written about the source of the Crazy Jane group of poems. Of concern here are the concepts and experiences embodied in the poems through their dramatic characters and arresting imagery. It is easy to see that the poet’s often asserted idea of natural impulse against the repressive code of rational morality lies at the root of these poems. It has already been noticed that, as pointed out by Cowell, from about 1917 onwards, women were very important in Yeats’s poetry because of their comparative freedom from intellectual entanglements, and such a figure as Sheba from his earlier poetry anticipates Crazy Jane. It is characteristic of his later period, however, that Yeats
should take his heroine not from Bible but from his own observation. The importance of Crazy Jane is that she is intensely alive; she knows what she is talking about from an experience of life which has given her wisdom without bitterness. The Crazy Jane poems were started in the spring of 1929 after a period of personal depression. His description in a letter of the source of this new inspiration suggests his delight and gratitude:

Crazy Jane is more or less founded on an old woman who lives in a cottage near Gort. She loves her flower garden. She has just sent Lady Gregory some flowers in spite of the season and has amazing powers of acidulous speech—one of her queer performances is a description of how the meanness of a Gort shopkeeper’s wife over the price of a glass of porter made her so despairing of the human race she got drunk. The incidents of the drunkenness are of an epic magnificence. She is the local satirist and a really terrible one. (Letters, 785-786).

In Words for Music Perhaps Yeats is making full use of the speech and life of the peasantry, which, in Supernatural Songs have become for him symbols in the experience of good and evil. The subject of these poems is the need for a complete union of Soul and Body. To deny the body its role, they imply, is to deny man life. Because of Yeats’s comprehensive vision of life, sex is treated with unprecedented realism. More or less founded upon on an old woman who lives in a little cottage near Gort’, Crazy Jane stands folk experience, which apprehends life whole. She is a violent, earthy character:

Jack had my virginity,

And bids me to the oak, for he
(All find safety in the tomb.)

Wanders out into the night
And there is shelter under it,
But should that other come, I spit:

The solid man and the coxcomb. (Collected Poems, 290-291).

That other man is, of course, the bishop. Upholding life-withering morals, he contrasts with Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman and Tom the Lunatic:

The bishop has a skin, God knows,
Wrinkled like the foot of a goose . . .
The heron’s hunch upon his back,
But a birch-tree stood my Jack:

The solid man and the coxcomb. (Collected poems, 290).

While Jane gladly offers her virginity to Jack under the shelter of the oak tree, she spits at the Bishop who reproves her for her sensuality. The explicitly phallic symbols of birch tree and oak tree as appropriate to Crazy Jane in the first poem as the sea-shell which symbolizes the miracle of divine creation to the bishop in the next. The ‘birch tree’ symbolizes masculinity and life. Working by means of sets of oppositions or dialectical Contraries, which foreshadow the Chambermaid and the lady, these poems present different views of life with the poet on Crazy Jane’s side. The Bishop, in Yeats’ opinion, has ruled out life by denying himself sex. Soul and body is complementary; neither can be complete without the other. By coming to grips with the stark facts of life, Crazy Jane lives it whole. The point is clinched by the pun in the last two Para-doXical lines sole-soul, whole-hole. In an equally outspoken manner, Three Things reiterates this belief:
Three dear Things that woman know,
Sang a bone upon the shore;
A child found all a child can lack,
Whether of pleasure or of rest,
Upon the abundance of my breast’:

A bone wave whitened and dried in the wind. (Collected Poems, 300).

The sexual overtone in the last but one line bespeaks Yeats’s increased preoccupation with sex in old age, for he believed that “only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind- sex and the dead”. (Letters, 730).

After reading these poems one can easily judge that they also carry allegorical meaning. Though Crazy Jane is an interesting, terrible character in her own right, she is primarily an Irish symbol; the aged Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The Bishop represents prudence, common sense, social morality and the power of the law against the individual. His primal meaning is as the representative of the Puritan-Catholic conscience in Ireland. As the opposite of the Bishop, Crazy Jane stands for a good deal that Yeats’s held dear about Irish life. His belief in passion, imagination and ecstatic religious feeling are here, as is also his interest in the sordid experiences of life which had access to a higher innocence.

The tension between Crazy Jane and the Bishop can be viewed also as that between the artist and the moralist, the imaginative and the prudential. The intensity of life’s experience, especially those called morally evil by the Bishop’s standards, leads to an Art and a vision of life. This view upon life can, to some extent, be attributed to the Civil War, which sharpened his apprehension of the world. He could now penetrate deep into things and experience, extracting from their essence, which he bodied forth in symbols.
It seems that in *Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment* she speaks for Yeats when she says:

Love is all

Unsatisfied

That cannot take the whole


This idea is later developed in several ways. Answering the Bishop’s admonition to ‘Live in a heavenly mansion’ not in ‘in some foul sty’ Crazy Jane says: ‘Fair and foul are near of kin / And fair needs foul’. (Collected Poems, 294). The concept of the wholeness of experience, of the union of opposites, of spirit and body, and God and sex is the basic philosophy projected in these poems. Jane is the embodiment of the union of opposites. She loves Jack and lets other men use her body while she sings, ‘All things remain in God’ She learns eternal truths in ‘bodily lowliness/ And in the heart’s pride’. (Collected Poems, 294). Fair and foul, spiritual nobility and sexual depravity, love and excrement lie cheek by jowl:

But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not been rent. (Collected Poems, 295).

This is no romantic conception of love by an idealist. It is down to earth realism which strikes the climatic note in the anatomical image in the last line. The Bishop who condemns natural life as evil and asserts the dichotomy of soul and body has failed to see truth in its entirety. Soul and body are two halves of a single entity. A recognition of the sacredness of earth is a prerequisite for the admittance to spiritual
bliss. Sanctity is not a one-way traffic; it applies to both the worlds, natural and supernatural.

The three poems dealing with Old *Tom the Lunatic*, a masculine counterpart of Jane, are primarily concerned with time and eternity, fantasy and reality. Though physically blinded; Tom has the inner vision to see through the superficial flesh into eternal reality that lies behind everything. He makes fun of people who sing ‘penance on the road’ in a perfunctory way and derides those who exist ‘Wrenching, drinking’ which presents a funeral image. However, nothing dies permanently:

> Whatever stands in field and flood,
> Bird, beast, fish or man,
> Mare or stallion, cock or hen,
> Stands in God’s unchanging eye,
> In all the vigour of its blood;
> In that faith I live or die. (Collected Poems, 305).

In *Tom at Cruachan* Yeats metaphorically speaks about the relation between Time and Eternity which explains man’s double nature, for he is the result of mating of the two:

> The stallion Eternity
> Mounted the mare of Time,
> Gat the foal of the world. (Collected Poems, 306).

The Animal Imagery, highly evocative of sexuality, is now transformed into an immense metaphor for the conception both of Christ and of the world: man is both perishable and imperishable, a creature compounded from Time and from Eternity, a dying in destructible thing. Man, in other words, is poised between Eternity and Time, and his humanity depends upon his maintaining contact with both. Man denies his
humanity when he tires of the tension between these two impulses within him. As if anticipating a charge of glorifying ignorance by locating his ideal of humanity in two characters such as *Crazy Jane* and *Tom the Lunatic*, Yeats ends the Volume with a poem in praise of a philosopher, Plotinus, whom he sees as having resisted the temptation to escape from life into the bland detachment of philosophy:

> Behold that great Plotinus swim,
> Buffeted by such seas;
> Bland Rhadamanthus beckons him,
> But the Golden Race looks dim,
> Salt blood blocks his eyes. (Collected Poems, 306).

