# THE IDEA OF GAIETY IN YEATS'S LYRIC POETRY

THESIS

Submitted in Fulfilment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

of Rhodes University

by

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December 1989

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have helped to make this thesis a reality, and I would like to thank them for their advice, encouragement and support. Professor Guy Butler, Ms Cathy Salomon, Mr Arthur Morgan and Dr Seumas Miller commented on various sections of the work. The Rhodes English Department invited me to read a paper at one of their research colloquia and they employed me. My fellow M.A students provided gatherings of a more informal kind. Lorna Burns proof-read and re-read this thesis, and she was always there. I owe a special debt to her and to Dr Wendy Jacobson.

My supervisor, Professor Don Maclennan, first taught me Yeats, and he was willing to take on the much greater task of watching over this enterprise, which he has done with patience and rigour and unfailing good humour--for all of which I thank him.

# ABSTRACT

In June 1917 W.B. Yeats wrote to his father:

> Much of your thought resembles mine . . . but mine is part of a religious system more or less logically worked out, a system which will I hope interest you as a form of poetry. I find the setting it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework and new patterns. (Wade 1954, 627)

The new framework and new patterns that he claimed to have found in his system generated a new, and for Yeats, radically different sort of poetry. Before 1919 (*The Wild Swans at Coole)*, the poetry had as its subject various traditional themes: the pity of love; the romance and heroism of Irish mythology; the threat of age, change and death. The poetry up to this point is, formally speaking, highly skillful, but locked into its own admissions of failure to touch or incorporate reality in any but a romantically defeatist way.

However, the order which Yeats refers to in his letter, and the system he generated as a propaedeutic to this new order, once assimilated into the habit and texture of the poetry, generated new topics of its own which made those of the earlier work seem subjective, self-indulgent and intellectually uninformed. Yeats's poetry now changed drastically in focus and form, from subjective to objective poetry. Whereas the earlier poetry had opposed reality with romantic heroism or self-destructive despondency, the poetry subsequent to his change of practice, incorporates a new vision of reality as the intrinsic architechtonics of poetry itself. Now the measure of human and aesthetic completion is no longer an inexplicable and inscrutable

sadness, but an intelligent and informed detachment, an energy of mind that Yeats called "gaiety".

My thesis explores this energy of mind and what it meant for Yeats and his poetry. My contention is that the idea of gaiety provides a way for Yeats to grant meaning to his life, a way for him to create himself. As the poetry is completed thanks to the new system, so is the poet. In order to see this, it is necessary to read the poems as a series of collections, or stories, that resonate back and forth with meaning and qualification and understanding. Yeats's system is his myth, and he writes his poetry in terms of and informed by that myth, shaping and re-shaping the experience of the created and fictional self until it has meaning in a way that the real self does not.

The thesis explores this process of creation firstly in theoretical terms, using Lotman's ideas of Story and Myth, and looking at Yeats's intellectual and poetic inheritance. It goes on to examine some of the great poems in an attempt to define gaiety, and how Yeats achieves it in the poetry, and then to look at the early, pre-system poems to see how they differ. Finally, it takes the last of Yeats's lyric collections, *Last Poems*, and shows how gaiety works in the most mature poetry when the poems are read as narrative events within a story.

## A NOTE ON THE CHOICE OF TEXTS

My thesis argues that the way to read Yeats's poems is in collections. This means that it has been necessary to examine the texts of those collections and to decide what authority they have. Since Finneran published his *W.B. Yeats: The Poems, a New Edition* (Macmillan, 1983), the debate around Yeats's texts has waged fiercely, and I have consulted: Warwick Gould's review of Finneran's book in the *TLS* of 29 June 1984; Norman Jeffares's comments in the introduction to *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Macmillan, 1984); Curtis Bradford's essay "On Yeats's *Last Poems*"( Macmillan 1968); Finneran's own prolegomenon to his edition, *Editing Yeats's Poems* (Macmillan 1983); and *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Macmillan 1957) amongst others.

On the basis of this reading I have decided to use the Variorum as my basic text as I believe that the emendations Finneran has made are sometimes unreliable, and that

> It is a matter of regret . . . that *The Poems: A New Edition* (1983) does not adopt the chronological ordering of the poems in the first volume of the 'Definitive Edition' of 1949, *The Poems of W.B. Yeats*, but follows instead the division made in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (1933, 2nd ed. 1950) between lyrical poems and narrative and dramatic poems. (Jeffares 1984, vii)

As both Jeffares and Gould point out, *CP* 1933 was meant to be a popular edition, and its publishing never supplanted the plan for a definitive edition, which was to insert the long poems in their rightful places between the lyric collections. The longer poems are illuminating as to Yeats's development as a poet, and any

reading that claims to be looking at his work as a whole, cannot ignore them, or read them in isolation. (I have deliberately restricted myself to the lyric poems in my discussion of how to read Yeats's poetry, but it is a conscious restriction in the interests of the argument). The Variorum is based on the Definitive Edition of 1949, so it has the chronological ordering, and it appears to be more reliable than Finneran's edition with respect to the text of the individual poems.

The point on which I support Finneran is on his restoration of the ordering of *Last Poems*, hence breaking up the collection known by that name in *CP* 1950 and in the Definitive Edition, into *New Poems* and *Last Poems*. Bradford explains that "during the last days of his life Yeats arranged the work he had completed since *New Poems* by number and title in a manuscript table of contents" (1968, 75-76). This volume was published as *Last Poems and Two Plays* on July 10 1939, with the lyrics in the order Yeats had specified (Wade 1968, 199). When this collection came to be incorporated into the definitive edition, however, it was linked with the last volume published before Yeats's death, *New Poems*, and the order of the poems from *Last Poems* was changed substantially. Bradford's comment here is that

> . . . if we consider . . . the *Last Poems* themselves in Yeats's intended order, we will find that Yeats, as always, is guiding us with a sure hand. Again, poem reinforces and explains poem: Yeats's principal themes and ideas emerge more clearly and forcefully. Finally, he provides us, by carefully arranging a great variety of metrical forms and modes, with a musical experience both rich and intricate.
> (1968, 76)

This, at least, has been corrected in Finneran's edition, and this is the ordering that I use in my discussion of these poems, although I have kept to the Variorum text of the poems.

## CHAPTER ONE

### I

My thesis examines the concept of gaiety in some of W.B. Yeats's lyric poetry. The methodology for the study is somewhat eclectic, but it has its origins in Jurij Lotman's ideas of "story" and "mythology", which he explores in *The Structure of the Artistic Text*.

In Chapter 8 of his book Lotman points out that texts have two aspects: one is the mythological aspect, which expresses a general system of beliefs that attempts to account for meaning in a universal way; the other is the story aspect, which reflects some episode in a more specific reality (1977, 211). (Myth is privileged here as a large, overarching structure that is inclusive of story). Lotman's assumption is that texts are models of what we commonly call reality. If this is so then these aspects of myth and story must come from the reality which is modelled. On the basis of these assumptions Lotman seems to be suggesting that we experience life in two ways. Firstly, on the basis of events that occur around us on a daily or hourly basis, it is a story. Secondly, we understand life in terms of various systems of belief that we construct to give these events meaning. These systems, or larger structures, are myths.

It is possible for texts to be constructed only on the mythological principle: they would reflect everything in the form of pure essences, and not through individual episodes. An example of a text constructed on the mythological principle would

be what we commonly call a myth, or an allegory. It would be impossible to construct a text only on the story principle, however, as the text would have to be an exact replica of the event it is attempting to model, uninfluenced by the author in any way, and such a text would be mistaken for the event itself, and not a model of that event. This is because the mythologizing aspect of the text is associated with the frame, that which separates the text from the non-text. D.W. Harding in *Experience into Words* speaks of the same two aspects of a text, and confirms that "the effectiveness of literature lies in its combining (sometimes with tension between them) these two aspects of its materials, their uniqueness and their representativeness" (1974, 73). The two are obviously extreme points--". . . the curve is asymptotic" (1974, 73)--but like Lotman, Harding indicates that it is possible to approach the representative, or mythological, extreme quite closely, through allegory and some personification, in other words those tropes associated with metaphor. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* provides an example of this. To attain pure story, or uniqueness, is impossible however. For one thing the author's choices and preconceptions are bound to interfere with an attempt to do nothing but mirror a particular situation. Lotman's contention is that if a text were constructed only on the story principle--in other words if it dealt only with the specific and individual--it would be indistinguishable from the thing itself. Artistic texts need frames, general and collective elements, to separate them from reality. It is worth noting, however, that just as it is possible to get close to the mythological extreme by means of metaphor, there is a figure for texts which approach

the extreme of story as closely as possible, and that is metonymy. As David Lodge notes: ". . . literature written in the metonymic mode tends to disguise itself as non-literature . . ." (1977, 93). Lodge, and it is his definition I shall adopt, defines metonymy (and at the same time synecdoche) in structuralist terms as a figure ". . . produced by deleting one or more items from a natural combination, but not the items it would be most natural to omit . . ." (1977, 76). He provides an example in the sentence "The keels of the ships crossed the deep sea", and he deletes "ships" and "sea", to form a sentence reading "The keels crossed the deep". By the first deletion a synecdoche is formed, and by the second, a metonymy, and the latter is important to my argument.

The two aspects of a text, myth and story, can thus also be characterised as the metaphoric and metonymic aspects of a text. As has been indicated, some texts attempt to approach one or the other extreme, and sometimes succeed as in the case of myth, but texts more usually contain elements of both as essential to their constitution and to their comprehension.

A poem that contrives to reach as far as possible in the direction of both extremes without tearing itself in half is Yeats's "No Second Troy" (Allt 1957, 256):

> Why should I blame her that she filled my days
> With misery, or that she would of late
> Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
> Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
> Had they but courage equal to desire?
> What could have made her peaceful with a mind
> That nobleness made simple as a fire,
> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?

> Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
> Was there another Troy for her to burn?

The poem deals with the poet's perception of the life of a specific individual, Maud Gonne, (although the identity of the individual is not given in the poem and this knowledge is not essential in order to understand the poem). It operates almost exclusively in terms of simile and synecdoche, apart from the major figure of the poem, which is the metonymy of Troy. It is in this figure that the elements of story and myth are, quite literally, united. Yeats uses metonymy, the figure associated with story, but the content of the figure is a recognised myth. The very choice of the city of Troy for the figure grounds the poem in the myth of Troy, makes Maud Gonne into Helen, and raises the poem above the plane of the specific. Instead of being a re-telling, the poem becomes a true model of the poet's experience of a woman, offering a way of seeing and comprehending which is not dependent on the reader's possessing biographical information. It is the deliberate creation of this sort of tension between the two extremes of myth and story that leads Stallworthy to speak of Yeats's "detachment" which is ". . . unique, in a self-confessed romantic poet, who wrote so constantly out of his own experience" (1963, 6). The technique, I shall argue, is characteristic of Yeats, and the terms of myth and story, and metaphor and metonymy, provide a useful way of discussing it.

Lotman claims that a natural language is a primary modelling system, and anything that is constructed from a natural language, such as poetry, is a secondary modelling system. He

acknowledges however, that a poem, operating within the constraints of, amongst others, grammar and of notions of what is appropriately called poetry, can only ever be a finite model of an infinite universe. Another way of approaching this is to say that poetry is a translation from the realm of natural language to that of poetic language, that "it is the reflection of one reality in another, that is, it is always a *translation*" (Lotman 1977, 210, original emphasis). As a translation, however, a poem will also transcend its context, because it is a translation from natural language, which attempts to reflect reality accurately and literally, to the language of art which claims no such thing. Poetry may claim to help us understand reality, but it seldom performs this function by accurate and literal reflection. This transcendence of context is a function of the mythological aspect of a text.

Myth, which Lotman identifies with the frame of an artistic text, is the ordering principle. It offers an inclusive, overall pattern and unity as opposed to the flexible complexity of individual energy and experience that is story. Myth is the *sine qua non* for understanding story. Jerome McGann points out that

> One of the special graces of poetic works--probably their chief social value--is that they are conceptual forms which operate at a high level of generality, on the one hand, and at an equally high level of particularity on the other. The particulars, the "matters-of-fact", are subjected to a general organizing structure which precisely *does not* reduce those particulars to conceptual finishedness, but instead preserves them in a state of (as it were) freedom. The particulars are grains of sand in which the world may be seen--may be seen again and again, in new sets of relations and differentials.
> (1985, 12; original emphasis)

In individual and personal terms, the story consists of the particular events of a life, and the myth is that which organizes the events into a coherent whole. In this sense a myth is any larger system of beliefs that enables people to comprehend and attribute meaning to their lives. In a poem, the mythological aspect will often not be articulated in the text itself. A poet does not make apparent in each poem he writes what the system of belief is that constrains him to write in that particular way. If it were not there ordering and organizing, however, the poem would be indistinguishable from that which it was attempting to model. Without the mythological aspect, translation fails. Once again, "No Second Troy" is a useful example. The only indication of the ordering principle of the poem is the single word "Troy", but it is sufficient to distinguish the poem from the specific instance, and indicate that it is in a discourse that is a model of natural language, and as such is a discourse that is attempting to reflect upon the experience by using such figures as metonymy.

Myth and story then, would seem to be necessary features of a poem, perhaps especially so in Yeats's poems, where the story almost invariably has a biographical reference and, from autobiographical and biographical records, it is possible to determine the myth with which he orders the story, whether that of the occult, of Ancient Greece, of Ireland, or *A Vision*. It is not sufficient, however, to examine Yeats's poems singly in this way, as they come to seem obscure and esoteric, requiring decoding by means of biographical information before they can be

understood. This is something that appears to be particularly true of later poems such as "Blood and the Moon", which is seemingly inexplicable without *A Vision*. This is partly the result of Yeats's choice of the lyric form. One lyric poem serving as a model of the world is almost bound to seem arbitrary and constrained. Several lyrics, making up a map of interlocking poems, can begin to reflect the structure of the world. The significant text then becomes the collection of poems, and not a single poem. In James Olney's words:

> From a most disjointed and random diversity, Yeats's poems make their way, through quaternities, trinities, and antinomies, to the most intense unity. The poetic act is an exact imitation of the Demiourgos' creation, fitting the many together as a unified image modelled on the single paradigm: a sensible living creature that is a likeness of the intelligible Living Creature. (1980, 360)

There are two reasons for approaching Yeats's poems in collections, and in terms of story and myth. The first is that Yeats himself was acutely aware of the way he organized his poems. Hugh Kenner points out ". . . Yeats's most radical, most casual, and most characteristic maneuver: he was an architect, not a decorator; he didn't accumulate poems, he wrote books" (1984, 139). Kenner goes on to show how *The Wild Swans at Coole* develops from the title poem to the final one of the volume, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes".