‘Salt blood’ suggests very strikingly how Plotinus is immersed in human problems, so that his is a human rather than transcendent philosophy. Philosophy need not be ethereal, any more than the life of the emotions need be bestial. Plotinus on the one hand, and *Crazy Jane* and *Tom the Lunatic* on the other, achieves this balance between Time and Eternity and Soul.

In *A Woman Young and Old*, the sexual theme becomes explicit again, as a symbol of the fusion of body and spirit. Through the sexual act men and women can defeat time without forsaking their humanity. As *Chosen* says, in that moment of ‘stillness . . . where his heart my heart did seem’, the tyranny of sequential time is defeated: ‘The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.’ (Collected Poem, 311). As pointed out by Cowell,

> Perhaps the greatest difficulty a writer encounters in dealing
> with a sexual theme is to avoid becoming pompous or didactic.

The poem *Consolation* shows how easily Yeats avoids these dangers. Once again as in *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, the
attitude rejected is the one that thinks of birth as a crime, though Yeats admits that this pessimism has certain intellectual attractions. (Cowell, 110-111)

O but there is wisdom/ In what the sages said’ (Collected Poem,310). However, talking to a beloved woman, he asks her to excuse him while he thanks the sages for providing him with the pessimism whose rejection intensifies his sexual joys:

How could passion run so deep
Had I never thought
That the crime of being born
Blackens all our lot?
But where the crime’s committed
The crime can be forgot. (Collected Poems, 310).

The supreme confidence of the last two lines reflects the depth of Yeats’s convictions, avoiding, through the trace of wit, any suggestion of moral self-righteousness. The positive, defiant disregard of old age shown in the Crazy Jane poems is also reflected in poems in this Volume which are more specifically about old age. ‘Bodily decrepitude’ is seen not as a final sign of emotional exhaustion, but rather as a cloak that can if allowed to, hide a man’s permanent and unfading emotions even from himself. The emotional and human tragedy that can result from this situation is beautifully expressed in Meeting, where an old man and woman, lovers in their youth, greet each other with defensive scorn on meeting, repudiating the emotions of their youth:

Hidden by old age awhile
In masker’s cloak and hood,
Each hating what the other loved,
Face to face we stood. (Collected Poems, 314).

They both hate their own bodies, but still, though neither will admit it, love the body and spirit of the other loved ‘each hating what the other loved’ (Collected Poems, 314). This line in its intense compression is typical of this poem’s tragic insight. They pour scorn on each other in their pride and rage, but the woman sees the situation as it is:

But such as he for such as me-
Could we both discard
This beggarly habiliment-
Had found a sweeter word. (Collected Poems, 315).

This then for Yeats is the greatest temptation of old age, to be deceived by bodily decrepitude into illogical and tragic conclusion that one is old emotionally. It is a deception that Yeats never ceased to rage against.
Works Cited


Chapter Five

A Full Moon in March and The Last Poems

This chapter deals with the themes and symbols of the Collection of poems called The Full Moon in March (1935) and The Last Poems (1936-1939). It seems useful to treat Yeats’s later poems all written during 1933 to 1939- together, almost as if they had appeared in a single volume of poetry. The final sweep of his work is represented in two volumes published during his lifetime, The Full Moon in March (1935) and The Last poems (1936-1939). The first one, The Full Moon in March collection contains a quite small selection of verse under the title Parnell’s Funeral and for the sequence of ten poems of Supernatural Songs. The Last Poems is a wide ranging Volume focusing largely on sexual and political motifs and on growing old. The theme of old age is being discussed in several poems of this phase.

Yeats writes about political figures like Parnell. He writes three poems about him, one is Parnell’s Funeral other two poems are in The Last Poems. A succession of Political poems, sometimes violently nationalistic, sometimes revolted by violence, and sometimes tough mindingly satirical appears in this volume. The title poem Parnell’s Funeral is a vehement attack on what Yeats saw as the betrayal of Parnell by a craven, bigoted, and misled Irish public. The poem opens with a mystical scene of ritual sacrifice. In it a miraculous boy who might have wrought wonders is killed and his heart cut out. Thus it was Parnell, whose downfall is seen as the everlasting shame of the nation.

An age is the reversal of an age:

When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone,

We lived like men that watch a painted stage.
What matter for the scene, the scene once gone. (Collected Poems, 319).

This is the best passage in the poem, which goes on to say that political leaders of a later age would have been able to prevent Civil War and to act more nobly if only they could have ‘eaten Parnell’s heart’ and thus partaken of his courage and wisdom. This poem does several things at the same time. Of primary importance is the apotheosis of the national leader. The cosmic change accompanying Parnell’s death heightens the presentation of the event and belittles the ‘frenzied crowd’ whose depravity is relentless assailed. The image of the hound dragging a stag down brings one more charge against the Irish people and culminates in an open indictment.

All that was sung,

All that was said in Ireland is a lie

Bred out of the contagion of the throng, (Collected Poems, 320).

Yet the poem, in a sense, reads better as it stands on its own feet in the Collected Poems. Yeats was trying to synthesize events and literary movements into a coherent, unified, symbolic interpretation of his country’s history. This poem is written in two parts. Part first of the poem was finished after his return from America and ended the poetic silence he had endured since Lady Gregory’s death. In April 1933 Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare: “I have been in a dream finishing a poem, the first I have done since Lady Gregory’s death. American lectures and so on filled up my time”. (Letters, 808) Clearly, it draws on the thoughts of the lecture and translates them into a complex poem, integrating a number of previously-used symbolic details. The five stanzas catch the funeral scene in a moment of mythic illumination, forcefully emphasizing the significance of the moment as an ‘accepted sacrifice’. The other emphases are on the real nature of the event as opposed to
ritualism, the guilt of Parnell’s own people; the suggestion that the sacrifice was completed by the eating of the slain King’s heart; and the willed desolation of an onlooker like Yeats, thirsting for accusation to be turned on himself and his bare soul. The next poem, in this volume is *Three Songs to the same Tune*, in this poem the exaltation in tragedy and defeat which Yeats had found in the Rising, the event had lost the greater part of its epic quality by the 1930’s and its appeal to Yeats was diminishing. Instead of plunging him into bogs of mixed feelings and doubts as in *Easter 1916*, it revealed itself from a longer distance. By now, the heroes have been gathered into the national ritual. Taking their place are heroes of past, his friends and other contemporaries. ‘Those renowned generations’ have now come to dominate the scene:

> Justify all those renowned generations;
> They left their bodies to fatten the wolves,
> They left their homesteads to fatten the foxes,
> Fled to far countries, or sheltered themselves
> In cavern, crevice, hole,
> Defending Ireland’s soul. (Collected Poems, 322).

As pointed out by Cowell,

> The volume begins with a series of poems, that prove “Yeats’s continuing political passions,” and then comes a poem that illustrates very well the unique defiance of Yeats’s poetic old age, *A Prayer for Old Age.*” It begins with monosyllabic passion, deliberately exploiting the spluttering awkwardness of the first two words. (Cowell, 112).
God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone. (Collected Poems, 326).

The poem must be the most outspoken statement of aestheticism ever. He says that great poetry is written only by those who think in a marrow bone, who experience life with their whole being, and so, he prays that he may be spared the conventional virtues preclude conflict, and without conflict there can be no poetry. He knows that he will seem foolish to others, but that is negligible price to pay for the continuing ability to write poetry:

O What am I that should not seem
For the song’s sake a fool? (Collected Poems, 326).