The purpose of Yeats writing these books was to explore himself. Hazard Adams agrees that Yeats's poems should be read as a whole, as a single book made up of a number of smaller ones, and explains why:

> . . . Yeats's poems [form] a book . . . an antithetical book with a narrative-mimetic plot, the

> main character of which is a fictive figure who eventually names himself Yeats. This view has certain radical consequences for the reading of many of Yeats's poems, because it requires that we transfer the utterances in any given poem from that of the author Yeats to that of the fictive created character Yeats. I hold that we had better begin reading Yeats's poems with the assumption, at least provisional, that we can no more directly identify the speaker of, say, "Byzantium" with the historical author than we can identify a soliloquy of Hamlet with the historical Shakespeare or the Duke's lightly veiled threat with Browning. (1986, 1)

The strength of this kind of approach lies in its concentrating on the poems themselves and how they work, and its denial of biography as adequate criticism. In this thesis I shall name the speaker of the poems as Yeats, but it will be this fictive Yeats of whom I speak: the mask, and not the man behind it. This is because what is interesting is the story Yeats told himself in order to make sense of the world, and of himself: "one's self-identity is the story one tells one's self of who one is" (Laing 1969, 93). This story is contained in the poetry, and it is not "true" in the sense of being autobiographically accurate, but it is spiritually accurate.

The second reason is that the concepts of story and myth as aspects of a text seem to link both the practice and the theory of Yeats's poetry, the major myth or ordering generality of which is, I shall contend, the idea of gaiety. A tentative definition of gaiety might be that it is

> a union of opposites. . . . For when we see through the illusions of our boundaries, we will see, here and now, the universe as Adam saw it before the Fall: an organic unity, a harmony of opposites, a melody of positive and negative, delight with the play of our vibratory existence. When the opposites are realized to be one, discord melts into concord, battles become dances, and old enemies become lovers.
> (Wilber 1981, 28-9)

As the quotation suggests, gaiety is the result of the reconciliation of opposites, or Unity of Being. Yeats finds Unity of Being at phase fifteen of his Great Wheel, and describes the possessor as a "being" who has:

> . . . selected, moulded and remoulded, narrowed its circle of living, been more and more the artist, grown more and more "distinguished" in all preference. Now contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has bodily form, and every bodily form is loved.
> (*A Vision*, 135-136)

The subject is only a "being" because this kind of extreme unity is normally unattainable in life. Yeats claims, however, that it is easier for those who find themselves in phases sixteen to eighteen, and he counted himself as a man of phase seventeen. In "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" he gives a more personal account of the phenomenon:

> At certain moments, always unforseen, I become happy. . . . I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them: everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs; I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end.
> (*Mythologies*, 364-365)

In the poetry, it is the oppositions of story and myth that must be reconciled in order to generate gaiety. Story and myth here are both the antinomies of life that are discussed in the above quotations, and the features of a text. To say this is to equate life and art, and to understand them in the same terms, as does Nietzsche, who views art as a structuring of chaos, and explains life in the same way: "to become master of the chaos one is; to compel one's chaos to become form . . . that is the grand ambition here" (cited in Degenaar 1986, 20). What this does is to make the artist's life into a work of art, so that it is

possible to speak of story and myth both in terms of life and art and to mean the same thing. Still in Nietzschean terms, life involves "sexuality, intoxication, cruelty" (ibid.), and these must be transformed by Art. Yeats takes these "states of animal vigour" (ibid.) and turns them into poetry, subduing the Dionysian chaos of story in an Apollonian form. It is as the reconciliation of the two features of the poem, and so of the life, occurs, that a new third feature is produced. The poem becomes greater than the sum of its parts, as does the life. As E.E. Cummings writes in the introduction to his collection *is 5*: ". . . whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four,he [the poet] rejoices in a purely irresistible truth(to be found,in abbreviated costume,upon the title page of the present volume)" (Cummings 1981, 221). It is obvious that, as elements of a poem, story and myth can only be reconciled *within* a poem, locating gaiety unequivocally in the poem, much as Keats locates melancholy ". . . in the very temple of Delight" ("Ode on Melancholy" *l*.25, Keats 1977, 349). The next step is to say that without the poem you cannot have gaiety, and so, paradoxically, poetry *is* gaiety. Having located it at the heart of the poetry in this way, it becomes clear that dealing with gaiety is inextricable from dealing with style: myth and story reside in the language, and particularly in Yeats's metonymic use of language and in his sense of closure.

Closure is ". . . a modification of structure that makes *stasis*, or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event", according to Barbara Smith (1968, 34; original

emphasis). It is important because Yeats's poetry enacts the process of reconciling myth and story to achieve gaiety, and that moment is achieved as the poem ends, and as the collection of poems is completed. Closure is a formal and stylistic consideration, and it suggests Yeats's concern with unity and completion, which he expresses in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae":

> When all sequence comes to an end, time comes to an end, and the soul puts on the rhythmic or spiritual body or luminous body and contemplates all the events of its memory and every possible impulse in an eternal possession of itself in one single moment. (*Mythologies*, 357)

At this point it becomes necesssary to stress once more that, while Yeats's poems can be read in isolation, they ought not to be: they lend themselves instead to examination in layers. The first layer is that of the individual poem, with its elements of story and myth. The second layer is that of the organization of the poems into collections. Here story and myth are present not only in the individual poems, but as aspects of the collection itself, given that in its own right it is a text. The final layer is the organization of the collections into the *Collected Poems*. Once more, the larger text also has the aspects of story and myth.

The final structure of the *Collected Poems* is much like one of Yeats's gyres: there is a movement from level to level by means of the meaning-producing conflict between story and myth, the end of it all being to attain the state of gaiety.

II

Yeats's adoption of a myth, and of one culminating in gaiety in particular, and the way in which he ordered his poems, was not unique. He was working in a long tradition, in fact in a number of traditions, and it is important to take cognisance of these.

With regard to the use and choice of myth, Yeats owes a large debt to William Blake. He began reading Blake seriously in the 1890's when he collaborated with Edwin Ellis on the Quaritch edition of Blake's work and it

> had a very particular impact on his own creative work. . . . it provided him with an enlarged repertoire of symbols that he would repeat and refine for the rest of his life. In addition, the 'diagrammatic', systematising approach . . . was a precedent for his own attempt at an all-encompassing psychological and historical system some thirty years later in *A Vision*. (Masterson 1985, 75-76)

Yeats returned to read Blake, as the letters show, in 1902 and again in 1917 (Wade 1954, 379; 631). In an 1890 letter to Katharine Tynan he writes:

> You will like Blake's system of thought. It is . . . amazingly poetical. It has done my own mind a great deal of good in liberating me from formulas and theories of several kinds. You will find it a difficult book, this Blake interpretation, but one that will open up for you, as it has for me, new kinds of poetic feeling and thought . . .
> (Wade 1954, 152-153)

Yeats was beginning to understand how system and poetry could operate together. He was already interested in the "Perennial Philosophy" and he confirmed its presence in Blake. Aldous Huxley, in his book of that title, describes the perennial philosophy as follows:

> PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS--the phrase was coined by

> Leibniz; but the thing--the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being--the thing is immemorial and universal. (1945, vii)

Through his study of Blake, the Tarot, and his membership of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, Yeats practised himself in this philosophy, and by 1917 was ready to commence the writing of his own system, *A Vision*. A system is necessary at all because

> the world that seems so diverse to us--or worse than diverse: fragmentary, chaotic, painful, and meaningless--will never be a universe, will never be an ordered whole, except through a living system capable of discovering a unity in plurality. (Olney 1980, 359)

Yeats must also have been aware of the statement Blake gives to Los in *Jerusalem* I 10: "'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's '" (Blake 1969, 629). Jonathan Culler offers a modern variant of this problem: "He who does not write . . . is himself 'written' by the system" (1975, 264). Yeats is as determined as this to understand the world without compromising his genuine and carefully gained beliefs. The system he finally chooses is Platonic in its insistence on the necessity of both the One and the many and the reconciliation of the many in the One. Hence Yeats's attraction to Nietzsche, whose ". . . Apollonian-Dionysian duality, in the final analysis, reduces to the distinction between the divided many and the primogenial one" (Abrams 1973, 317). Johan Degenaar points out, however, that Nietzsche criticised Platonist metaphysics, and he suggests that we ". . . rather see him as a philosophical explorer of metaphors and parables with a keen sense for poetry

and for the mythology hidden in language, and also as a philosopher who discovered the psychological dimensions of philosophy and the role of experience in thinking" (1986, 23). This last view is much more Yeatsian. The first has something of finality about it, suggesting that conclusions are possible in terms of the system, whereas the duality of story and myth is never finally resolved, and has to be explored over and over in various ways, this exploration providing the need for and the impetus to creativity that Yeats felt until the end of his life. The need that makes even Plato's ghost sing out in dissatisfaction:

> 'The work is done,' grown old he thought,
> 'According to my boyish plan;
> Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
> Something to perfection brought';
> *But louder sang that ghost, 'What then?'*
> ("What Then?" *ll*.16-20; Allt 1957, 577)

The duality of story and myth is that which is present in both art and life, and in the process of trying to resolve it, art becomes the life and the life becomes art. This is another Nietzschean approach, and Degenaar points out that in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche's contention is that

> this aspect of art, namely: the re-enacting of experience on a different level, the de-pragmatisation of life, enables man to view things from a distance and to see himself in perspective. Without this distance man would be nothing but foreground--a state of affairs which excludes any form of perspective. (Degenaar 1986, 21)

A poem which might seem to contradict this view is "The Choice" (Allt 1957, 495), yet it is a moment in which Yeats can look with utmost perspective on his life:

> 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.
> When all that story's finished, what's the news?
> In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
> That old perplexity an empty purse,
> Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

This is Yeats's comment on the choice he has made to be a poet, and it is ostensibly a negative and regretful comment. Yet it is in the form of a poem, suggesting that the way Yeats understands his life is through the medium of his art. Degenaar comments on Nietzsche's insistence that art brings perspective to life and says: "I read this to mean that each person should become an artist--a poet of his own life--in creating his life by not remaining in the foreground but building into life the liberating distance of perspective, by structuring it in a personal way, by telling a story about himself" (1986, 21). Here, in a nutshell, is Yeats's poetic technique, and the reason for it. Yeats read Nietzsche, and found that he ". . . completes Blake and has the same roots . . ." (Wade 1954, 379).

In the expression of his system, then, Yeats relies on the symbols of the Tarot and of the Cabbala, and other esoteric studies, all of which have for their main theme one version or another of the perennial philosophy. For the word, joy or gaiety, that defines the moment to which he aspires he goes to the Romantics: Wordsworth and Coleridge amongst others. John Lucas points out in "The Poet in His Joy" how the word joy came to change its meaning radically in the course of the eighteenth century, and became associated with the transforming power of the imagination, and the religious state of grace (Lucas 1982, 30-

49). So at the beginning of the nineteenth century Coleridge could write in "Dejection: An Ode":

> O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
> What this strong music in the soul may be!
> What, and wherein it doth exist,
> This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
> This beautiful and beauty-making power.
> Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,
> Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
> Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
> Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
> Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
> A new Earth and new Heaven,
> Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud--
> Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud---
> We in ourselves rejoice!
> And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
> All melodies the echoes of that voice,
> All colours a suffusion from that light.
> (*ll.* 59-75; 1969, 365-366)

Clearly, joy is something of extraordinary power; capable of uniting the individual and nature, and transforming utterly perceptions of the world. Commenting on the Greater Romantic Lyric, M.H. Abrams explains why a stanza as gratulant as this one should occur in a poem about dejection:

> In some of these poems the confrontation occurs at a time of spiritual crisis which is called 'dejection' (the *acedia, deiectio,* or spiritual aridity of the Christian experts of the interior life); and the ancient struggle for the blessedness of reconciliation with an alienated God becomes the attempt to recover in maturity an earlier stage of integrity with oneself and the outer world, in a mode of consciousness for which the standard name is 'joy'. (1973, 123)

The confrontation is between the subject and the object of Romantic thought: the self and the outside world; more specifically, the self and nature. This might be a description of Yeats's poetry, but for the fact that the difference between him and the Romantics lies in what is to be reconciled. For Yeats ". . . the colloquy is no longer between mind and nature

but between antithetic aspects of the single mind: 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'" (Abrams 1973, 122). Nonetheless, unity is still the desired good, and the word used to describe the state is still joy, or gaiety.

The important thing about the unity of joy is that it is momentary. Abrams locates in Augustine, particularly in the *Confessions*, the suggestion that "this experience of eternity in a moment . . . anticipates the translation of all time into eternity at the apocalypse" (1973, 385), and he goes on to discuss Wordsworth as ". . . preeminently a poet of the revelatory and luminous Moment" (1973, 387). Wordsworth's "spots of time" are moments of unity and comprehension, and therefore of joy:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
> In trivial occupations, and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
> That penetrates, enables us to mount,
> When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
> This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
> Among those passages of life that give
> Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
> The mind is lord and master--outward sense
> The obedient servant of her will.
> (*The Prelude* (1850) XII 208-223; 1972, 479)

It is on this tradition that Yeats draws, although his product is so vastly different from Wordsworth's.

Another piece of common ground between Yeats and the Romantics is the idea of the sublime. Ramazani points out that " . . . the theory of the sublime is close to being a theory of what Yeats calls 'tragic joy', for the sublime transforms the

painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence" (1989, 163). He also points out that "in all versions of the sublime, not just Yeats's, the moment of gaiety presupposes the pain or death from which it rises" (1989, 173). The implications of this for the modern as opposed to the Romantic poet are profound. As Abrams has indicated (see above), the conflict in modernity is located in the self, it is no longer an external battle. This means that the pain or death occurs within the self. Ramazani speaks of the sublime in Yeats's "visionary lyrics", and says that "such poems enact the strengthening of the ego by introjection, and yet, in doing so, they admit an '*alien* voice', as Heidegger calls it, that seems to tear the boundaries of the ego, bringing it perilously close to annihilation" (1989, 165; original emphasis).

Yeats's myth, then, is drawn from a number of sources, and he combines them into a system uniquely appropriate to himself and his needs. The fact that he did this is by no means unusual. Abrams points out that Schlegel, Schelling, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats all made, and advocated the making of, their own mythologies (1973, 67). The other Romantic who worked quite explicitly within a system was Wordsworth. Some of the central belief of that system has been elucidated above, but it is important to notice that he deliberately arranged his poems within that system. In the preface to the 1814 edition of *The Recluse* Wordsworth discusses the relationship between that poem and *The Prelude*, which was seen as an introduction to it:

> . . . the two Works have the same kind of relation to each other, if he may so express himself, as the ante-chapel has to the body of a gothic church.

> Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add, that his minor Pieces, which have been long before the Public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connexion with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices.
>
> (Wordsworth Vol.II 1977, 36)

Abrams's comment on this is that "Wordsworth could not have been more precise or insistent: he envisaged all his poems as one immense work, a poem made up of poems, written in accordance with a single comprehensive design" (1973, 20). From his first collection of poems, Yeats is writing with the same insistence on system and order, although he only begins to derive real energy from this organisation once he has clarified his thought in *A Vision*.