Here Yeats’ conception of poetry is shaping his life, but only because of his conviction that great poetry is the product of a great life. Here is one of Yeats’ most convincing demonstrations of his refusal to separate life and art. He could not face the prospect of writing poetry which was not backed up by a full life.

The heart of this Volume is _Supernatural Songs_, written in the summer of 1934. These songs are a sequence of ten poems divided between sexually saturated mystical philosophizing and a more straightforward lyricism. The Title is, of course, partly ironic, for the very idea of the supernatural was anathema to Yeats. Professor Ellmann has expressed the central theme of these poems very effectively: “Where Crazy Jane usually maintains that there is a spiritual aspect to physical delight, Ribh defends the converse”(Cowell,113).Ribh, an Irish hermit, is presented by Yeats as an example of very early Christian thought, which still retains traces of Pre-Christian mythology and robustness, and he is set over against St.Patrick, representing the kind of other-worldly, completely unphysical, Christianity that Yeats hated”. Ribh, the hermit, then is the possessor of a Christianity which sees so- called supernatural
events in human terms, showing that there is a physical aspect to spiritual delight. Thus, in *Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillín* Ribh celebrates the passion of the pagan lovers who, on being falsely told of each other’s death, had died of broken hearts. Their love is now spiritual:

> Though somewhat broken by the leaves, that light
> Lies in a circle on the grass; therein
> I turn the pages of my holy book. (Collected Poems, 328).

Perhaps the supreme stroke is the suggestion of a complaint: the light is somewhat broken by the leaves! Ribh, in fact has a proper grasp of the relation between the supernatural and the natural, and is thus appalled by the doctrine he hears from Patrick of an all-male Trinity. This, he says, is not supernatural, but unnatural:

> Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.
> As, man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead begets Godhead (Collected Poem, 328)

On this point of doctrine, Ribh clearly prefers his pre-Christian theology. Proceeding with his criticism of Christianity, Ribh says, in *Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient*, that Christian love can too easily degenerate into sentimentality. Man should be capable of feeling every emotion towards God, even hatred. Only thus can he achieve a complete relationship, a complete absorption in God such as is described in the last stanza. An ecstatic experience of God is one which involves the whole man, including every aspect of his body and mind, and in this sense it ‘cannot endure/ A bodily or mental furniture’. Ribh expresses this ecstatic absorption in God thus:
What can she take until her Master give!

Where can she look until He make the show!

What can she know until He bid her know!

How can she live till in her blood He live! (Collected Poems, 330).

God can become real for man only when he is treated as real, and thus, paradoxically, ‘Hatred of God may bring the soul to God’. Pre-eminently then, Ribh’s view of the supernatural is a common-sense one. He has a proper respect for the human as well as the superhuman.

It is clear that the driving force behind these poems is Yeats’s continuing search for an all-inclusive reality. The last poem in volume, Meru which is named after India’s Holy Mountain, expresses Yeats’ sense that this search must be an unending and continuing one, each age undoing what a previous age has done. In spite of the apparent hopelessness of the search, every individual is committed to it, and though he may never know the truth, he may embody it:

But man’s life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease Ravening through centaury after centaury
Ravening, raging, uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality. (Collected Poems, 333).

Meru is the concluding section of the Supernatural Songs in which Ribh, an imaginary critic of St. Patrick, is introduced as the speaker. He is supposed to be Yeats’s image of an orthodox Christian. But we have to bear in mind that what is orthodox to Yeats may be heterodox to others. However, in a note to the poem Yeats says: “I would consider Ribh, were it not for his ideas about the Trinity, an orthodox man. (Variorum, 837-838). The final section of the poem, Meru supports the
proposition that Yeats is moving closer to the Indian view of life. According to this poem, civilization is hooped together by ‘manifold illusion’ or Maya; man’s life itself is nothing but illusion, and he ‘despite his terror, cannot cease /Ravening through century after century and comes into the desolation of reality’. The poet bids farewell to Egypt, Greece and Rome, for none of these can lead him to that final perception that comes alone to the Indian ‘Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest.’ The Hindu ascetic, who is ‘caverened in might under the drifted snow’ and is beaten by winter’s dreadful blast’, is the one who attains that mystical vision of the cyclical activity of life and who alone can see with dispassionate eyes through the meaninglessness of life. These hermits of Mount Meru know ‘That day brings round the night,thar before dawn/His glory and his monuments are gone’ (Collected Poems,334). It is not known whether this cyclical idea was suggested to the poet by the well-known Indian image of the serpent with its tail in its mouth. Ribh’s Christianity comes from Egypt, and it must have retained the characteristics of older faiths. This was the kind of Christianity which St.Patrick must have found in Ireland, and Yeats associates that early Christian Ireland with India.

Hermit Ribh, as presented in the first section of the poem, sits in ‘the pitch dark night’ reading his holy book by the light of the sexual intercourse of two angels, ‘For the intercourse of angels is a light’. Yeats might have drawn this idea from Swedenborg, who had spoken of angelic intercourse as a union of the whole body which seems from far off incandescence. The image of the spirits of the two lovers enjoying physical delights is derived from the swedenborgian theory of correspondence. Like most of Yeats’s later poetry, this poem about lovers is shot through and through with a vibrant sexuality, and Rajan is right in pointing out that “Ribh complements Crazy Jane by representing the sexuality of spirit rather than the
spirituality of sex”. (Rajan, 152-153). And ironically enough, these angels which Yeats’s orthodox Christian Ribh sees are the pagan lovers Baile and Aillin. It is above the Christian symbolic trees of the apple and yew. “In Christian symbolism yew leaves express the idea of immortality that the spirits of these unchristian lovers meets, ‘purified by tragedy’”. (Webber, 221).

Thus, at the outset, Yeats shows the scene and atmosphere transfused with Christian Ribh, Holy book, Apple and Yew as well as pagan Baile and Aillinn images.

Then comes, in Ribh Denounces Patrick Yeats’s blasphemous view of the Christian Trinity voiced by Ribh;

An abstract Greek absurdity has crazed the man—

Recall the masculine Trinity. Man, woman, child (a daughter or a son).

(Collected Poems, 328).

That’s how all natural or supernatural stories run. The ‘masculine Trinity’ of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost which Patrick worships seems to Ribh ‘an abstract Greek absurdity’. All other natural and supernatural Trinities are composed of a father, a mother and a son or a daughter. Mary’s virginity makes the Christian Trinity an unnatural absurdity. Ribh believes with Swedenborg and ‘The Great Smaragdine Tablet’ that heavenly things correspond to natural ones, ‘For things below are copies’. The only difference between divine and human love is that god is only three, whereas human beings go on begetting because of the incompleteness of our love (Letters to Olivia Shakespeare, 823-25).
It is common place in Christianity that woman attains her salvation through man and that the marriage of man and woman is an image of the union of Christ and the Church. Metaphysical poetry bears out this idea by its copious imagery based on sexual analogue for divine love. However, Yeats’s celebration of passionate sexual love is more akin to Hinduism than to Christianity.

In the fifth section, begins with the poem *Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient*, the hermit speaks of his peculiar religion which is based as much on hatred as on love of God. He thinks that it is futile to ‘seek for love or study it’ for ‘It is of God and passes human wit’. Therefore he studies ‘hatred with great diligence’ with the hope and belief that hatred ‘can clear the soul’ and “Hatred of God may bring the soul to God’. Yeats has written elsewhere about hatred: ‘My hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate’, and this he calls ‘Irish hatred …, the hatred of human life that made Swift write Gulliver and the epitaph upon his tomb,…and also he accuses himself for not having given his hatred adequate expression in the same essay Yeats says that the opposite of hatred ‘fills the light ,all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred’ *(General Introduction to my work in Essays and Introductions*, p-519-526). The poet’s idea of love and hatred is in conformity with his concept of the gyring antinomies, and, also, it reminds us of poems of *Crazy Jane’s* paradoxical ‘fair needs foul’ Implied in this poem is the idea that ‘soul has to enter into a personal and individual relation with God through enmity if necessary ,to escape mere credulity or religiosity.

As one proceeds through the various sections of the *Supernatural Songs* it seems that Yeats is moving farther away from Christianity and is coming closer to Eastern thought. In *The Four Ages of Man* one can see the well-known Indian concept of the four Ashramas. It is a procession of man’s life through four stages
(Brahmacharya, Greshasthashrama, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa) culminating in the union of the soul with the Indefinite: ‘At stroke of midnight God shall win’. While the idea of man warring upon God as a condition of his nature is more Christian than Indian, the idea of the hopeful prospect of God’s winning in all cases is closer to Indian thought than to the rather pessimistic war of the Christian soul for salvation saddled as it is with the burden of original sin. As Ellmann pointed out, “All that is known fights with all that is unknown; God is Himself man’s opponent and the final struggle is with Him, whether He keeps His own shape or takes that of death or destiny. As Yeats wrote in this little poem, called *The Four Ages of Man*” (Ellmann, 288):

He with body waged a fight,
But body won; it walks upright
Now his wars on God begin,
At stroke of midnight God shall win. (Collected Poem, 332).

The war on God is the ultimate heroism, and like all heroism in Yeats ends in defeat.

Now, looking back to the first section of *Supernatural Songs*, we see that the scene is set at a low place beneath the symbolic apple and Yew trees and in one of the middle sections we pass through a forest and finally climb the snow capped Mount Everest, the summit of which is the highest point on earth. This is the symbolic spot from where one could possibly view all of the earth, see the entire life of humanity wholly and steadily, and arrive at the profound philosophical truth expressed in the last lines of the poem. The cold, snowy peak of the Meru is the symbol of detachment.

In 1930s, Yeats collaborated with an Indian philosopher, Sri Purohit Swami, on a translation of *The Upanishads* and other Indian writings. Volume *The Last
Poems begins with *The Gyres* which is in effect an injunction to the poet himself to look out the whole of human life, and its prevailing desolation, and to rejoice. As pointed out by Raymond Cowell, Once again, “Yeats tests the validity of his poetic imagination by making it look at life and its suffering. His response this time seems at first almost callous, ‘We that look on but laugh in tragic joy’. This joy arises not from the callousness or insouciance but from an awareness of the permanence of the best aspects of humanity, inspite of their apparent destruction”. Expressing this awareness in his own terms, Yeats says that the gyres of history will disinter nobility, beauty, and tradition again because these are not qualities of a particular age, but permanent, indesectaible qualities of the human mind. The poet too has suffered, so that he is now ‘old rocky face’. His joy has behind it the sanction of personal experience, but his memories are not bitter. Now that he trusts in the future course of history he need no longer rage against the destroyers of what he values, nor shout the praises of those he loves, and this new control and confidence are reflected in such a line as ‘Hector is dead and there’s light in Troy’ (Collected Poemss, 337) which suggests his almost matter-of-fact acceptance of destruction as one necessary part of the cycles of civilization. “This is something new in Yeats. The sentiment, ‘Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul./What matter?’ though recognizable for the most part as a characteristically Yeatsian sentiment would not have been expressed with such assurance in Yeats’ earlier work”.( Cowell,119).

As Ellmann says, The *Gyres*, on the other hand, stand for the world of appearance, a world in which, as he says, ‘Consciousness is conflict’. Wedded in antagonism, they symbolize any of the opposing elements that make up existence, such as sun and moon, day and night, life and death,
love and hate, man and God, man and woman, man and beast, man and his spiritual counterpart or diamon on a mere abstract level they are permanence and change, the one and the many, objectivity and subjectivity, the natural and supernatural worlds. (Ellmann, *Identity of Yeats*, 153).

With the gyres Yeats had a more excited and interesting picture of the universal conflict than, for example, two armies drawn up against one another would have afforded him; for the point of one gyre was in the other’s base, as if a fifth column were operating in the very headquarters of the enemy. He was further, confirmed in his symbol by the fact that it applied to his verse, which he realized with increasing clarity was guided by the principle of the containment of the utmost passion by the utmost control.

Like the sphere, the gyres are not often explicitly mentioned in his poems; they occupy a place equivalent to that of the cross in his early work, which appeared rarely, because the opposition might be put less formally.

The gyres! the gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth;

Things thought too long can be no longer thought,

For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,

And ancient lineaments are blotted out. (Collected Poems, 337).

*The Gyres* is not paralleled in those comfortless poems. It cannot be too much emphasized that he modified the symbols to suit the states of mind, irrespective of their consistency with *A Vision*.

The gyres are his servants, not his masters. In the same way he treats Empedocles and Troy with a fine casualness as symbols of the present scene rather than as allusions to the past. All ages are equally present to his prophetic eye. Every
element in the poem has appeared in his work before, but recast to jibe with the Dionysian, ecstatic quality which he imparts by the exclamatory phrase, rare for him:

The gyres! The gyres! And the repeated rhetorical question, ‘What matter?’ these interjections mitigate the oracular tome of many of the statements and are the main force in the confrontation of past, present, and future. With fire and skill Yeats succeeds in transforming one’s horror at the indifferent survival of evil as well as good into delight that good must survive as well as evil. (Ellmann, Identity, 155).

The next poem in this Volume, is *Lapis Lazuli* of July 1936, presents the same theme, but in more specifically aesthetic terms. Tragic gaiety is set over against the hysteria of women’s speculation amount the future war, again Yeats surveys past civilizations, finding a constant pattern of construction and destruction:

All things fall and are built again,

And those that build them again are gay.(Collected Poems,339).

This tragic gaiety, then, is not a static attitude; it carries within itself the impetus to reconstruct what it has seen destroyed. The final section of the poem expresses Yeats’ viewpoint symbolically. A Chinese carving in *Lapis Lazuli* presents two Chinamen and a serving man viewing dispassionately the ruin that surrounds them. No doubt, Yeats implies, when the carving was first made they were surrounded by a more congenial scene, but time has ravaged the inessential aspects of the carving:

Every discoloration of the stone,

Every accidental crack or dent,

Seems a water-course or an avalanche,

Or lofty slope where it still snows. (Collected Poems, 339).
In Lapis Lazuli, too Yeats introduces the image of the mountain from the dizzy heights of which one could stare at all the tragedies of life enacted below on the plains:

Or lofty slope where it still snows…
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare…

Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay.(Collected Poems,339).

Yeats in his last years, was reaching out for this vision of the seers of the ancient east. The ascent of the mountain is symbolic of the attainment of that mystical vision; but once it is within reach, one should look at life not in terms of philosophical abstractions, but of art. Yeats indirectly insists that life should be lived in the spirit of art, and that one should live experiencing the ‘tragic gaiety’, and laughing always ‘in tragic joy’ as he says in The Gyres But only creative artists can enjoy that gaiety: All things fall and are built again./And those that build them again are gay.