While it is important to understand the historical context of Yeats's ideas, it remains my contention that Yeats's writing and organisation of his poetry is so careful and deliberate that it is possible to understand almost all of it by a careful and deliberate reading of all his poetry in its correct sequence, without having to become an expert, either in his esoteric symbolic system, or in his biographical details. This is because Yeats's poetry is the ritual in which he exercises his belief, and so it is an accurate reflection of that system of belief. The next chapter will attempt, in the light of such a reading, to examine some of the major poems that are sources of the idea of gaiety, and to see how Yeats qualifies and changes the inberited idea, by means of his style, to suit his particular time and purpose.

# CHAPTER TWO

> *. . . we artists . . . are the servants not of any cause but of mere naked life, and above all of that life in its nobler forms, where joy and sorrow are one, Artificers of the Great Moment . . .*
> *Essays and Introductions, 260.*

The poems examined in this chapter are some of those which deal, in one way or another, with Yeats's Great Moment. I have chosen those that offer most scope for the kind of commentary I wish to make, although the generalisations that I draw from the examination of these poems are applicable to all his work.

James Olney suggests that:

> the typical psychological and philosophical progress of Yeats's poems is from *ego* to *eidos*, proceeding . . . by way of *logos* and *mythos*, and passing from this temporal world about us to the eternal world of the work of art through exercise of memory and *anamnesis*. (1980, 278)

He goes on to point out that the poems begin in the world of division, and end with unifying and timeless truths. What is interesting here is not so much the movement itself, which Yeats's philosophy makes inevitable, as how it is accomplished. Olney's terms of *ego* and *eidos*, and *Logos* and *mythos* can be equated to Lotman's terms of story and myth, and the process of the poem concerns the placing of the individual and personal story in the context of myth in order that parts may be made whole. The poem imitates this unifying action of the imagination, and thus it can provide the experience of gaiety as the poem comes to an end. All poems are mimetic, even if all we

can say of them is that they imitate historical utterances (Smith 1968, 15). What makes Yeats's poems particularly difficult is that they imitate ". . . in a much subtler, more Pythagorean and Platonic way . . . 'an intensity of pattern that we have never seen with our eyes' . . . in *this* life" (Olney 1980, 274; original emphasis). Before Yeats's eyes are the Ideal Forms of his system, and he shares them with us by making them into poems, which are then Forms in their own right.

The first of these Forms that I shall examine is "A Prayer for my Daughter" which is collected in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (Allt 1957, 403). The title poem discusses Yeats's view of female beauty, which he sees as an ideal Form, provided it is accompanied by labour to the end of beauty alone; women must not work at intellectual pursuits. This concern is echoed in a number of poems in the collection, but it is accompanied by a series of poems that are disturbed at the threat to this, and therefore to all the Forms. "A Prayer for my Daughter" combines these two interests.

The poem opens with a storm that matches the turmoil in the poet's mind and provides a physical threat to match the metaphysical one that his mind conjures:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
> My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
> But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
> Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
> Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
> And for an hour I have walked and prayed
> Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.
> (*ll*.1-8)

True to Olney's description, the poem begins with ego: the child of the title is asleep, and we are focussed on the poet. He

walks and prays, and his imagination is stimulated by the sound of the wind, omnipresent in its threat. Yeats characterizes his state of mind as being an "excited reverie" (*l*.13), and this paradoxical description is indicative of the state of division in which the poem begins. The paradox is echoed in ". . . the murderous innocence of the sea" (*l*.16), and this in turn is an echo of the lines in "The Second Coming": "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (Allt 1957, 402; *ll*.5-6). The sea is the element of change and process, and it breeds a wind that breeds in Yeats's mind fear of a future, full of division, that "Danc[es] to a frenzied drum" ("A Prayer for my Daughter" *l*.15).

The future that the sea and the wind presage threatens not Yeats, but his daughter, and as the prayer begins in the third stanza he asks that she will not be made so beautiful as to cause either others or herself to be "distraught" (*l*.18). In other words, that she will not be so beautiful that she will not have to work at it. Distraught coincides with the three adjectives of the previous stanza: excited, frenzied, and murderous; and it is against the possibility of such emotions of division absorbing his daughter's life that Yeats makes his prayer. That beauty is a source of division he makes plain in the fourth stanza:

> Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
> And later had much trouble from a fool,
> While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
> Being fatherless could have her way
> Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.
> It's certain that fine women eat
> A crazy salad with their meat
> Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.
>
> (*ll*.25-32)

Here he mentions Helen and Venus, two mythological women renowned for their beauty, and suggests that both of them have betrayed the cornucopia that was in their keeping by marrying respectively a fool and a bandy-leggèd smith. Beautiful women, Yeats is suggesting, have a responsibility to live according to that beauty, because they are Ideal Forms, and to shirk this responsibility is to deprive the world of these Forms. But this responsibility is exceedingly heavy and so he prays that his daughter will not be made disturbingly beautiful. Instead, he would have her taught courtesy, which he defines as including charm and kindness, for these things earn more hearts than beauty wins. Men that have been fools and rovers for beauty have been made wise by charm and captivated by kindness. The reason for this is that courtesy is a ritual where all action is prescribed, and there is no possibility that wilful action of the kind available to perfectly beautiful women will destroy the inherited and carefully cultivated Forms. It is important to note that courtesy is learned, and for Yeats this means that it is a difficult thing, much more difficult than being naturally beautiful. The lines to recall here are those from "Adam's Curse":

> . . . 'To be born woman is to know--
> Although they do not talk of it at school--
> That we must labour to be beautiful.'
>
> I said: 'It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
> (Allt 1957, 205; *ll*.18-22)

Courtesy will give her the ability to be ". . . a flourishing hidden tree" that is "Rooted in one dear perpetual place"

(*ll*.41,48). Her thoughts will be like linnets in the tree, with ". . . no business but dispensing round/ Their magnanimities of sound" (*ll*.43-44). The permanence and stability of the tree image is given poignancy by the roving man, and by the realisation that for Yeats this is a high and difficult way to be. The tree is also that of unity: all its parts make a perfect whole--down to the birds who live in it--and it is a symbol of gaiety. This is the tree of "Among School Children": "O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,/ Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" (Allt 1957, 446; *ll*.61-62). Slowly but surely the weight of myth is growing as Yeats gives the ordinary words an increasingly symbolic weight to bear. As surely Anne Yeats is becoming a symbol of the things that will hold up against a threatening future. Yeats is busy ". . . unchaining an image from its first order reference to the world and also from its merely subjective associations in order to give it a new role in understanding" (Degenaar 1986, 74).

For a moment now the poet returns to himself, confessing that the things he values are scarce, and so his mind has become unfruitful. By this confession he reiterates that this way of life is a difficult one, and places more emphasis on his daughter, not only as a symbol of unity against the chaos of the future, but as a personal symbol of hope for himself in his barren state. Yet despite his current inertia, the poet knows that hatred is perhaps the most dangerous thing of all for his daughter. Hatred can destroy the integrity of mind that the tree symbolises, and leave her vulnerable to the omnipresent ". . . haystack- and roof-levelling wind" (*l*.5) that will ". . . tear

the linnet from the leaf" (*l*.56). The worst hatred of all is said to be intellectual hatred, and Yeats gives another example of a beautiful woman who has rejected the responsibility that goes with the cornucopia of beauty "Because of her opinionated mind" (*l*.61). There is only one way for a beautiful woman to think and to remain faithful to the cornucopia, and that is to think with her body:

> --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 too.
> ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer" *ll*.47-51; Allt 1957, 387)

These lines must have those of Donne's in mind: ". . . Her pure, and eloquent blood/ Spoke in her cheekes, and so distinctly wrought,/ That one might almost say, her body thought" ("Of the Progresse of the Soule: The Second Anniversary" *ll*.244-246; Donne 1938, 259).

If a woman can live like this, either accepting the responsibility of beauty or being trained in courtesy, and rejecting hatred, the result is what Yeats describes in stanza nine--gaiety:

> Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
> The soul recovers radical innocence
> And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
> Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
> And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
> She can, though every face should scowl
> And every windy quarter howl
> Or every bellows burst, be happy still.
> (*ll*.65-72)

She will learn that the soul is responsible only to itself, and she will experience resolution and unity with the greater scheme of things. She will also be immune to the influence of the

dividing forces that surround her. Her innocence will be ". . . radical. . . " (*l*.66), both extreme and rooted.

At this point we are approaching *eidos*. Anne Yeats has been transformed from a sleeping baby to an Ideal Form, and Yeats is expressing his belief as to how that Form must be maintained. The trouble in "The Second Coming" is that "The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (*l*.6; Allt 1957, 402), and Yeats asks in "A Prayer for my Daughter" which follows directly after:

> How but in custom and in ceremony
> Are innocence and beauty born?
> (*ll*.77-78)

He goes on to clarify the entire poem in the last two lines where he expresses the final Idea:

> Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
> And custom for the spreading laurel tree.
> (*ll*.79-80)

Ceremony is the cornucopia that is given to beautiful women in order that they may continue to create beauty and to inspire others to do so, and custom is the uniting tree which a courteous woman becomes as she labours through ritual.

Yeats's "Imagining in excited reverie" (*l*.13) has become his imagination working against the violence of the divisive wind that the sea breeds; working to create a Form that will contain and constrain the violence, and by the end of the poem that Form has been created, both in the definitions of custom and ceremony that have been worked out, and in the physical shape of the poem itself. We may assume that the poet's restless and anxious pacings are over, that ". . . the great gloom that is in my mind" (*l*.8) has been lifted.

This lifting, however, is temporary. Once more it is important to notice that gaiety is momentary. No sooner has it been achieved than it is gone, and the search for resolution begins again. Yeats does not always find resolution in the same way. Now it will be in the timeless moment experienced from an otherwise very temporal state of mind, then it will be only in a permanent escape from the world of process. The dilemma is similar to the one that Keats faces in "Ode on a Grecian Urn": is it better to be a figure on the urn, *eidos*, and never fulfilled, but never experiencing pain either, or to live in the world of process, *ego*, and experience both pain and joy? Keats's final position is unambiguously expressed in the "Ode on Melancholy":

> Ay, in the very temple of Delight
> Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
> Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
> (*ll*.25-28; Keats 1977, 349)

Yeats always makes a choice, but that choice is seldom both--and in one poem. He more usually settles for one way in one poem, and another way in a second poem, and it is part of the task of the larger dialectic of the collected works to make a choice. This movement is imitative of Yeats's gyres, which spiral round from division to unity to division and back to unity again, with each spiral moving closer and closer towards a final resolution. Yeats finds his gyres close to home, and one of them forms the central figure of a collection: *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

The most obviously dialectical poem in this collection is "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Allt 1957, 477). The poem begins

with Soul issuing a summons to Self to mount ". . . the winding ancient stair" (*l*.1). The summons is an old one, to a religious pilgrimage which will result in stasis and peace and unity in "That quarter where all thought is done" (*l*.7). Self rejects the invitation and concentrates instead on the sword he holds across his knees. It is as new, and is wrapped around with some old, faded, embroidered silk torn from a court-lady's dress. As Soul points out, these things are "Emblematical of love and war" (*l*.19). The sword is an instrument of bloody political change, and the dress wrapped around the sword is a sign of the conjunction of male and female and the process and change involved in and resulting from that meeting. Self is intrigued by these things because although they are instruments of change and process, they themselves have survived, and they provide Self with a link with past generations, whose concerns have been much the same as his own, and a talisman against the Soul, who wishes him to abandon all this and seek oblivion:

> Think of ancestral night that can,
> If but imagination scorn the earth
> And intellect its wandering
> To this and that and t'other thing,
> Deliver from the crime of death and birth.
> (*ll*.20-24)

Self is adamant, however, and he deliberately sets up an antithesis, with the sword, the embroidery and the day, against the tower and the night. His final claim is the right, because he has the sword (and that is both the weapon and his manhood), ". . . to commit the crime once more" (*l*.32). That is, the crime of being involved in the process of birth and death and the Eternal Return. This is in direct contrast to the following poem

"Blood and the Moon" (Allt 1957, 480), where Yeats chooses the tower for his symbol, and follows the winding stair.

Soul has one last chance to persuade Self, and offers a description of that quarter where all is one and the senses are nullified by assumption into the darkness:

> *My Soul*. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
> And falls into the basin of the mind
> That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
> For intellect no longer knows
> *Is* from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*--
> That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
> Only the dead can be forgiven;
> But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.
> (*ll*.33-40)

The dualistic divisions between Is and Ought, Knower and Known are negated. This sounds like gaiety, and it is, but Soul offers it as a permanent state of being, and that is unnacceptable. One of the things that is lost in this state is speech, and that is not a conceivable sacrifice for a poet.

It ought to be said that this poem is a variation on the theme that Olney describes, as it concerns *ego* arguing with itself and trying to define the kind of *eidos* it seeks. *Ego* is present much more strongly throughout the poem than Olney's scheme suggests, although the poem does close on a note that shows that story has been translated into myth in the course of the writing, beginning with Self's conscious adoption of the sword and the silk as personal emblems that give his actions authority and meaning.

At this point Soul disappears from the poem, having thought itself into silence, and Self takes over. Harold Bloom's comment on this is that:

> The most neglected of truths about the *Dialogue's* famous declaration of autonomy by the Self, is that the Self ignores Yeats's account of the laws of process as completely as the Soul accepts them. The poem's largest irony is that the Soul is an esoteric Yeatsian, and the Self a natural man.
> (Bloom 1972, 375)

It is ironic, but it is profoundly Yeatsian in the continued questioning and adjusting of supposedly fixed positions. Ramazani is perhaps more accurate when he says that "however hard Yeats tried to be a mystic, the lyric self in his poems is rarely the passive vessel of the Daimon" (1989, 166). In this case the Self blazes forth with the declaration that he would endure it all again:

> 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 men;
> Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
> The folly that man does
> Or must suffer, if he woos
> A proud woman not kindred of his soul.
>
> I am content to follow to its source
> Every event in action or in thought;
> Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
> When such as I cast out remorse
> So great a sweetness flows into the breast
> We must laugh and we must sing,
> We are blest by everything,
> Everything we look upon is blest.
> (*ll*.57-72)

Compared to ". . . the basin of the mind" (*l*.34) that Soul offers this is indeed an impure ditch, but it is better, because here, as we learnt in "A Prayer for My Daughter", gaiety is the result of the soul being accountable to itself. As Yeats says in *Essays and Introductions*: "I am . . . self-possessed in self-surrender . . ." (1961, 524), and here he can finally "Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!" (*l*.67). "Yeats sees his life and the

world he looks upon as all gratulant, although not by a Wordsworthian but by a Nietzschean act of heroic self-forgiveness and self-redemption" (Abrams 1973, 122). This ultimate acceptance of self by self leads to sweetness and laughter and song: "In the psychic economy of these lyrics the energy released by the escape from the father--or from death, the final form of authority--often manifests itself as laughter" (Ramazani 1989, 165). The authority in this poem is Soul, with its vision of permanent stasis from which Self escapes to accept moments of joy, such as the one experienced at the end of this poem. The final irony is that although Soul is an esoteric Yeatsian and Self a natural man, the terms in which Self expresses his release from the authority of Soul are terms that more rightly belong to Soul: forgiveness, remorse and blessing. Self appropriates what it needs from Soul, and Yeats unites antinomies once more.