Whether or not one agrees that a Last poems deserves a high estimate, there are points of strength in the Volume. The Gyres and Lapis Lazuli are fine poems in Yeats’s more traditional manner, and The Municipal Gallery Revisited should convince readers skeptical about the sincerity of his backward-looking, vindicating manner. But by a stroke of genius, the last two poems together sum up the theme of the Volume. The greatest temptation was to sink, surfeited with emotion; the challenge was to confront life as it offered up its models of excellence to oblivion. Yeats accepted the challenge, prayed for ‘an old man’s frenzy’, sang of heroism, gaiety
and wildness and rejected the temptation of mere ‘good company’. The title of the last poem, *Are you content* echoes other questions of the Volume—*What then?* Sang Plato’s ghost.*What then?* and the refrain to *The O’Rahilly, How goes the weather* such questions are unanswerable but- one year before his death-Yeats would not agree to becoming ‘An old hunter talking with Gods’

Infirm and aged I might stay
In some good company,
I who have always hated work,
But I am not content. (Collected Poems, 370).

In the next two poems, *Imitated from the Japanese* and *Sweet Dancer*, as pointed out by Raymond Cowell,

Yeats returns to one of his favourite symbols, that of the dancer, and gives it extra layer of meaning that makes it fit into the context of this Volume. Like the men in the *Lapis Lazuli* carving, the dancer achieves a stasis and equilibrium which go beyond suffering, make her I a sense impregnable, and so the second poem finishes as her happiness is not that of craziness but of tragic joy. (Cowell,120):

If strange men come from the house
To lead her away, do not say
That she is happy being crazy;
Let her finish her dance,
Let her finish her dance.
Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!.(Collected Poems 340).
But this tragic joy and gaiety can come only to those who have experienced the whole of life, so the next poem, *The three Bushes* is in a sense a cautionary tale about those who shrink from the total involvement in life. “It begins with a brilliantly lucid narrative of a plan conceived by a lady to save herself from what she considers would be the degradation of sexual love with the man she claims to love. The plan is to substitute her maid for herself in her lover’s bed at night and this plan seems to work up to a point. (Cowell 120-121). However, when her lover is accidentally killed hurrying to join her, as he thinks she dies of remorse ‘for she /Loved him with her soul’ (Collected Poems, 342). The logic of the poem requires of course, that the chambermaid’s love should be seen as genuine, and this proves to be the case, for when she confesses to a priest her part in the plan, he recognizes her genuine emotions, and on her death has her buried alongside the graves of her former mistress and her lover. Each grave has a —bush planted on it, and in time the three bushes intermingle:

> And now none living can
> When they have plucked a rose there,
> Know where its roots began. (Collected Poems, 343).

After death the three people achieve union of a kind that was denied them, through the lady’s folly, during their lives. Thus the heart of the poem is *The Lady’s Second Song*, one of six songs that follow the actual narrative. The Lady expresses her misguided views to the maid in these ominous terms:

> He shall love my soul as though
> Body were not at all,
> He shall love your body
> Untroubled by the soul,
Love cram love’s two divisions
Yet keep his substance whole. (Collected Poems, 344).

In poems, *The Three Bushes, The Lady’s first song, The Lady’s second song, The Lady’s Third Song*, till *The Chambermaids Second song* in all these six poems, one is led to wonder whether the critical silence is one of embarrassment for the openly sexual themes and imagery of these poems. It is as if it were felt that they were an awkward mistake on the part of the old poet, who for every other poem of the same period is accorded superlatives. The sequence shows Yeats trying to explore the sexual paradox within the limits of a dramatic fable even narrower than those of his plays, and thus producing a greater intensity in the poetry. By keeping to a dramatic fiction, he freed to employ the three separate voices of the Lady, the Chambermaid and the Lover in the ‘Songs’ and the forth choric voice of a narrator.

The first mention of the poems comes in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley of July 1936, which suggests Yeats has been at the project for a time: ‘I now like my long ballad of *The Three Bushes* again. I have written two other poems on the same theme... I think them among my best things’. As pointed out by, Vivienne Koch, the narrative line of the sequence is simple: a Lady who loves a poet, and wisely recognizes that love needs to be fed, at the same time wishes to preserve her chastity. She asks her chambermaid to lie with her lover in her stead. She is pleased with herself for her strategy but nevertheless has faint regrets when the Chambermaid ‘looked half asleep all day’. These six lyrics, all short purport to be spoken by the Lady (three); by the Lover (one, and significantly, the paltriest) and by the
Chambermaid whose last song ends this sequence of six poems.

(Vivienne Koch, 132-133).

The narrative technique is that of the flashback, for the three personae have already been disposed of in the introductory poem. But in the songs the psychological facets of their roles in the drama are explored by each in turn. ‘The Lady’s First Song’ tells of her ‘shame’ because she is in love and ‘No better than a beast / upon all fours’ (Collected Poems, 344). It describes her ambivalence toward the sexual union she appears to shun and shows the degradation she attaches to what she carves. The Lady’s Second Song advises the maid to prepare herself for the Lover, who will love the maid’s body but love the Lady’s soul. It is considerably more complex in tone than her first song, and closes with a paradox:

If soul may look and body touch

Which is the more blest? (Collected Poems, 344).

The Lady’s Third Song is even more subtle in diction and meaning. It presents a quite involved rationale of the Lady’s stratagem which puts her motives for not sleeping with her lover in a more generous light. She says she wishes her maid to share with her the aspect of love which bodily union does not touch, just as she participates vicariously in the bodily union which her lover enjoys with the maid. The Lover’s Song simplest of all has the least ‘colour’ The Lover is almost a blind force seeking to discharge its burden of necessity in much the same instinctual way that, the mind is pacified by being rid of the burden imposed on it by the body. The chambermaid’s songs are strange, bold descriptions of sexual intercourse and its aftermath. The metre of both short lyrics is that of a Lullaby, the tone infinitely tender, even maternal:
God’s love has hidden him
Out of all harm. (Collected Poems, 346).

The second song of the maid, which we at first may take as a low pitched one. The narrative thus outlined, we are faced with a question: Is there a split in the ‘story’ summarized by the objective introductory poem, the ‘story’ as revealed by the individual characters who later speak their part in it? We know that the end of the total story is positive and happy: all three lovers are united in death by the symbolic merging of the bushes into a single organism. The incompleteness of their relationships in life are seen to supplement one another in the longer view. Body, and soul, as the lady suspected, but could not risk proving, are, in the end, one.

In *Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites* the poet re-creates with realistic strokes a popular national hero by juxtaposing his achievements with his private life. The casual, conversational ‘And here’s another reason’ almost trips up the reader by surprise. Still praising Parnell’s pride, the poem rolls on in rollicking rhythm, integrating levity with seriousness:

> And Parnell loved his country,
> And Parnell loved his less (Collected Poems, 356).

In *Parnell*, Yeats expresses in two powerful lines his cyclical attitude to the new form of government:

> Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
> ‘Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone. (Collected Poems, 359).

There is grim humour as well as bitterness. Parnell here is not so much a hero as a mouthpiece through which Yeats expresses his view on Irish politics. By choosing Parnell, who was paid with ingratitude for his efforts in bringing the Irish people
freedom, Yeats makes the ‘cheering man’ look all the more foolish and naive. Portrayed in a manner no less impressive are his friends, ancestors, and contemporaries other than the 1916 martyrs. In his early poems, he drew on Irish mythology and painted legendary heroes, Gods, and demigods. Now he could dispense with them, for his friends, ancestors and contemporaries had themselves become ‘Olympians’. In the poem of his last period, they are depicted with economy and bold, clear strokes. Unnecessary details are pared away with only the essentials left behind:

Around me the images of thirty years:
An ambush; pilgrims at the water–side;
Casement upon trial, half hidden by the bars,
Guarded; Griffith staring in hysterical pride; (Collected Poems, 368).

There is something noble, dignified and statue like about such people as O’Leary, O’Grady, Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne, with Yeats’ high sense of his own dignity adding to the dignity of these ‘Olympians’. Because of this, the carriage of Lady Gregory in the following lines is unlike that of an ordinary mortal: She is arrested in a stasis and gathered into eternity, as it were:

Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
Her eightieth winter approaching:’yesterday he threatened my life,
I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table (Collected Poems, 348).

Apparently at the end of his life, Yeats seemed to be creating mythological figures once again, just as he had done at the beginning of his career and had come back to the starting point. But, as a matter of fact, there is much difference between early and later modes of ‘myth making’ By, now he was no more dependent upon
Celtic legends, for he had contemporary Irish personalities to draw on. Graham Hough is certainly right when he says that “no poet in our day has written more about his family and his friends than Yeats, and no one has been more successful in enlarging them to heroic proportions”. (Hough, 233).

Yet despite the predominance of Parnell and Yeats’ friends and contemporaries in poems of the last period. Cuchulain, the Celtic hero, is still retained. It is in *Cuhulian Comforted*, however, that the hero appears with his full grandeur. A prophetic poem on the famous Irish legendary hero, who is ‘creative joy separated from fear’ it describes his entrance to the Kingdom of the dead, with memories of Dante cutting across Celtic legend.

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man

Violent and famous, strode among the dead;

Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone. (Collected Poems, 395).

Dorothy Wellesley, in her account of Yeats’s last days, gives ‘the prose theme’ of Cuchulian Comforted, as Yeats read it aloud to her. In it one of the shades says: “…You will like to know who we are. We are the people who run away from the battles. Some of us have been put to death as cowards, but others have hidden, and some even died without people knowing they were cowards…” (Letters on Poetry, 193).

The great puzzle of this very authoritative poem, as pointed out by Bloom,

One of the most inevitable that Yeats wrote is why *Cuchulian* the hero finds himself among the cowards in the after-life. Part of the clue may be in the omitted group of ‘the prose theme’. Is Yeats not, in this poem, facing his own, his human death,
thinking that he will die, with some personal cowardice unknown? (Bloom, 462).

Yet this is the poet who stirringly asked the massive rhetorical question: “Why should we honor those that die upon the field of battle? And added the magnificence explanation ‘A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself.’” (Ellmann. *The Man and Masks*, 6). *Cuchulian Comforted* will always have the authority of mystery about it; Yeats chose to write it in his hieratic mode, and he found for it a tone of revelation imperfectly apprehended, a half–light that darkens into religion. What compels many readers of the poem is a sense of Yeats’s own involvement here in The Last Things. Now, they seem to say, he enters into the abyss of himself. There is no sense at the close of *Cuchulian Comforted* that the cowards have been defeated, either in this life or in the after-world. We are given instead an obscure sense of appropriateness, and we do not feel the hero dishonored when he ends surrounded by a choir of his contraries, and presumably becomes identical with them. The appropriateness is presented as an enigma, the formal equivalent in the poem of Yeats’s own doubts about the hero, and perhaps also about his own potential for heroism.

Cuhulain, in the poem, exchanges an individual meditation on wounds and blood for a sharing in a communal activity of stitching and of singing a communal song. The quick of Yeats’ invention is in this, in a movement against his own deepest convictions.

Finally, he is welcomed by the souls in the country of the Blessed. *Cuchulian Comforted* has a special significance. To Yeats, Cuchulian is a figure that stands for loneliness, exaltation and defeat, a figure that draws his strength from many heroic ages; he is the Achilles of the Irish saga with the qualities that Yeats admired. By
writing such a poem sometime before his death, the poet is identifying himself, at least unconsciously, with Cuchulian. His admission to the country of the Blessed, therefore can be regarded as a fitting comment on his own life. In many of these poems from *The Last Poems*, theme of death and old age is discussed again and again as in songs of this Volume sex is discussed as a theme.

In *Curse of Cromwell* he attacks the English ‘Lenin as an embittered Irishman. And in his dispute with the English over the forged Casement diaries, his identification with Ireland is most obvious. To incriminate Roger Casement and bring about his execution, the English had forged diaries purporting to be written by him. When depravity was discovered, Yeats lashed out at them in two poems. *Roger Casement* and *The Ghost of Roger Casement*. The first poem opens with a direct and forcible declaration:

I say that Roger Casement
Did what he had to do.
He died upon the gallow,
But that is nothing new. (Collected Poems, 351).

Gradually exposing the perjurer’s trick he pours out his disgust in simple but passionate verse. There is bitter irony in the second line relentlessly arraigning the English for their injustice and inhumanity. Finally he pays tribute to the hero, which he rarely did in his poems earlier. Hero here symbolizes Parnell. These two poems were dedicated to Parnell. Straightened by a refrain, *The Ghost of Roger Casement* brings another charge against England:

Upon the British Empire,
Upon the Church of Christ.
The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door. (Collected Poems, 353).
By referring to “the church of Christ’ and the ‘trust’ all must hang upon the British Empire, Yeats shows up the egregiousness of Britain’s crime. The refrain, in which Roger Casement is beating on the door, grows more insistent and strident as the verse moves on. It indirectly yet forcibly points an accusing finger at Britain: the grievance must be redressed. But with the degenerate behavior of the British: the grievance must be redressed.

The poem steadily rises and finally bursts with overwhelming refrain, which because of the gradual building up of emotion, increases in Volume stanza after stanza. It is an instance in which says Joseph Hone, “Yeats felt confident of his powers to introduce into his poetry the deep –seated nationalistic prejudice”. (Hone, 453). to acknowledge its flaws and accept them for better or worse.

We Irish, born into that ancient sect
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
Climb to our proper dark that we may trace
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face. (Collected Poems, 376).

The vocabulary –‘filthy modern tide’, ‘formless spawning fury’ –is no doubt still loaded with bitterness, but the first person plural ‘we’ is an unmistakable sign of the poet’s alignment with the Irish race.

Being one of the makers of modern Ireland, he felt that he had been responsible somehow for the course it had taken. Consequently, his contemplation of the past and his commitment to the nationalist cause gave rise to misgivings and doubts in The Man and the Echo. By recalling Easter 1916 and Coole Park, he feels that his fate is inextricably woven into that of his country.

Then next poem is Under Ben Bulben the identification is given in full expression. As he is about to make his soul, the poem is therefore, his last word
handed down to the next generation. He is now speaking almost as the patriarch of his race. Still believing in the profane perfection of mankind, arising from the ‘the secret working mind’ he admonishes Irish poet to learn their trade:

Sing whatever is well made
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base –born products of base beds (Collected Poem, 400).

Finally, he brings his poem to a close, using the horsemanship as the unifying symbol of many aspects of the Irish tradition:

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head
In drum cliff churchyard Yeats is lead.
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by! (Collected Poems, 401).