A second poem from this collection is "Vacillation" (Allt 1957, 499). This poem is not constructed directly as a dialogue, but its constitution as one long poem made up of a number of shorter ones, forming sub-sections, allows a dialectic to take place. Yeats's more important poetic statements often follow this form as it allows for qualification and expansion in a way that a single, short lyric does not. Part of this qualification and expansion involves Yeats's vocabulary. He frequently begins a poem using words with their accepted meaning, and as the poem progresses he slowly unchains them from that convention, or deconstructs their meaning, so that he can reconstruct them with a meaning quite particular to the poem. He builds his symbols in much the same way, for instance the silk and the sword in "A

Dialogue of self and Soul" and Anne Yeats in "A Prayer for my Daughter".

Yeats builds in this way because of his resistance to metaphor. Rather than claim the likeness between one thing and another, Yeats prefers to show how one thing might come to be illuminated by being discussed in terms of another, or how one thing might come to stand for another. To reiterate part of the discussion of Chapter One: the figures that allow for the deletion of what is not central to Yeats's thought are metonymy and synechdoche rather than metaphor, which is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is part of the process of turning story into myth. It cannot happen in one fell declaration. It is a careful working and reworking to transform the experience into something much greater than itself, into *eidos*; to make the poem into a Form, much as Coleridge's ". . . Frost performs its secret ministry" ("Frost at Midnight" *ll*.1,72; Coleridge 1969, 240), not changing the shapes of things, but transforming the perception of them. "Vacillation" is an attempt to transform our perceptions of joy, and to continue the dialectic on gaiety.

The poem begins with the simplest, tightest statement on Yeats's system that is possible:

> Between extremities
> Man runs his course;
> A brand, or flaming breath,
> Comes to destroy
> All those antinomies
> Of day and night;
> The body calls it death,
> The heart remorse.
> But if these be right
> What is joy?
> (*ll*.1-10)

Man exists between extremes, and these might be, for instance, the race and soul of "Under Ben Bulben" (Allt 1957, 637), or the self and the mask of the anti-self, or the One and the Many. Yeats offers further clues when he calls them ". . . those antinomies/ Of day and night" (*ll*.5-6), as we discovered in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" that day was aligned with Self, the sword, the silk, and the life of generation, while night stood for Soul, the tower, and stasis. Particularising the extremes is not essential, for Yeats believed with Blake that "Without Contraries is no progression" ("The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" plate 3; Blake 1966, 149). The point is simply that there must be contraries. Next, something comes to cancel out those contraries: "A brand, or flaming breath" (*l*.3). But the question is whether or not this cancellation is a good thing. "The body calls it death,/ The heart remorse" (*ll*.7-8), so the experience of the destruction of oppositions is perceived very differently, and which is correct? Yeats suggests that they are both wrong, by the final question: "But if these be right/ What is joy?" (*ll*.9-10). The suspicion immediately raised is that death and remorse are misguided responses, especially in the light of "A Dialogue of Self And Soul" (Allt 1957, 477) where it is quite clear that death must be accepted and remorse cast out. But the question launches us into the rest of the poem, and we must read further and be prepared to abandon or qualify those suspicions.

In the second section Yeats unites the antinomies in one tree, laterally divided into flame and foliage. These seemingly incompatible elements are paradoxically the necessary halves that make up the one, organically whole tree, which we have seen in "A

Prayer for My Daughter" (Allt 1957, 403) and "Among School Children" (Allt 1957, 443). Another paradox about the tree is that ". . . half and half consume what they renew" (*l*.15), introducing the sublime notion that destruction is the necessary precursor of creation. The worshipper who approaches the tree partakes of this paradoxical existence and experiences ". . . not grief" (*l*.18). Yeats can only define the emotion negatively. He is not sure yet whether or not this is joy, but he is quite certain that it is not grief. Ramazani suggests that ". . . the poems of tragic joy might be thought of as a countergenre to elegy" (1989, 166), and we find a confirmation that body and heart are wrong in their negative--elegiac--response to the reconciling of antinomies.

The appropriate response to death and memory (the provoker of remorse) is joy, and this is expressed even more strongly in the third section. Here the conventional aspirations of men are called ". . . Lethean foliage . . ." (*l*.27), and men are advised to abandon them as vain endeavours that never bring satisfaction. Instead it is better to concentrate on honing the life-work to meet the standard of ". . . such men as come/ Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb" (*ll*.33-34), hardly an elegiac response to mortality.

These first three sections of the poem come together in the fourth, where the poet experiences a moment of gaiety. It comes without seeking, and has no effect whatsoever on the outside world, but it enables the poet to receive and to give blessing in a state of happiness. In all these things the poet corresponds to foregoing descriptions. His body blazes like the

foliage of the tree in section two, and he laughs like the man in section three, and he exists in a perfect equilibrium of giving and receiving, meaning that there is no conflict, no contrary. This is a moment of progression.

That this state is transient is made explicit in the following section, where the poet is racked by remorse. The move from the previous section to this is so sudden and sharp as to be an almost physically sickening drop. The poet struggles here with memory, and he calls himself to account for sins of both omission and comission, much as he does in "The Man and the Echo":

> All that I have said and done,
> Now that I am old and ill,
> Turns into a question till
> I lie awake night after night
> And never get the answers right.
> (*ll*.6-10; Allt 1957, 632)

As in that poem, however, Yeats finds a solution. In "Vacillation" it is expressed in section six, and consists in surrender to the understanding that one is but a small part of the larger process, and that one's actions are ultimately of no real importance: "'Let all things pass away'" (*ll*.61,66,71) is the refrain that Yeats has the great men speak, and the sentiment is echoed elsewhere:

> Come let us mock at the great
> That had such burdens on the mind
> And toiled so hard and late
> To leave some monument behind,
> Nor thought of the levelling wind.
> ("Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"
> *ll*.93-97; Allt 1957, 432)

Which is not to say that one should do nothing at all, but rather that one should always bear in mind the levelling wind, which

cancels the need for remorse. And ultimately, the actions, non-actions and the thoughts that lead to them come from no less an ambiguous place than ". . . man's blood-sodden heart . . ." (*l*.67). This is echoed in "Whatever flames upon the night/ Man's own resinous heart has fed" ("Two Songs from a Play" *ll*.15-16; Allt 1957, 438), and in many other places Yeats expresses doubt about the suitability of ". . . the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" as a source for things that might be good ("The Circus Animals' Desertion" *l*.40; Allt 1957, 630).

This resinous, foul and bloody heart is intractable, however, and in section seven it wins out above the concerns of the soul. It will not relinquish what it sees to be its destiny, which is to sing, and to sing of ". . . things that seem" and ". . . original sin" (*ll*.72,77). By original sin Yeats means the things that concern man most nearly here and now, as opposed to the more esoteric idea of salvation that the Soul offers. Along with salvation goes being "struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!" (*l*.75), and this is unacceptable to one who is ". . . a singer born . . ." (*l*.73). As Ellman explains:

> To follow the soul into another world is to give up one's heart and self, and worst of all for a poet, to give up one's tongue, for in the presence of that unblemished world our tongue's a stone, in the simplicity of fire we are struck dumb.
> (1954, xiii)

Here above all is the explanation of why gaiety must be just a moment and no more. The rest, the entropy of the moment is immensely tempting, hence Yeats's vacillation, but to participate in it permanently costs too much. Gaiety is at the heart of the system, is the reason for the system and the poetry, but it is

only valuable so long as it is mostly unattainable. It is the grail.

In section eight of the poem Yeats finds another contrary, the figure of Von Hügel, and tests the new-found resolution of sections six and seven against him. The conclusion is that the poet plays ". . . a predestined part./ Homer is my example and his unchristened heart" (*ll*.86-87). So Von Hügel is dismissed, Yeats having ascertained that the moment at the centre of this poem has been one of progression and resolution--until next time.

But ". . . man's life is thought", says Yeats in "Meru" (*l*.3; Allt 1957, 563), and like it or not he cannot help but begin the questioning and the examining all over again. This time Yeats's claim is that all of civilization is ruled by illusion: "Civilization is hooped together, brought/ Under a rule, under the semblance of peace/ By manifold illusion. . . " (*ll*.1-3); illusion no doubt of the kind that he mentions in "The Tower" (Allt 1957, 415):

> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul,
> Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
> And further add to that
> That, being dead, we rise,
> Dream and so create
> Translunar Paradise.
> (*ll*.148-156)

Yeats is not quite as radical as he seems here; he is saying that man makes up the systems of meaning we attribute to these things, rather than that he makes up the things themselves. Nonetheless, this means that we are living in a fabric of illusion and that

our systems are designed to protect and cushion us. For all that, man is not content to live securely within those systems "And he, despite his terror, cannot cease/. . ./ Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come/ Into the desolation of reality" ("Meru" *ll*.4-7).

What Yeats is largely concerned with here is the notion that gaiety involves destruction, but he has refined it to the point where the system that produced gaiety in the first place is destroyed, and man bears the title of both creator and destroyer. In the process, another definition of gaiety is offered: it is the ability to do entirely without system, to gaily wave goodbye to Egypt, Greece and Rome, and to live like the hermits, exposed in the full understanding "That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ His glory and his monuments are gone" (*ll*.13-14).

The great ironic tension in this poem is that it is a sonnet. It is the ultimate imposed system of order, containing a refutation of that order. In this most civilized form, Yeats expresses, in the ravening and raging of man to overturn the system and discover reality, ". . . the rhetorical violence of the sublime . . ." (Ramazani 1989, 163).

This concern with gaiety as a result of the cyclical nature of things, and as the appropriate human response, is expanded in "Lapis Lazuli" (Allt 1957, 565), and the word itself, as Geoffrey Hutchings points out in his discussion of the poem (1984, 24-25), is subject to a careful process of qualification by foregrounding that leaves us with the fullest and clearest definition of the state of gaiety that Yeats offers.

This poem is clearly an example of the move from *ego* to *eidos*. Even though the ego in question is not directly that of Yeats, the poem begins with the speech of ". . . hysterical women . . ." (*l*.1), and they speak in clichés, which is about as mundane a context, and as far removed from *eidos* as one could wish. The first use of "gay" occurs in this context, and is slightly pejorative as a description of the poets, but not particularly startling. Instead of an open refutation of the Platonic claim that the poets are irresponsible, Yeats quietly begins by putting the entire human race on the stage in a tragedy:

> All perform their tragic play,
> There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
> That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
> Yet they, should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
> (*ll*.9-17)

He lists some of the greatest tragic roles and enters them into the poet's party by describing them as gay. This time the use of the word is startling, and it is clear that the usual meaning of gay as "full of or disposed to joy and mirth" (*OED*) is not intended. To assist us, Yeats provides a brief explanation of what gaiety does, which is to ". . . transfigur[e] all that dread" (*l*.17). He goes on to say that it is something to which all men have aspired, which they have attained, and then lost again. It is characterized by extremes: "Black out; Heaven blazing into the head" (*l*.19), and it cannot be diminished or augmented in any way. This sounds very much like a description

of the transcendent and immutable One, but it is puzzling to consider the possibility of human beings being One.

Leaving it there, Yeats moves his focus from the dramatic, to civilizations and their visual arts and learning. He reiterates the notion of "Meru", that civilizations pass eventually, and he spends some time on a beautiful and intricate description of the work of Callimachus, which no longer exists. The length and care of the description help us to understand the full weight of the final lines of the stanza: "All things fall and are built again,/ And those that build them again are gay" (*ll.*35-36). It is impossible to avoid knowing that even the most perfect work will stand for only a day, and in the face of this knowledge those who continue to make things, to seek the *eide*, are extraordinarily courageous. Thus gaiety gains another layer of meaning.

The final symbols of gaiety are the Chinamen:

> Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
> Are carved in lapis lazuli,
> Over them flies a long-legged bird,
> A symbol of longevity;
> The third, doubtless a serving-man,
> Carries a musical instrument.
> (*ll.*37-42)

They themselves are not real, but a work of art, and thus someone's attempt at creation despite the certain knowledge of destruction. The carving is carefully described, as might be expected by now, and then, as the description progresses, Yeats's imagination takes over. The move is quiet and almost unnoticeable, and it is not immediately apparent that the last seven lines of the poem are not the carving at all, but Yeats's imaginative creation:

1

Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.
(*ll*.49-56)

He takes them where the carving does not, all the way up the mountain, like the hermits of "Meru", and the Soul going up the winding stair, to sit where they can see the tragic scene. Here, from a position of understanding like that of the ". . . long-legged fly upon the stream" ("Long-legged Fly" *l*.9; Allt 1957, 617), the Chinamen can play their music in defiance of the world of process and change, and for a moment they exist in the harmony of the melodies they create, just as Yeats exists in the harmony of his completed creation, with eyes that are gay in their courage and defiance.

The way that the word "gay" is qualified in this poem is a small example of the way in which Yeats's system is embodied in his poetry. In one poem a word will change its meaning, or be turned into a symbol, and this will happen across many poems until an entire vocabulary is created and a system elucidated. The philosophy emerges from the poetry ". . . as a process . . . imitated, dramatized, and embodied" (Olney 1980, 237).

# CHAPTER THREE

Yeats's early poetry was not always as assured and skillful as the previous chapter might suggest. His earlier work has much less energy and authority than the poems of the great moment. *Crossways* (1889), a series of lyrics first published with *The Wanderings of Oisin*, and now the first collection of *Collected Poems*, is so called ". . . because in them he [Yeats] tried many pathways . . ." (Allt 1957, 845). At this early stage in his poetic career, Yeats is still seeking to work into a coherent system the myths that will give the required strength and direction to his poetry, to the story he has to tell, which is the story of himself. As his search for identity progresses, Yeats tries on various identities: he tells himself a number of different stories that are contextualised in a number of different myths. The early poetry is perhaps best described as a series of attempts at self-identity. In this search he begins, not by inventing his own myths, but by adopting the extant systems of others to use as contextualising myths for his stories. Chief amongst the systems are those of the occult, and of Ireland. These systems inform and direct the poetry, but because they are not Yeats's own inventions the result is that of an imposed convention, rather than a framework that has grown by necessity from the central thought of the poem. Rather than Yeats finding a form for a thought, he finds a thought to fit a form. The result is that he is unhappy and constricted, and his

major concern is to escape, something he acknowledges in a letter to Katharine Tynan:

> I have noticed some things about my poetry I did not know before, in this process of correction; for instance, that it is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight. The Chorus to the "Stolen Child" sums it up--that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint--the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge.
> (Wade 1954, 63)

The chorus to "The Stolen Child" reads as follows :

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a faery, hand in hand,
> For the world's more full of weeping than you
> can understand.
> (*ll*.9-12; Allt 1957, 87)

The first poem in the *Crossways* collection, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (Allt 1957, 64), has a similar theme. In this poem, Yeats appears to bewail the loss of Arcadia and of dreams--appears to, because it is not at all certain that he does. The basic argument of the poem is that the old world, which was good, fed on dreams. Now, in the new, changing and dreary world, Yeats has nothing to uphold except the value of words, which ". . . alone are certain good" (*l*.10) because deeds pass away. Therefore we are instructed not to reverence deeds, and furthermore, not to toil after truth "Lest all thy toiling only breeds/ New dreams, new dreams . . ." (*ll*.25-26). The only resort is to exercise words, to sing; but Yeats does not seem to notice that the making of words into song is both toil and productive of dreams. The closing injunction of the poem, however, is to "Dream, dream, for this is also sooth" (*l*.57). By now the reader is not at all sure what he ought to do, and

neither is Yeats. The real problem here is Yeats's failure to define his vocabulary sufficiently: the word "dream" seems to mean two different things in the two contexts Yeats gives. On the one hand, the dreams of old Arcadia, and the dreams that we must dream in place of those, are good, but the dreams that are dreamt as a result of seeking after truth anywhere except in your own heart are false and beguiling. The connection that needs to be made, but which is not, is that between Arcadia and the heart. Consequently the difference between the two types of dreaming is indistinct, and weakens the poem. In later poems, as the previous chapter shows, Yeats is capable of exercising power over his vocabulary in a way that he is not capable of here, and he learns to identify those dreams in which responsibility begins (Allt 1957, 269).

Richard Ellman offers a similarly critical reading of this poem, and suggests that the weakness arises from Yeats's own uncertainty as to whether his longing was really for Arcadia, or whether this focus was misguided (1961, 39-40). The letter to Tynan quoted above suggests that Yeats was looking for something far more rigorous and concrete than a dream world. Already the myth of Arcadia fails to provide an adequate context for the story Yeats wishes to tell. In a negative sense, it is the inadequacy of Arcadia that is a context, albeit an unintentional one, which sets Yeats off on the search for a system that can contain his experience and its expression. It is not just Arcadia that is insufficient. However unintentionally, this poem is typical of Yeats's experience that all systems not his own prove to be insufficient.

"The Sad Shepherd" (Allt 1957, 67) is the test of the advice offered in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd", and Yeats's way of pointing out the inadequacies of the latter poem. As he does so, he senses a way forward to a more coherent story of himself. The man in the poem discovers that everything around him is engaged in reflexive activity: the stars, the sea, the dewdrops, the shell. None of these is interested in his words, and the shell goes so far as to change everything he says ". . . to inarticulate moan" (*l.*27). The man longs to tell his story in order to escape the burden of sorrow that he bears. The problem is that everything else has just such a story to tell, and despite the fact that he uses words, which are supposedly powerful, the listeners either continue to listen for their own sounds, or they change the speaker's words entirely. It seems, then, that the only way out is to become reflexive, to tell one's own story over and over again to oneself; like the dewdrops, to listen ". . . for the sound of their own dropping" (*l.*16). Arcadia does not exist, words are not magical charms that will release the soul: "...there is no truth/ Saving in thine own heart" ("The Song of the Happy Shepherd" *ll.*26-27), and redemption is only possible if the journey is downward and inward, to the centre of self. Yeats uses a method here that is most characteristic of his later work--that of creating a dialectic between two poems and offering a resolution in neither, but in the result of their interaction. The dialectic between these two poems produces what turns out to be one of the key ideas behind all Yeats's poetry: that poetry must come from the self. The problem at this early stage, however, is the borrowed

self from which the poetry comes, and what this means for the style in which it comes.

Yeats's diction until and including *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) is best described as crepuscular. It is equivocal, languid, esoteric and frail, a fact he acknowledges himself:

> I have buried my youth and raised over it a cairn--of clouds. Some day I shall be articulate, perhaps. But this book I have no great hopes of--it is all sluggish, incoherent. (Wade 1954, 84)

The search here is for a diction that will be more than an inarticulate cry, and a style that will contain and direct the energy of that diction. Yeats condemns himself to vagueness, however, because the myths around which he has structured his life, those of the occult and of Irish patriotism, are not his own invention, but are adopted. Furthermore, they are not adopted as an appropriate context for something Yeats wishes to say, as in the case of "Easter 1916" or "No Second Troy" (Allt 1957, 391; 256). Instead the myths are the context into which Yeats has to inject some content. They provide an artificial context around which Yeats must shape his life, which then becomes an abstract creation, dissociated from the genuine self, and subject to confused expression because it is not clearly understood. Again, it is a letter to Katharine Tynan which indicates that Yeats was aware of this tendency to artificiality:

> We both of us need to substitute more and more the landscapes of nature for the landscapes of art. I myself have another and kindred need--to substitute the feelings and longings of nature for those of art. . . . We should make poems on the familiar landscapes we love, not the strange and rare and glittering scenes we wonder at; these latter are the landscapes of art, [?not] the range of nature.
> (Wade 1954, 99)

The "landscapes of nature", according to the same letter, are the habitual thoughts and feelings of the genuine self. The tension expressed here is Yeats's growing awareness that he was interested in and striving for something that was not habitual at all, and yet most attempts to write at a distance from the self were unsatisfying.

Yeats's successful early poetry is produced when he ignores himself altogether and concentrates solely on the business of writing poetry. "Down by the Salley Gardens" (Allt 1957, 90) is an example of an early poem which does not try to be anything more than the sum of its parts, and so succeeds:

> Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
> She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
> She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
> But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.
>
> In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
> And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.
> She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
> But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

The poem tells one of the oldest stories in the world, and the power of the story resides in the candid, unadorned style in which it is related. Because the focus is on the events, not the individuals, "my love" and "I" become symbols, the latter representative of all who have loved ". . . not wisely, but too well" (*Othello* V ii 195). "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman" (Allt 1957, 90), which follows directly after "Salley Gardens", is by comparison lavish with the emotion of nostalgia, and not

nearly so moving:

> You waves, though you dance by my feet like children
> at play,
> Though you glow and you glance, though you purr and
> you dart;
> In the Junes that were warmer than these are, the
> waves were more gay,
> *When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*
>
> The herring are not in the tides as they were of old;
> My sorrow! for many a creak gave the creel in the
> cart
> That carried the take to Sligo town to be sold,
> *When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*
>
> And ah, you proud maiden, you are not so fair when
> his oar
> Is heard on the water, as they were, the proud and
> apart,
> Who paced in the eve by the nets on the pebbly shore,
> *When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*

Both these poems are written from conversations that Yeats had with, respectively, an old woman and a fisherman (Allt 1957, 797). Thus the subject matter is not taken from himself, although it definitely falls within the range of nature. What makes the one successful and the other not is the fact that he has avoided particularizing the first poem, whereas he allows the first-person narrator of the second poem to be overcome with self-indulgent emotion, which is alienating to the reader, and does not allow the same weight of meaning that an impersonal symbol does. These two poems show Yeats in the process of trying on various personae both in pursuit of what he wants to say, and in pursuit of a voice that will accurately convey his meaning. This use of personae becomes a skill that Yeats develops into the theory of masks.

At the bottom of the theory of masks is Yeats's awareness of the dual nature of existence: that it is both one and many, and that without contraries there can be no progression. He claims thus that "no mind can engender till divided into two" (*Autobiographies*, 345), and goes on to say that:

> I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed.
> (*Autobiographies*, 503)

This statement was written in 1909, some twenty years after the poems that have just been examined, and it is interesting to notice that Yeats is still not willing to commit himself as to exactly what that other self might be.

The next book in the *Collected Poems* is *The Rose* (1893). It too is a collection of lyrics first published with a longer work, *The Countess Cathleen,* and Yeats named it *The Rose* ". . . for in them he [Yeats] has found, he believes, the only pathway whereon he can hope to see with his own eyes the Eternal Rose of Beauty and of Peace" (Allt 1957, 846). This is Yeats's attempt to give his poetry more force, to write more surely of natural landscapes. His method is still at fault, however. Although he now has a goal, and a means of attaining it, both are still borrowed. The Rose, which is the unifying symbol of the perfection to which he aspires, is also his muse, and thus the means of attainment. While she becomes Yeats's personal symbol, he has taken her and her values from his dealings in the occult and in the myths of Ireland, and she is also, conveniently, the traditional symbol of love and romance.

The qualifications of "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" (Allt 1957, 100) show how even the great and unifying rose is inadequate. In the poem she is implored to come near--but not so near that she shuts out ordinary life, or the landscapes of nature: "Come near, come near, come near--Ah, leave me still/ A little space for the rose-breath to fill!/ Lest I no more hear common things . . ." (*ll.*13-15). Yeats recognised her as an esoteric symbol that would serve, if anything, to alienate him from the lives of ordinary people, about whom and for whom he wished to write. Thus, an early conflict becomes Yeats's strength: the combination of opposites in argument in order to reach a solution. Here, however, it is weak and inconclusive because the arguments are not Yeats's own, and the diction and rhythm in which he couches them are equivocal and dreamy.

The visual impact of the title of the poem is perhaps more expressive than the poem itself. Yeats positions the Rose upon the cross of time, which she transfixes and transcends, her path leading to another, more desirable state of existence. As Yeats was to put it some fourteen years later in the essay "Poetry and Tradition": ". . . [Art's] red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity" (*Essays and Introductions* 255). The rose is both the means and the end, and in this sense, a progression for Yeats from the confused wanderings of *Crossways*. In terms of the Lotman paradigm, the Rose is the gateway at the axis of Story and Myth. It is at this point of intersection that poetry aims, and if it succeeds, it draws together Story and Myth and provides a moment of

transcendent joy, or gaiety. Visually, Yeats understands what it is that he seeks. The problem seems to be to find an assured and convincing way of expressing in words the ambiguity of the desire. The desire is ambiguous, because while gaiety is the Good, it is only so if it is transient and temporary. Gaiety can only occur as a poem reaches its conclusion, or achieves a moment of extreme stasis such as that at the centre of "Vacillation". Process is necessary for the poem to be written at all. At this point in his career Yeats's equivocating between the possession of gaiety and the process upon which possession is contingent is unconvincing. In the later poems Yeats either maintains the tension between the desire for gaiety and the desire for process by expressing both desires through different speakers, as in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", or he uses separate poems to initiate a dialectic on the tension, as in "Vacillation". In "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" he attempts to express the tension through the wavering of one speaker in one poem and, far from leading him to transcendence, the poem to the Rose, romantic and defeatist as it is, leads him into a twilight world: the muse, it seems, betrays the poet.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree", from the same collection, abandons the use of the Rose as a symbol and as a muse. Ellman suggests that the poem is composed in two styles (1961, 142). The first and third stanzas are plain. They are landscapes of nature using concrete details, while the middle stanza with its strange metaphors is in fact a landscape of art, and thus ornate. The poem embodies another, deeper experience of the poet: that of the struggle for style, which is an integral part of the struggle

for self.

In *Autobiographies* Yeats characterizes the two possibilities for style as solar and lunar, solar meaning ". . . elaborate, full of artifice, rich, all that resembles the work of a goldsmith . . .", and lunar meaning ". . . all that is simple, popular, traditional, emotional" (371). Other terms for solar and lunar would be metaphor and metonymy, and Esnault's distinction between metonymy and metaphor is helpful here: "Metonymy does not open new paths like metaphorical intuition, but, taking too familiar paths in its stride, it shortens distances so as to facilitate the swift intuition of things already known" (cited in Leech 1969, 152-153). As Yeats's own symbolism will tell him, the ideal harmony is achieved at the union of solar and lunar.

Just as the desire to unify his myths in the Myth of the Rose provides for more fruitful, although still flawed, poetic enterprise, so the drive to combine the two styles produces more skilled work, work that is worth the endless re-writing that Yeats did. An important example of re-writing in this collection is "The Sorrow of Love" (Allt 1957, 119). This poem is still not one of insight and knowledge, although it comes closer to this goal, largely because the symbolism unites the personal experience of Yeats and the myths of Ancient Greece. The two versions of the poem are as follows, the earliest printed version first, and the revised version second:

> The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
> The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
> And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves
> Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all the burden of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

-*-

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man's image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry.

Ellman discusses "The Sorrow of Love" in *The Identity of Yeats*, and suggests that although the second version of the poem is not wholly satisfying, ". . . the second version does not demand so much indulgence from the reader as does the first" (1964, 123). The poem was originally written in 1891, and revised slightly in 1899 to give the first printed version quoted above, and finally revised in 1925 (Stallworthy 1963, 46-53). The date of this last revision means that at the time of rewriting Yeats had begun to work out his own system, and was more consciously and more skillfully turning story into myth. This is apparent particularly in a comparison of the middle stanzas of the two poems. The poem is no longer about ". . . earth's old and weary cry" (*l*.4, first version), but about ". . . man's image and his cry" (*l*.4, revised version). And to that end

the girl in the second stanza has been generalized, by the indefinite article, and slightly alienated by the use of "arose", which suggests something out of the ordinary, and increases the vigour and possible effect of her appearance. The use of Odysseus and Priam firmly locates the girl as Helen, and as firmly locates the experience which Yeats is discussing in one of the myths that is an unavoidable inheritance of western humanity, magnifying it beyond the particular so that it is a discussion of the sorrow of *all* love, not just Yeats's. As Jon Stallworthy points out in a discussion of the two poems: "Where an identifiable personality could not support the weight of hyperbole [the whole world's tears], a symbol can" (1963, 51). Yeats has understood how to make the landscapes of nature more than just decorative. Once the girl has arisen the entire function of the natural surroundings is to ". . . compose man's image and his cry" (*l*.12, revised version). There is no longer any sense of description for its own sake. The sorrow of love is so great that the entire natural world is only just sufficient to give expression to the feeling.

Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference* speaks of the art of the writer as ". . . a labor, a deliverance, a slow gestation of the poet by the poem whose father he is", and quotes from Edmond Jabes' *L'espace blanc*: "'Little by little the book will finish me'" (1978, 65). Derrida goes on to say that "the poet is thus indeed the *subject* of the book, its substance and its master, its servant and its theme" (ibid. original emphasis), which is an accurate description of Yeats's poetic enterprise. This is writing at its best, and Yeats came to be able to say

that "Myself must I remake" ("An Acre of Grass" *l*.14; Allt 1957, 576), and that "The painter's brush consumes his dreams" ("Two Songs from a Play" ll 12; Allt 1957, 438), but this awareness is expressed late in his career. In the 1890's he is still seeking both subject matter and style. His poems are experiments in himself, and not, as yet, strong enough to give birth to him. Nietzsche, discussing the height of the Dionysiac ecstasy, says that man is "no longer the *artist*, he has himself become a *work of art*" (1956, 24; original emphasis). Yeats was acutely aware of the intimate link between artist and art, and it gave rise to the constant rewriting he did, as well as an untitled quatrain that was not included in *Collected Poems*, but which was published in 1908:

> The friends that have it I do wrong
> When ever I remake a song,
> Should know what issue is at stake:
> It is myself that I remake.
> (Allt 1957, 778)

The struggle towards poetry of this calibre is an arduous one, and Yeats confesses of himself in the 'nineties that he succumbed to creation without toil (Hone 1971, 98). The last collection of the 'nineties, *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), is full of the desire for twilight, and for shelter beneath the beloved's hair: ". . . *O women, bid the young men lay/ Their heads on your knees, and drown their eyes with your hair*" ("He tells of a Valley full of Lovers" *ll*.5-6; Allt 1957, 163). It is only creation with toil that will bring clarity and light and the conflict that enables **resolution**.