According to T.R.Henn,

The word ‘horseman’ in Irish idiom has certain overtones: it carries a note of respect, even awe; the rider has something of Hebraic strength and mystery or of the symbolic strength and wisdom that produced the holy centaurs of the hills. The horseman belongs to aristocracy, he symbolizes possessions, breeding, strength, virility and a certain ‘wildness of sorrow’.

(Henn, 336).

It also suggests death. In view of all these associations, the mention of the horseman becomes a fitting comment on Yeats’s long and fruitful poetic development, which is unequalled in the twentieth century.
Work Cited


Chapter Six

Conclusion

This chapter is the conclusion of the observations made on the themes and symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. In the preceding chapters that have endeavored to demonstrate how Yeats used themes and symbols in an entirely poetic framework. Coming as they do from strictly religious sources, these symbols and themes, while operating within the context of his poems, often undergo a drastic change yielding an entirely non-religious meaning. Similarly, themes are utilized as a poetic tool or machinery, and are hence treated in a non-Christian way in his poems as well as in the plays.

Critics sometimes complain that Yeats's symbology is mainly based on his private myth of A Vision and hence is not very communicative. A close study of his symbols removes this complaint, for the Themes and symbols come from well-known religious sources. For example, rose, cross, dance, Byzantium—to mention only a few of the impressive ones—are all traditional symbols which are public and communicative. Even the solar and lunar symbols—the sun standing for action and violence, the moon for reflection and imagination—are, private to Yeats alone. Similarly “even the thirteen cycles in the poet’s extremely private and esoteric mythical system may be considered reminiscent of Christ and the Twelve Apostles”. (Identity, 159). To list of the main Yeastian symbols one may add the tree and towers which admittedly are not very private. The gyre makes the list almost complete; and it is easy to see how the whirling gyre is an extension of the fixed cross of the antinomies of his poetry.

The crux of the problem regarding Yeats’s symbology lies in the fact that it is more a literary than a philosophical or religious problem. It seems to me that many of
the discussions have only added confusion to this already complicated question. Instead of examining the symbols in the context of the poems in order to decipher the richness of their meanings, critics very frequently lift those symbols out of poetic contexts, to scrutinize them in the light of what the poet had written elsewhere, especially of his *Vision* system. It is true that the poet’s philosophical or mystical ideas have gone into the making of several of his poems was rendered easy for Yeats by his own intellectual ethos. With his characteristic religiosity he developed a monkish hate for science, he found the asceticism and rationalized ethics of Christianity quite uncongenial. Being destitute of faith and yet terrified of skepticism, he longingly turned in several directions, to the past, to the orient, and to other religions. Consequently, he brings together traditional and universal symbols or prototypes, which as Hiram Haydn observes, to most of us do not “belong together”. As Haydn goes on to say “Yeats’s juxtaposition and balancing of Christ and Oedipus, Saint Catherine of Genoa and Michael Angelo, the Buddha and the Sphinx, the Angels and the Gods confuse all but those minds that delight in new combinations for ‘their own sake’- for the sake of his art” (Haydn, 297-323). That Yeats could do this was not surprising, for what he aimed at was to rest his art upon “certain heroic and religious truths” even if they are modified by individual genius. (Autobiography, 332-333). It is this traditional truth that Yeats was reaching for through his eclecticism. According to him even the Mass goes back to savage folklore.

Universality was attained not only in his treatment of Irish landscape; it was attained through the treatment of Irish people, too. Until then, treatment of Irish people in his poetry was topical. In writing about Major Gregory, he rose to a level that he had never reached before; people, events and scenery not only act upon one another, but also transcend the merely personal. In these poems, Major Gregory
ceases to be an individual; his stature has grown so much that he has become a symbol of all accomplished Young men, whose tragedy is shared by all generations. It has significance not only in Yeats’ time but in our time as well.

Making use of what he took to be complex and tragic situation, Yeats achieved multiplicity of expression. The death of an Irishman elicited from him a wide range of emotions, which enabled him to approach his subject from different angels. Consequently, *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, Shepherd and Goatherd, Reprisals* and *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory* give us the impression of a fugue. Lifted from time, the Irish hero bears testimony to the following judgment by Fraser: “No poet of our time has loved and admired his friends more, or incised their profiles in more firm and enduring verse”. (Fraser, 278).

Yeats was conscious, very early of the urgency of the fight for the independence of art, the very life of poetry, and never wavered in his conviction. That the artist's work preceded and transcended the moralist's. As an aesthete the early Yeats almost obliterated the distinction between art and life, but he did not go as far as his other co-aesthetes in wanting life purged of all its coarse and vulgar elements. However, he shared their idea of replacing religion with art.

At this point a distinction should be made between symbolism and aestheticism. The first is a doctrine of art, springing from artistic practice; it is not merely a method of using symbols, but it is a technique adopted to raise language to a highly charged level. The second derives from theory and tends to become an attitude towards life, to turn away from life in all its artistic elements. Yeats's aestheticism differs from that of the others in that it was not a result of a reaction from bourgeois social and moral standards which they despised. In 1898 Yeats wrote: "The arts are, believed to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders
of priests..." (Essays and Introductions, 193). What Yeats wanted was to exalt poetry and place it on a pedestal as high as religion's. Consequently, he was searching for a ‘tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing’. (Gitanjali, 390). It is important to note that the nature of the fight for the independence of art led the poets to emphasize the dark side of art with its preoccupation with the secret and forbidden as the way to self-discovery.

Here again we can see, as Rosenthal points, out, how Blake influenced the young mind of Yeats. (Rosenthal, 21). Blake's rapport with sexual frankness, mysticism, and deliberate reversals of familiar moral assumptions guided Yeats through pastures which were fresh and new to him. It also helped him to see beyond the current fashions in poetry, and to transcend what was familiar to his co-aesthetes. In other words, Yeats was able to absorb and integrate in his mind the virtues of both symbolism and aestheticism.

Yeats, unlike the aesthetes, imbibed the true spirit of symbolism and became a seeker after reality. Consequently his art came to be a mystical way of apprehending that reality. It is this mystical vision of life and reality which provides the depth in his religion of poetry and which one miss in the religion of the aesthetes of the last century.

To a certain extent Yeats goes along with the aesthetes, especially when he deprecates the impure poetry of Wordsworth which is mixed up with popular morality, and also when Yeats enunciates his artistic principle that “Argument, theory, erudition, observation are merely what Blake called 'little devils who fight for themselves,' illusions of our visible passing life, who must be made to serve the moods...” (Essays and Introductions 195).
But when he says in the same breath that everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than the means... he certainly is outstripping his fellow poets of the 'nineties. This change finds its most clear and incisive statement in a passage in his Autobiography:

Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned. The revolt of Individualism [of the Aesthetic School the doctrine of which, according to Yeats, was expounded by the younger Hallam in his essay on Tennyson] came because the tradition had become degraded, or rather because a spurious copy had been accepted instead. Classical morality.... Dominated this tradition at the Renaissance, and passed from Milton to Wordsworth and to Arnold, always growing more formal and empty until it became a vulgarity in our time—just as classical forms passed on from Raphael to the Academicians. But anarchic revolt is coming to an end, and the arts are about to restate the traditional morality. (Essays and Introductions, 332-333).