As the century turned, so did the tide of Yeats's poetic energy, and from *In the Seven Woods* (1904) onwards he began to gain in direction and vigour, producing poems such as "Adam's Curse" (Allt 1957, 204). In this poem he acknowledges the need for labour in lines that have become a standard description of Yeats's work--indeed of all poetry:

> We sat together at one summer's end,
> That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
> And you and I, and talked of poetry.
> I said: 'A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen-pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.' (*ll*.1-14)

*From "The Green Helmet and other Poems"* (1910) produces even more work of strong self-consciousness, such as "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (Allt 1957, 260). In this poem, as in "Adam's Curse", Yeats examines himself with frankness in terms of his poetic enterprise, and how that enterprise is affected by his life. This is an early and a good example, if not a great one, of contextualising the story of life in the myth of poetry:

> The fascination of what's difficult
> Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
> Spontaneous joy and natural content
> Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
> That must, as if it had not holy blood
> Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,
> Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
> As though it dragged road-metal. My curse on plays
> That have to be set up in fifty ways,
> On the day's war with every knave and dolt,

> Theatre business, management of men.
> I swear before the dawn comes round again
> I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.

As the poem shows, this was the period when Yeats was most involved with the theatre, and this collection contains "The Mask" (Allt 1957, 263), which is one of the first indications that this idea imported from the practice of drama is going to be a profound influence on Yeats's thought and on his poetry. Another poem from this collection that is indicative of the way in which his thought was moving, is the quatrain "The Coming of Wisdom with Time" (Allt 1957, 107). This is an expression of the Platonist notion that there is one root for all life, the rhizome, and that individuals are simply the blossoms that stem from this one root. C.G. Jung expressed it as follows:

> Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away--an ephemeral apparition. . . . I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains.
>
> (Cited in Olney 1980, 1)

This is another way of dealing with the many and the one. Yeats's quatrain reads as follows:

> Though leaves are many, the root is one;
> Through all the lying days of my youth
> I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
> Now I may wither into the truth.

Apart from the philosophical implications of this poem, it is a good way to describe what was happening to the poetry at this stage: Yeats was sloughing off the experimental personae, and vigorously pruning away the flowers and the leaves of emotion in order to be left with the starkly beautiful truth of his soul.

*Responsibilities* (1914) is the last collection of poetry to be published without the benefit of *A Vision*, or at least the beginnings of the work it involved. Even so, it is the most coherent and unified of the early work.

Gaiety is more clearly dealt with and more obviously the point of many of the poems in this collection. Yeats is striving to find "that shaping joy . . ." that will unite ". . . overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness . . ." (*Essays and Introductions* 255). For instance, in "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing" Yeats does not offer anything like the conventional comfort, but urges the friend to seek something still more difficult:

> Bred to a harder thing
> Than Triumph, turn away
> And like a laughing string
> Whereon mad fingers play
> Amid a place of stone,
> Be secret and exult,
> Because of all things known
> That is most difficult.
> (*ll.*9-16; Allt 1957, 291)

Here is the secret, almost manic moment, quite contrary to mourning, sought for itself alone because it is "most difficult". This poem is an explanation of why, despite the fact that Yeats has to ask his ancestors' pardon at the beginning of the collection for not having produced anything except a few books, he continues to write. It is the only way in which he can achieve this most difficult moment. Stephen Donadio comments that:

> At the very moment of creation, the dialectical process of art appears suspended, for the artist comes to regard his will as an expression of the nature of reality itself. Accordingly, although the act of artistic creation necessarily involves the

> imposition of form on a resistant material, the form that the artist seeks to impose does not appear to him to be merely an arbitrary one: in his view, that form corresponds (in the particular case) to the discovered structure of reality itself, and that structure, that pattern of meaning toward which the reality appears to strive but which, lacking consciousness, it is incapable of attaining, ultimately enlists the artist as the agent of its realization. Like the sculptor who has glimpsed the figure in the stone, he must obey that form which represents itself as necessary, and as a consequence the reality he labors to bring into being seems to him far more than his personal fabrication: for him, it is ultimately the world itself which is his handiwork, and he seems to have no choice but to yield to its plea for existence.
> (1978, 243-244)

For Yeats the nature of reality is that it is a constant tussle between opposites, rewarded by rare moments of unity. The only way to achieve that unity is to recreate both it and the conflict that is its precondition.

The consciousness of his art, and of his place in that art is one of the important features of this collection. Yeats is at at last well out of the shadow of the beloved's hair, and he looks around him to take cognisance of his inner and outer worlds, and to find a way to belong in both of them. As T.R. Whitaker has it: ". . . Yeats's quasi-autobiographical poetry began . . . . to dramatize the history of his time in utterances that combine proud assertion and honest admission, social criticism and tragic purgation. . ." (1964, 160).

The poem that follows "To a Friend . . ." is "Paudeen" (Allt 1957, 291), and it too is expressive of gaiety, but in a very different way. It is Yeats's realisation, after scorning the ignorant and materialist majority

> That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,
> There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,

A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.
(*ll*.6-8)

It is a moment of acknowledgement and apology such as is seldom found in Yeats, who is on the whole more interested in giving ". . . not what they would,/ But the right twigs for an eagle's nest!" ("To a Wealthy Man . . ." *ll*.35-36; Allt 1957, 288). Yeats needs to make these acknowledgements, however, or he will fall foul of his own strategy. Ellman points out that in *Responsibilities* Yeats's technique is to call on the Ghosts of the past and ". . . to pose the experiences of the present against these shadowy judges and their high, non-mortal standards" (1964, 114). In other words, Yeats's story is the present, and the contextualising myth is the past. He lives in the present, however, and has only mortal standards. One of the costs of choosing a system that leads to a perfect moment is that one is perpetually falling short of what is required, and here in *Reponsibilities* Yeats is learning that one of the keys to gaiety is not anger and self-hatred at the inability to maintain it, but acceptance of its brevity, and forgiveness of and rejoicing in the failures of the self. Whitaker discusses the art of the shaping joy and its implications for its practitioner and says that:

> such art weds the Apollonian and the Dionysian. It puts on and consumes the temporal body; it accepts and transcends history. Its ecstasy arises from at least three sources: the artist's joy in experiencing our limited temporal life; his joy in contemplating it, amid defeat, as an "eternal gesture" of "life herself"; and his "shaping joy," which has enabled him to bring to a single focus those contrary joys in the bounded and the boundless. (1964, 148)

This is more a description of Yeats's art at its fullest, but it

is the direction in which he is heading at this stage of his career.

After *Responsibilities* Yeats set to work seriously on his system. Perhaps one of the real ironies of this pre-system work, in terms of this thesis at any rate, is that biography is helpful in its explication. Yeats did not have at his disposal the energy and conviction of his system that made the creation and ordering of the later work so authoritative and self-explanatory. The context for the early work is the poet's struggle for self, and it is the insufficiency of this context that drives Yeats to find a new one.

In 1917, when he finished *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he wrote to his father to say that "I find the setting it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework and new patterns. One goes on year after year gradually getting the disorder of one's mind in order and this is the real impulse to create" (Wade 1954, 627). Yeats never stopped trying to get his mind into order, and never stopped creating. He became more and more accomplished at using his system to write his story into myth, and the final chapter is an attempt to show how the use of the concepts of story and myth are helpful in a close reading of Yeats's poetry, in particular of *Last Poems*.

# CHAPTER FOUR

> *The artist is indeed the child of his age . . . . His theme he will, indeed, take from the present; but his form he will borrow from a nobler time, nay, from beyond time altogether, from the absolute, unchanging, unity of his being.*
>
> *Schiller.*

## I

In 1925 Yeats arranged a private printing of *A Vision*, for subscribers only (Wade 1968, 151). He had set himself to complete it in 1924, and Hone suggests that

> this is one of the aspects of Yeats which might seem part of his humorous self-dramatization. Yet what he really strove for above all was to speak with authority, and this makes it all the stranger that he was so successful in his resistance to even the greatest of the doctrines. It is as though he wished (in *A Vision*) to turn his heresy into a new orthodoxy. (1971, 363-364)

To turn his heresy into a new orthodoxy is of course exactly what Yeats wished to do--he had to create his own system or be enslaved by another man's. Yeats was not content with the version of 1925, however, and he continued to work at his system, still seeking independence and authority. Finally, in 1937 he published a revised version, and Wade's comment on this is that "so much which appeared in the first version of *A Vision*, 1925 . . . has been omitted and so much new material added, that this is almost a new book" (1968, 192). It was this new book that gave Yeats the final assurance he sought that he had indeed created his own system--two years before his death. The poems written in those last two years benefit enormously from the

poet's sense of control and authority in a way that even the great poems of 1917 to 1936 do not, and they are finally the ritual in which he exercises his belief.

At the centre of this belief is the idea of gaiety, and it is exercised in terms that have already been examined: story and myth; *ego* and *eidos*; metonymy rather than metaphor. The collection that encompasses all these things in a controlled and conscious way is *Last Poems*.

II

In the revised order of *Last Poems* (see introductory note on texts), the poem that opens the collection is "Under Ben Bulben" (Allt 1957, 636). It is quite clearly Yeats's own epitaph, and placing it at the beginning of the collection means that all the poems that follow this last will and testament come to us from beyond the grave: Yeats is one cycle ahead of his merely mortal readers. He might be saying to us, in the words of Machado de Assis:

> . . . I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing, a writer for whom the grave was really a new cradle . . .
> (1985, 19)

Curtis Bradford calls "Under Ben Bulben" an ". . . overture", and says that its function is to serve as an introduction to the themes of the collection, which is Yeats's ". . . farewell to life and art" (1968, 77).

The first section of "Under Ben Bulben" suggests that Yeats has found two things that are valuable enough to swear by.

The first is the speech of the sages which ". . . set the cocks a-crow" (*l*.4). The second is "That pale, long-visaged company" (*l*.7) that is superhuman and possessed of completed passion, and that belongs in Ireland, "Where Ben Bulben sets the scene" (*l*.11).

The sages suggest learning and wisdom--not necessarily Irish--that is like the dawn: it sets the cocks crowing; it brings light. The horsemen and the women, specifically of Ireland, have what Yeats most strives for: gaiety. They have won completeness of their passions, they are immortal and superhuman, and they too are at home in the dawn, hearkening back to the fisherman for whom Yeats wishes to write one poem ". . . maybe as cold/ And passionate as the dawn" ("The Fisherman" *ll*.39-40, Allt 1957, 348).

Having presented these two groups of figures in whom we are to believe above all others, Yeats offers the rest of the poem as an explication of them. The second section makes it clear that the pale company and the sages are associated with race and soul respectively. In this instance Yeats concentrates on the pale company, which embodies the racial ideal, and privileges it with all the knowledge. Speaking with authority from his grave--and so perhaps with the knowledge of ancient Ireland (*l*.16)--Yeats's assurance is that death is nothing to fear. Despite the strength and endurance of the grave-diggers, and the sharpness of their tools, their labour is in vain. Death does not end in the grave because the grave-diggers simply ". . . thrust their buried men/ Back in the human mind again" (*ll*.23-24). Not only is man invovled in a constant cycle of

reincarnation, but once the body is gone, he survives in human memory and imagination. Olney points out Yeats's strategy in this poem, and in the collection as a whole:

> from his "single mind", Yeats passes by way of the intermediate minds of family and nation . . . to his eventual goal which is the Great Mind, focussed now, however, as the gyres turn back on themselves once more, in Yeats's own single mind. (1980, 236)

The purpose of this return to the human mind, and a description of the ideal state of the human mind, are the subject of the third section of the poem. A man is to strive for the completion of ". . . his partial mind" (*l*.30). A partial mind is one that is prejudiced in some way, lacking balance, and therefore not whole. All things must be held in equilibrium--"Cast a cold eye" (*l*.92) on both life *and* death--before completion can be gained. Completion thus involves the appropriation of the negative prejudice into your being. In Yeats's terms this is the absorption of the opposite, or the adoption of the mask. Completion is what distinguishes the company of Ancient Ireland, and the sages, and is achieved only through conflict. The result of it, significantly, is ease and laughter, albeit "For an instant . . ." (*l*.31). But no matter how brief the period of completion it is an enabling time (much like Wordsworth's "spot of time") and as a result of it a man can ". . . accomplish fate,/ Know his work or choose his mate" (*ll*.35-36). The moment of ease and laughter is the moment of gaiety, the moment when "Like a long-legged fly upon the stream/ His mind moves upon silence" ("Long-legged Fly" *ll*.9-10, Allt 1957, 617).

In section four, Yeats moves his focus from man in general, to the particular man, the artist. Amongst those who can be generally characterised as striving for completion, each person has a particular task, and the task of the artist is an enormously responsible one. He is required to understand what the sages say about that eternity of the soul (section two), and to instruct man in this respect: "Bring the soul of man to God,/ Make him fill the cradles right" (*ll*.40-41). Irrespective of style or period this is always the artist's task, and as he strives for completion of himself as an individual, he is also striving for the completion of humanity, or as Yeats will have it: "Profane perfection of mankind" (*l*.52). From Egypt, to Greece, to the Renaissance, the purpose of the proportion and perspective of art has been perfection. The Quattrocento painting, because it is perfect, provides ease for the soul, or gaiety, and thus a vision of heaven. Yeats claims that other great men, amongst them Blake, contributed imaginatively to a vision of perfection for the world. After the passing of these men, however, no-one arose to take their place and "Confusion fell upon our thought" (*l*.67).

At this point it is important to discuss briefly Yeats's notions of language, imagination and reality. An awareness of his understanding of these concepts can help to clarify his use of such terms as "perfection" and "heaven".

In the tussle between imagination and reality, there is no doubt that for Yeats the former is more powerful. One of the tensions constantly informing Yeats's poetry is that between action and observation. Finally, however, Yeats is a poet and as

such has achieved a kind of transcendence, because he realises, as does Conrad, that

> Only in men's imagination does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life. (Conrad 1946, 25)

Yeats himself expressed it as a belief that "Death and life were not/ Till man made up the whole" ("The Tower" *ll.*148-9, Allt 1957, 415). This is not so much to say that there was no such thing as reality until man imagined it, as to say that there was no *meaning* to death and life until, by the exercise of his imagination, man constructed one.

Yeats was fully aware of reality, and this thesis is in some measure against Ellman's contention that ". . . Yeats is more the poet of the sea torn by sexuality and tormented by time than the poet of the perfect moment" (Ellman 1964, 222): it contends that the conflict is finally only a pre-condition for the ultimate poetry. But there is no escaping that "I must lie down where all the ladders start,/ In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion" *ll.*39-40, Allt 1957, 630). It is imagination's role, however, to order this sordid reality by providing it with an ideal alternative--an image. Even in the poetry at its most tormented, the informing image is an ideal, an archetype, because it is only possible to reach a perfect moment by following the example of such an ideal. That this should be so is part of Yeats's philosophy, and is explored in poems like "A Prayer for my Daughter" (Allt 1957, 403). He notes that ". . . its befitting language is the research of a lifetime . . ." (*Essays and Introductions*, 511).

What Yeats found in this research was that the best language for poetry was that which ". . . coincide[d] with that of passionate, normal speech" (ibid, 521). Again and again he reiterates to Dorothy Wellesley that the best way to organise words is "'the natural words in the natural order'" (Wellesley 1964, 56), and "You have the best language among us because you most completely follow Aristotle's advice and write 'like the common people'" (Ibid, 44). Along with Yeats's insistence on the use of "ordinary" language is his determination that the language should be old and traditional, hearkening back as far as possible: ". . . we . . . reject every folk art that does not go back to Olympus", he says (*Essays and Introductions*, 516), and again:

> I have never said clearly that I condemn all that is not tradition, that there is a subject-matter which has descended like that 'deposit' certain philosophers speak of. . . . This subject-matter is something I have received from the generations, part of that compact with my fellow men made in my name before I was born. I cannot break from it without breaking from some part of my own nature . . .
> (Ibid, viii)

What Yeats is trying to achieve in this insistence on the unextraordinary is a continuing concern of Modern and contemporary poets, including Wallace Stevens in "Chocorua To Its Neighbor", part XIX:

> To say more than human things with human voice,
> That cannot be; to say human things with more
> Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
> To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
> Of human things, that is acutest speech.
> (1984, 300)

The discussion presents a picture of Yeats as a poet who believes in reality, but even more firmly in the power of

imagination over that reality. He is also a poet who wishes to speak of these things in a language as close as possible to that of his non-poetical fellows. He chooses, as far as possible, not to privilege his vocabulary with special meanings. As I have indicated he creates his own particular meanings within the course of a poem, but he seldom commences a poem using esoteric meanings. If a word like heaven calls to mind all the ways in which people have ever thought of it, so much the better for Yeats's purpose of reaching back to the roots of human memory: "He that sings a lasting song/ Thinks in a marrow-bone" ("A Prayer for Old Age" *ll.*3-4, Allt 1957, 553).

Returning to "Under Ben Bulben", it is clear that Yeats's concern in section five is to encourage the exercise of imagination against the threatened confusion of section four. Ironically, Yeats's speech *is* privileged here, but not in terms of meaning. This poem is his epitaph, so he speaks as one who has already been thrust back into the human mind. He is one cycle ahead of his readers and he can presume to instruct them. The instructions he gives, in this case specifically to the Irish poets, are first in the area of form. Much as measurement began the might of mankind (section four), so too it will be the might of the Irish poet. Proportion and perspective bring gaiety--the momentary ease of the soul--that is the permanent possession of only the sages and the pale company of riders and women, the two groups that Yeats says are worth swearing by. The subjects of these perfectly formed poems are to be the people of Ireland: the peasantry, the gentry, the holy, the profane, and above all ". . . the lords and ladies gay" (*l.*78), "That pale, long-

visaged company/ That air in immortality/ Completeness of their passions won" (*ll*.7-9). These are figures of the past, and even of other worlds, and the poet's concentrating on them will enable him to create an Irish soul to put before God, and thus enable the creation of an Irish race--". . . the indomitable Irishry" (*l*.83).

Yeats returns to the individual poet in section six, the poet whose trade is now complete, whose life is complete, and who is in a position to instruct--for this poem is not advice. If the Irish poets wish to inherit from Yeats, these are the conditions: life and death must both be looked upon coldly, for they are not what matter. It is the synthesis of the two, the movement between the eternities of race and soul, that produces ease and peace, and this synthesis is only possible if the poet achieves a distance from life. Should the horseman ever wish to resemble his ghostly counterparts in the completeness of their passions he must "Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death" and then "pass by!" (*ll*.92-94).

It is clear that the sections of "Under Ben Bulben" are the parts of a whole. Each resonates with the others, and the poem accumulates range and intensity until it explodes into the extraordinary epitaph that denies *both* life and death, while affirming something greater. In Lotman's terms of myth and story, the story of the poet (his life, work and death) is being explored in terms of his artistic and spiritual inheritance, and his racial ancestry; that is, in terms of his myth. The synthesis of myth and story results in detachment and passion--the rider and the horse--in gaiety.

It is important that the poet is telling a story, and that the character at the centre of the story is himself. This story is not "true", it is not accurate autobiography, it is an imaginative attempt to create a persona whose attitudes and acts constitute meaning for the actual poet.

Such a reading of "Under Ben Bulben" suggests the way in which the collection *Last Poems* is to be read. The poem is a microcosm of the collection, or, to recall Bradford's term, an overture. The purpose of an overture is introductory, and "Under Ben Bulben" contains all the leitmotifs of the collection as a whole. In section two of the poem Yeats sees death primarily as a way back into the human mind. Having commenced the collection with this poem of death, he is able to launch into an exploration of his own mind. The point to recall here is that this is the final collection of lyrics in a long series of such collections, and it must be read in the light of its predecessors.

It is possible then to divide this collection, *Last Poems*, into four movements. "Under Ben Bulben" provides the overture. The second movement is an exploration of the first three sections of "Under Ben Bulben", which explore the notion of belief in the context of Ireland and tradition. The poems that comprise this movement are "Three songs to the One Burden", "The Black Tower", "Cuchulain Comforted", "Three Marching Songs", and "In Tara's Halls". The third movement is an expansion of the fourth section of "Under Ben Bulben", and builds on the themes of art, and the artist's role in the world. The poems concerned are "The Statues", "News for the Delphic Oracle", "Long-legged Fly", "A Bronze Head", and "A Stick of Incense".

The fourth and final movement, which is introduced by sections five and six of "Under Ben Bulben", is more personal. The poems are expressions of the life and work of this Irish poet in particular, and they include "Hound Voice", "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore", "High Talk", "The Apparitions", "A Nativity", "The Man and the Echo", "The Circus Animal's Desertion", and finally "Politics".

III

The second movement of *Last Poems* is built upon the first three parts of "Under Ben Bulben":

I

Swear by what the sages spoke
Round the Mareotic Lake
That the Witch of Atlas knew,
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

Swear by those horsemen, by those women
Complexion and form prove superhuman,
That pale, long-visaged company
That air in immortality
Completeness of their passions won;
Now they ride the wintry dawn
Where Ben Bulben sets the scene.

Here's the gist of what they mean.

II

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all.
Whether man die in his bed
Or the rifle knocks him dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.

III

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,

'Send war in our time, O Lord!'
Know that when all words are said
And a man is fighting mad,
Something drops from eyes long blind,
He completes his partial mind,
For an instant stands at ease,
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.
Even the wisest man grows tense
With some sort of violence
Before he can accomplish fate,
Know his work or choose his mate.

This is Yeats's examination of belief in the concept of race, one of the eternities between which man lives and dies. As race provides the group of figures--the horsemen and the women--which Yeats feels holds some measure of the truth, it needs careful examination, and Yeats casts it in the light of five poems.

The first of these poems is "Three Songs to the One Burden" (Allt 1957, 605). The immediately obvious connection with "Under Ben Bulben" is in the refrain that occurs at the end of each stanza: "From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen". The horsemen have already been identified as ideal representatives of race who ". . . air in immortality/ Completeness of their passions won" (UBB *ll*.8-9). In "Three Songs" they provide a background against which Yeats's three mortal representatives can explain their position with regard to race and tradition.

The first speaker, "The Roaring Tinker . . ." (I 1), subscribes to the ideal of the fierce horsemen. He is a man of ". . . character" (I 13) who does no work, but wanders around the countryside. On his own admission he detests ". . . the common sort" (I 3), which is inevitable. The common are characterless. His main objection to them is that they breed

others who are common, and he wishes that he and Crazy Jane were young enough, both to breed uncommon people and to encourage others to do so. For Mannion the tinker the way to attain to the racial ideal of the horsemen is a matter of breeding for perfection.

Henry Middleton, the second figure, is equally a party to what the horsemen symbolise, although his response to it is quite different from the tinker's, who for all his raving, can only *wish* to control the breeding of the race. Middleton withdraws from the world and becomes a recluse so that he can live according to racial tradition. He makes no effort whatsoever to encourage others in the tradition, although he pities the young because they do not have access to it: "The wisdom of the people's gone,/ How can the young go straight?" (II 16-17). Despite the fact that Middleton wears a fashionable coat, his strength and pride is in tradition, in "Memories of the talk/ Of henwives and of queer old men" (II 22-23). He believes implicitly in the value of the racial tradition, but instead of attempting to promulgate it, he determines to be content with living up to it as best he can.

Both Middleton and the tinker are individuals, men of character. The final song introduces the actors, whose profession is to assume character and to sublimate individuality. The players gather to commemorate the uprising of 1916, when the first person to die was the player, Connolly. On this occasion the action was not on a stage, and the actors participated as a group--not as men of character--in a political event. The third stanza claims that the motivation behind the actions of some of

the players was not the thought of victory, but "That Ireland's mind be greater,/ Her heart mount up on high" (III 21-22). Yet the glorious motivation, and the deed that it inspired, is qualified by the sense of waste: Connolly ". . . might have been/ A famous, a brilliant figure" (III 15-16). His action as one of the crowd has excluded the possibility of much greater things. A further qualification is "And yet who knows what's yet to come?" (III 23), suggesting that the deaths of Easter Monday 1916 have not accomplished what they set out to, that Ireland's mind and heart are not greater and higher, and that Patrick Pearse's prophecy of further bloodshed is a fearful and unwelcome one.

While in all three songs that comprise this poem the figures have a sense of common purpose, the poet seems to qualify this purpose. Mannion the tinker can only wish to control the breeding of a perfect race. Henry Middleton is a recluse and does not want to be involved with the community. The men of character do not act in the world: "The best lack all conviction . . ." ("The Second Coming" *l*.7, Allt 1957, 402). The actors, who lose their character as soon as they leave the stage, have no guarantee that their off-stage actions will not end in tragic waste. The fierce horsemen continue to ride throughout the poem, and perhaps they ride for eternity, because it is clear that the mortal cannot achieve the immortal. Yeats seems to be affirming the theoretical idea of a perfect race, while at the same time denying that it can be achieved by human action.

The men of "The Black Tower" (Allt 1957, 635) have no compunction about acting in accordance with their ideal. Their problem is rather to determine who it is that they serve, and

although it costs them dearly--". . . they but feed as the goatherd feeds,/ Their money spent, their wine gone sour" (*ll*.2-3)--they are adamant that they will not succumb to false leadership: "Those banners come not in" (*l*.6). The suggestion that the banners carry is that it is foolish to care who the king is ". . . when his own right king's forgotten" (*l*.13), implying that race and belief are subject to time and change and can become outworn. The men's belief continues unabated because they hear the wind shaking the "Old bones . . ." (*l*.10), threatening to bring them to life, and because others are afraid of them in the strength of their belief: "Why do you dread us so?" (*l*.16).

The fervour and the rightness of the men is questioned, however. The old cook, who ". . . climb[s] and clamber[s]/ Catching small birds in the dew of the morn" (*ll*.21-22), claims to have heard the approach of the right king. Supporting the cook's claim are: his age (and perhaps therefore his wisdom); the fact that he has climbed to a vantage point; the cunning he has, which enables him to catch small birds; and the fact that he moves in the dawn, which is a time of enlightenment. The rest of the men do not see this, and it is as though, in their fervour, their entire faith has been consumed by their task as guardians, and they no longer truly expect or desire the return of the right king. The final chorus then becomes an affirmation for the cook, and for the reader, and excludes ". . . the men of the old black tower" (*l*.1). At this point it is clear that race remains an ideal, but it is equally clear that there are many pitfalls for the unwary believer, including loss of belief and false belief.

"Cuchulain Comforted" (Allt 1957, 634) is a further comment that belief in race may entail some unexpected things. Cuchulain, the archetypal hero of the race, finds himself among the dead. He is characterised as "Violent and famous . . ." (*l*.2), and would seem, in the words of "Under Ben Bulben", to ". . . prove superhuman" (*l*.6). Part three of "Under Ben Bulben" offers a description of the violent man, especially one like Cuchulain who is ". . . fighting mad" (*l*.28), and explains, in terms that recall the notion of the sublime, that ". . . some sort of violence" (*l*.34) is necessary before a man ". . . completes his partial mind,/ For an instant stands at ease,/ Laughs aloud, his heart at peace" (*ll*.30-32). This is perhaps something of what could be expected to happen to Cuchulain in "Cuchulain Comforted". But the moment of ease and of completion is only possible when opposites are united and transcended. For Cuchulain the hero this means being confronted by and taking lessons from "Convicted cowards . . ." (*l*.21), an enormously difficult thing for him to be expected to do. He is asked to throw off his arms, and to make a shroud using needles that have been threaded by men whom in life he would surely have despised. The result of his acquiescence is that he can join the shrouds as they sing like birds--naturally, sweetly, and without conscious effort. The moment of ease is attained.

The effect of this poem is to qualify radically the meaning of comfort. It becomes something that, although desirous, is difficult, and even exactly the opposite of what might be expected. Even the heroes of the race have worked and suffered for "Completeness of their passions won" (UBB *l*.9). As

well as being an affirmation of the ideal of race, this poem is thus also a reiteration of the idea of "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing" (Allt 1957, 290): the ideal is reached through individual confrontation ". . . of all things not impossible the most difficult . . ." (*Mythologies*, 332).

"Three Marching Songs" (Allt 1957, 613) continues the emphasis on the individual in a negative way--by undermining the idea of causes. The first song is an exhortation to remember those who in the past have given their lives for Ireland. These sacrifices make contemporary success all the more essential: "Fail, and that history turns into rubbish" (I 21). The refrain, however, undercuts this patriotic fervour:

> Be still, be still, what can be said?
> My father sang that song,
> But time amends old wrong,
> And all that is finished, let it fade.
> (I 7-10)

The tone here is far more pacific, and suggests a willingness to exist in time and to be acted upon by time, rather than energetically to transcend time by remembering the past, and then to use that past as a spur to present action.

The second song affirms that there have always been objects of belief and believers. Humanity, it seems, needs causes. But there is a chance that believed and believer are equally deluded and that "A slave bows down to a slave" (II 6). A potential slave is the mind: hungry men will forgive if they are but given food (II 14). The mind can be imprisoned by the past and believe that its freedom is contingent on the overthrow of that past. Defeating the past is seen to necessitate belief in--imprisonment by--a cause that justifies the dismissal of the

past, and so the mind is never free to forgive, to ". . . let it fade" (I 10). Worse still, "What if there's nothing up there at the top?" (II 21). Once more Yeats is warning against unexamined acquiescence in a cause. There is no clear answer to the question "Where are the captains that govern mankind?" (II 22) and it is quite possible that the unforgiving mind will attach itself to something insubstantial, ". . . a tree that has nothing within it" (II 23), and be torn down by the indiscriminate wind. The refrain of this song, rather than providing an opposition, echoes the terrible doubt about the validity of the cause. The young man is eager to join whatever it is that marches down the mountain pass. The old man restrains him, because ". . . no man knows what treads the grass" (II 10) and it is important to be careful whom you ally yourself with so that you can retain the freedom of mind that will allow you both to act, and to forget.