Yeats attacked the question of ‘morality’ or values in a unique way: he made himself independent of it by objectifying it. This is at once different from, for instance, the method of Hopkins and the approach of Hardy—two of Yeats's contemporaries who represent extreme positions of belief and skepticism. Yeats presents a synthesis or a via media of these two positions and liberates himself from the bonds of both agnosticism and dogmatism by reducing them ‘to subordinate status in an aesthetically created universe of symbols’. (Rosenthal, 27).
Thus the Yeatsian fusion of aestheticism and symbolism led to a profound religion of poetry very different from that of the aesthetes of the fin de siècle. After all, poetry is, as Santayana says, “religion without points of application in conduct, and without an expression, in worship and dogma”. (Santayana, 289). Having accepted the new religion of poetry to which his life was dedicated to the end, Yeats realized that any other faith would seriously hinder his life-long mission. He was conscious of his obligations when he made the choice:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark. (The Collected Poems, 278).

Deliberately he chose the second, the perfection of the work, what he calls his ‘predestined part’ and refused ‘the heavenly mansion’ promised by religion. Poetry was the be-all and end-all of his life; and even after a long, rich and fruitful life of service in the cause of his new religion, he felt discontented. Towards the end of his career he takes stock of his work, and asks himself if he was satisfied and answers:

Infirm and aged I might stay
In some good company,
I who have always hated work,
Smiling at the sea,
Or demonstrate in my own life.
What Robert Browning meant
By an old hunter talking with Gods;
But I am not content. (Collected Poems, 370-371).
Although aged and infirm he prefers to die writing, ‘discontented till the whole design be shaped’. He is, in a way, like his great hero Cuchulain who, as the Blind Man's fatal knife creeps to his neck, declares Triumphantly, ‘say it is about to sing’ Yeats believed that striving after perfection in the realm of art is as noble and rewarding as any other religious pursuit. His own words bear out this point: Coventry Patmore has said, ‘the end of art is peace’ and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation that it demands. Somebody has said, 'god asks nothing of the highest soul except attention' and so necessary is attention to mastery in art, that there are moments when we think that nothing else is necessary, and nothing else so difficult. This is evident to make clear, in elevating poetry or art to the pedestal of religion Yeats did not fall a victim to the practice of 'art for art's sake.' While it is true that he was influenced by the apostles of this theory, Yeats cautiously steered clear of it and did not attempt to build up an autonomous art separated from life and experience. In spite of his preoccupations with non-literary occultism, his poems, especially the later ones, are the essence of his deeply felt experiences.

His poetry is instinct with what he had experienced in every fibre of his being; it is alive with things temporal and people living and dead—the complexities and the ‘fury and mire of human veins’ were his chief concern. For him experience was everything. So he rejected the Christian mortification of the flesh ‘to pleasure soul’ as well as the Hindu belief that springs from the idea that phenomenal experience is absolutely without value. Yeats's conviction is founded on the thought that phenomenal experience is all that we have of any value. At least this was the direction in which his art was moving. He was once in a dilemma and did not know if he should . . . bid the Muse go pack, Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend.
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel (Collected Poems, 218-219).

Or whether he should "mock Plotinus' thought / And cry in Plato's teeth" and thus assert the power and value of imagination and experience. Yeats's Crazy Jane poems show a resolution of this dilemma in his own experience by rejecting the Platonic abstraction which separates reality from nature. The Yeatsian idea of experience embraces both fair and foul love and excrement, beauty and terror, and sexuality and spirituality or, in his own words, ‘to discover... a divine love in sexual passions’ (Essays and Introductions, 195). About this idea of art as a negation of abstraction, Yeats writes in ‘Discoveries’:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and
shrinks from what Blake calls m a thematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain getting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. Its morality is personal, knows little of any general law ...(Essays and Introductions, 292-293).

Like the bird in his The Lover's Song, Yeats often’ sighs for the air’ (which stands for spirituality) but always comes back to the core of physical experience:

Now sinks the same rest
Oh mind, on nest,
On straining thighs.

Unlike Hopkins and Eliot, Yeats could face no absolutes and consequently his art became a gong-tormented sea of experience rent by tension and conflict. To him
there was only one kind of truth — the truth of each situation. Philosophical abstractions of truth are not the concern of the artist. So the poet asks his Muse to leave ‘The cavern of the mind’ which is the abode of Platonic abstractions, and to do ‘better exercise in the sunlight and wind’. In the same poem (Those Images) Yeats refers to two other modern kinds of abstractions, namely, Moscow's communist doctrine and Rome's Christian dogma, and to sub serve the interests of either would be drudgery which his art must renounce. He says almost the same thing in Church and State.

Here is fresh matter, poet,
Matter for old age meet;
Might of the Church and the State,
Their mobs put under their feet.
O but heart's wine shall run pure,
Mind's bread grow sweet.
Wine shall run thick to the end,
Bread taste sour. (Collected Poems, 327).

Yeats does not want his Muse to soar too high to lose contact with the earth:

Find in middle air
An eagle on the wing, (Collected Poems, 367)

And he asks his art to seek all kinds of images, violent and serene, fair and foul, ‘The lion and the virgin, / The harlot and the child’ (Collected Poems, 367). The poet recognizes the fact that his Muse must find nourishment in the reality experienced through the senses: ‘Recognize the five that makes the Muses sing’ (Collected Poems, 367). This idea is more bluntly stated in The Spur:
You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (Collected Poems, 359).

Yeats presents a reversal of the usual process: instead of the phenomenal leading to the nominal, it is the abstractions that lead the poet to earthly realities. In his Diary he writes: “Certain abstract thinkers, whose measurements and classifications continually bring me back to concrete reality”. (Explorations, 303). This, also, has been the direction of his poetry—from the ethereal to the earthy. He sees himself set in a drama where he struggles “to exalt and overcome concrete realities perceived not with mind only but as with the roots of my hair”. (Explorations, 302). This preoccupation with concrete realities, a pagan yearning for life and earth, the heightened consciousness of experience fully lived and the Consuming anguish of becoming brings Yeats very close to an existential position. Like the existentialists he starts with man and the world and asserts the significance of human emotion as a revelation of metaphysical nature. According to the poet man is always in the process of becoming, and there is no way of knowing reality—in the words of Yeats, “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” (Cowell, 135). In this matter he resembles Rilke; as poets both believe in reality which is apprehended through experience and which is not based on any systematic philosophy.

Like all other existentialists Yeats affirms dissatisfaction with the human condition. His sense of the fundamental irrationality of life is best expressed in his comedies. As a thinker and a creator of myth Yeats might have believed in a system, but as a poet it was the reality of experience and of situations that mattered to him. His vision is dialectical; it is a vacillation between fatality and freedom of will. His
entirely personal and highly individualistic approach to all matters of belief makes him a non-conformist and this leads him to loneliness and anguish.

In exploring the far corners of this irrational world as well as his own inner world Yeats had to use a kind of language which would be the right vehicle to communicate the incommunicable. He found that the language of logic was incapable of expressing his vision of reality as was the medium used by naturalists. As Wallace Stevens puts it, realism is a corruption of reality. Religious symbolic imagery was Yeats's choice of means to express his vision of reality. The power of this device, as Graham Hough states, was not that “it embodies the appeal of a graceful way of life, or supports a particular set of moral principles, but that it carries the mind back to the mystery that is at the heart of the universe, the mystery which the religious thought of the nineteenth century was bent on explaining away”. (The Last Romantics, 228).

Unlike the neoclassical and Victorian poets, Yeats with his constitutional distaste for the poetry of rhetorical statement tried to translate his intensely personal vision of reality into highly individualized religious imagery. An understanding of this symbolic imagery is the only road to the inner world of the poet.

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours

The sentimentalist himself; while art

Is but a vision of reality. (Collected Poems, 350).
Work Cited


Bibliography