Finally Yeats presents a believer in causes. Grandfather sings under the gallows and affirms that ". . . a good strong cause and blows are delight" (III 14). He has understood that some violence is necessary to experience the moment of ease, to ". . . accomplish fate" (UBB 1.35), and he is so exuberantly at ease that he can replace his stolen tambourine with the moon. But a good strong cause is also what tightens the noose around your neck and prevents you from completing your song. Cuchulain can learn to sing like a bird, but Grandfather's ". . . throat [is] too small" (III 24).

If absolute belief in causes, more especially the cause of race, is not the way to attain to the ideal of the horsemen and women, what is? "In Tara's Halls" (Allt 1957, 609) goes some

way towards answering the question. The man in the poem is old, and he decides to vow in public that, although he has *given* love, he will never ask to *receive* love. One year later the desire to be loved comes upon him, and he keeps his vow:

> He bade, his hundred and first year at end,
> Diggers and carpenters make grave and coffin;
> Saw that the grave was deep, the coffin sound,
> Summoned the generations of his house,
> Lay in the coffin, stopped his breath and died.
> (*ll.*16-20)

Yeats praises this man because his response to the cause of race is the correct one. He is an important member of the community (Jeffares notes that Tara ". . . was once the seat of the High Kings of Ireland" (1984, 412)), he upholds its institutions (". . . the Sacred House . . ." (*l.*11)), and he believes in the importance of his own family (*l.*19). Yet he is free to make choices, and has the individual strength to act in the community with integrity. He has sensed "That something is about to happen . . ." (*l.*4), and is excited at the prospect of ". . . the adventure of old age . . ." (*l.*5). When this adventure turns out to be that of facing his own limitations, he does so willingly, like a man who truly does ". . . accomplish fate,/ Know his work . . ." (UBB *ll.*35-6). He approaches death with calm resolution, glad to be ". . . thrust . . ./ Back in the human mind again" (UBB *ll.*23-24).

Yeats seems finally to be saying that belief in race is valid when that belief is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. The old man is praised because, although race provides the context in which he lives, he thinks and acts as a character-full individual. Race is a means to the overcoming of his

passions. The irony is that race is itself the cause of our passions: if there were no race, and the body that must go with it, there would be no passions to overcome. Race and body are both curse and delight.

That race has a place in the scheme of things is undeniable, but it is only the first turn of the spiral to perfection--there is still the soul to be reckoned with. Race is the means to overcoming the passions, but as Nietzsche points out: "The man who has overcome his passions has entered into possession of the most fertile ground . . . . The overcoming itself is only a *means*, not a goal . . ." (cited in Hollingdale 1977, 233; original emphasis).

## IV

IV

Poet and sculptor, do the work,
Nor let the modish painter shirk
What his great forefathers did,
Bring the soul of man to God,
Make him fill the cradles right.

Measurement began our might:
Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
Forms that gentler Phidias wrought.
Michael Angelo left a proof
On the Sistine Chapel roof,
Where but half-awakened Adam
Can disturb globe-trotting Madam
Till her bowels are in heat,
Proof that there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind:
Profane perfection of mankind.

Quattrocento put in paint
On backgrounds for a God or Saint
Gardens where a soul's at ease;
Where everything that meets the eye,
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,
Resemble forms that are or seem
When sleepers wake and yet still dream,

And when its vanished still declare,
With only bed and bedstead there,
That heavens had opened.
                                        Gyres run on;
When that greater dream had gone
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude,
Prepared a rest for the people of God,
Palmer's phrase, but after that
Confusion fell upon our thought.

Section four of "Under Ben Bulben" gives the artist his supreme commission, and discusses its purpose. It is the function of art, and so of the artist, to mediate between the two poles of man's life: those of race and soul. Art, which is the most fertile ground which the now ego-less artist possesses, brings the soul of man to God, offering it a vision of itself that is perfect and complete. As Olney says:

> it may be that God creates man in his own image, but if so . . . the artist, working out of the spiritual history of the race, first created that ideal image and presented it to God that he might see himself more clearly, know himself better, and so thereafter create more intensively. . . . the poet's creation may be an imitation of God's, but God's creation must wait on the poet's for the cradles to be filled right. Which comes first it would be difficult to say . . . . Nevertheless, it is clear that for Yeats creation is a human/divine and mortal/immortal affair that is both circular and continuous. . .
> (1980, 262)

This ability of art to provoke God to imitate it is for Yeats proof that the ultimate goal of the artist is "Profane perfection of mankind" (UBB *1*.52). This, at least, is the theory. In five of his most compressed and elusive poems Yeats explores the implications of this belief, and whether or not it is even possible.

"The Statues" (Allt 1957, 610) is strong in its assertion that such faith is possible. In it Yeats expresses his belief in

the value of the science of measurement because it has given proportion and perspective to art, which becomes then an objective ideal for the subjective human race. As the poem begins Yeats is perplexed at the response of the people to the statues that Pythagoras's numbers make possible. It is, however, the very perfection of the statues that disturbs the people. The ideal physical image is a challenge to more spiritual notions of human perfection--the attribute of ". . . character" (*l*.3). The people who respond appropriately to the statues are the young, who desire most of all an ideal physical image, a focus for their physical desire. They understand that if the statue in itself (and thus any work of art) expresses perfect harmony it is good. All that is required to bring the statue to life is passion, and that they have in abundance. The objective, however, is defined only by the presence of the subjective, and Yeats makes it clear that the art work has no meaning outside of the context provided by the human response to it.

The art work is much greater than its creator, and Pythagoras's numbers have unseen consequences. They enable the construction of perfect forms by many people, and these forms, not military endeavour, are responsible for the defeat of all things, whether they are pictures or philosophies, that are not perfectly harmonious. Yeats attributes these ". . . vague immensities" (*l*.12) to Asia, setting up a contrast between East and West. Asia is represented by "The many-headed foam . . ." (*l*.14), and Europe by the statues of Phidias, which, like the marbles and bronzes of the first stanza, provoke women to dream,

and provide dreams with a reflection of themselves.

Not content with a paean to the order and perfection of things that are measured and precise, in stanza three Yeats offers a vision of the consequences of the failure to " . . .put down" (*l*.11), either by battle or by capturing in measurement, these vague immensities. One image escapes the Pythagorean advance, that of the Buddha. It grows ". . . round and slow" (*l*.18), in an uncontrolled way, and as a result, instead of providing a clear and unambiguous ideal for those who do not have dreams, or an image of dreams themselves, it mirrors unselectively whatever comes before it, denying the possibility of meaning:

> Empty eyeballs knew
> That knowledge increases unreality, that
> Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.
> (*ll*.20-22)

The description of the worshipper of this vagueness is unflattering. He is reduced to Grimalkin, "an old female cat" (Jeffares 1984, 416), defeated before ". . . emptiness" (*l*.24). This is what happens when "Confusion [falls] upon our thought" (UBB *l*.67). Grimalkin is also a witch's familiar (*Macbeth* I i 8n), and part of what is being played out here is a religious and mystical drama where the blank gaze of the east nullifies the power of the pantheon of western supernaturalism, adding to the confusion.

The final stanza makes it clear that for Yeats confusion is pervasive. The present is characterised as ". . . this filthy modern tide" (*l*.29), on whose ". . . formless spawning fury" (*l*.30) the Irish race has been ". . . wrecked" (*l*.30). It is

also clear, however, that when Pearse summoned Cuchulain there was a response, and that ". . . intellect,/ . . . calculation, number, measurement . . ." (*ll*.26-27) of some kind did reply. Given the circumstances, the intellect, calculation, number and measurement that replied would seem to be those of the Irish artist who fashioned the statue of Cuchulain that stands in the Post Office. Pearse can place himself in the line of Irish racial heroes because an artist has provided an ideal image of such heroes. It is by such artistic actions that the Irish will be enabled to "Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace/ The lineaments of a plummet-measured face" (*ll*.31-32). Proper, because it is the "particular, distinctive" (*OED*) possession of the Irish race, and dark, because the actual outlines of the objective ideal are as yet indistinct--it is in the process of being made by Yeats and his fellow Irish artists.

It is appropriate that this poem, coming as it does straight after the group of poems on race, should concentrate on the way in which art can perfect race. The following poem moves further from the concern of race and examines the notion of measured perfection so privileged in "The Statues".

In "News for the Delphic Oracle" (Allt 1957, 611) it is the purpose of the artist, "Profane perfection of mankind" (UBB *l*.52), that comes under scrutiny. "There . . ." (*l*.1) is the state that is reached once art and measurement have produced profane perfection. Contrary to expectations the news is *for* the Delphic oracle, not from it, and the news is bad. In this place of gold and silver--the combination of which signifies perfection (Jeffares 1984, 35)--the inhabitants are ironically

called ". . . codgers . . ." (*l*.1). None of them is satisfied with his perfection because the state is a sterile one--there is no sex. Niamh and Oisin, the archetypal Irish lovers are dissatisfied there. So is Pythagoras, whose numbers made this possible in the first place. The newcomer Plotinus joins the chorus of sighs, which are all quite specifically for sex. Sex entails change and generation, two things inadmissible in a perfect paradise. If this is the ". . . proper dark . . ." ("The Statues" *l*.31) that lies on the other side of " . . .this filthy modern tide" of " . . . formless spawning fury . . ." ("The Statues" *ll*.29-30), then its desirability is questionable.

In the second stanza Yeats moves his focus from the paradise itself, to the sea around it. Coming across this sea are the Holy Innocents, those babes murdered during Herod's search for the infant Christ. Daniel Albright suggests that

> . . . their most important aspect is the extreme disparity in age and intellect between them and the golden codgers. The shift from the codgers to the Innocents is the first sign in the poem of the shift from the effete paradise of the first stanza back into the generative world. (1972, 140)

The Innocents are in the sea which is a place of process, and they are being carried by the ". . . brute . . ." (*l*.20) dolphins. Their cries, as they endure the process of being ". . . thrust . . . / Back in the human mind again" (UBB *ll*.23-24), are ". . . sweet and strange" (*l*.18), and cause the waters to laugh in ecstasy, creating an atmosphere that is quite different from the bored sighs of the first stanza. Also important is the fact that the Innocents never reach the shore. They are deposited in the water by the dolphins, and they are

surely much happier there.

The final stanza is a resounding rejection of "The Poverty of Heaven" (Albright 1972, 117), that is depicted in the first stanza. Peleus and Thetis stand in the sterile paradise, in what is clearly a potentially sexual situation, and his only response, and it is the only possible response "There . . ." (*l*.1), is to weep at her beauty. In the sea, however, a very different scene is taking place, and Thetis is instinctively drawn to that. Pan's "intolerable . . ." (*l*.32) music drives the nymphs and satyrs to a frenzied orgy ". . . in the foam" (*l*.36), in the element that in this poem is significant of the world of generation. The word foam also recalls the ". . . many-headed foam at Salamis" ("The Statues" *l*.14) which is defeated by the measurement of Pythagoras and the statues of Phidias. In "The Statues", however, it is measurement and the perfection it brings that is aspired to. In "News for the Delphic Oracle" the state achieved through measurement is found sadly wanting. The bad news for the oracle is that the vision that she usually presents of paradise as a place ". . . where all is unison and winning tenderness and guileless joy . . ." (MacKenna in Jeffares 1984, 322), is not a welcome vision at all.

It is typical of Yeats to build up a particular view of paradise and then to reject it. Exactly the same procedure is followed in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Allt 1957, 477), where the final resolution of the self is to choose ". . . the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch" (*l*.59), rather than succumb to the sterility of the soul's vision. This tactic within a single poem is repeated continuously in the collections as Yeats examines the

notion of gaiety. Here he reiterates that an essential characteristic of gaiety is its momentariness. It is a state continuously aspired to , and occasionally achieved, but always for only an instant. To live in heaven perpetually is to be perpetually bored. To live in the ditch with no hope is to be suicidal. What must be striven for is a balance between the two, a balance between process and stasis.

"Long-legged Fly" (Allt 1957, 617) is a swing of the pendulum towards just such a balance. In this poem Yeats reaffirms the value, not so much of art, as of the artistic mind and its ability to transcend the mundane in order to be active in it: civilisation depends on Caesar withdrawing from it and then returning to act in it; for beauty to have any effect at all it must seem subconscious; for the race to be given its ideal figures it must allow the artist to withdraw and create. ". . . Yeats calls for silence while Michelangelo works, for what he is creating . . . is nothing less than the model to which God will need to look so that he may get the cradles filled right: it is the *eidos* of humankind . . ." (Olney 1980, 264).

The central image in the poem is obviously that of the long-legged fly. The creature has the ability to move on top of a rushing stream without being caught in the current and swept away. The equivalent capacity in human beings is to be able to remain in contact with the world and yet not to be overwhelmed by it. The stream is something like the Heraclitean flux, and it is the artistic mind that has the ability to create forms to contain the flux. Here the personal desire and the social duty of the artist meet: he desires transcendence of the flux for his own

spiritual purposes, and humanity depends on him to shape the flux to enable them to experience transcendence too.

It is ironic that the result of this withdrawal and transcendence should be, in the case of Caesar and Helen, war, and in the case of Michaelangelo the disturbance of ". . . globe-trotting Madam/ Till her bowels are in heat" (UBB *ll*.48-49). This is inevitable, however, when transcendence is a condition of the few, and lasts only a moment. Transcendence implies an integration of opposites, it is a moment of unity: the normal condition of life is one of conflict and disunity. Ultimately, the moment of the artist is utterly powerless to change this. In his discussion of Michaelangelo in *The Renaissance*, Pater offers a description of the moment of the artist: it is

> . . . a dream that lingers a moment, retreating in the dawn, incomplete, aimless, helpless; a thing with faint hearing, faint memory, faint power of touch; a breath, a flame in the doorway, a feather in the wind. (1910, 96)

Transcendent and transient, it is yet this moment to which Yeats aspires as one of great power in the life of an artist. This is the moment that produces the perfectly measured creation that is

> Proof that there's a purpose set
> Before the secret working mind:
> Profane perfection of mankind.
> (UBB *ll*.50-52)

Again it is ironic that the perfection should be profane, but the tension produced by the yoking of these words is deliberate, and perfectly descriptive of the tension enacted in the three poems discussed so far. Perfection, once achieved, is boring and sterile, unless it is achieved and held for just a moment, in which case it becomes infinitely desirable and the possession of

it becomes a reason for existence.

The closure of "Long-legged Fly" provides perfect peace, but only for a moment. Despite what seems to be an achievement in the resolution of a painful paradox, Yeats cannot let the matter rest and he continues in another circle of enquiry. Art has been affirmed as a source of models for the perfect race, and as a place where conflicting ideas and desires can for a moment be reconciled. Still unresolved, however, is the problem of soul, that other eternity:

> Many times man lives and dies
> Between his two eternities,
> That of race and that of soul
> (UBB *ll.*13-15)

Art mediates between these two eternities, and it is with "A Bronze Head" (Allt 1957, 618) that Yeats begins to use art to approach soul.

In the poems discussed so far, art forms have been like the Quattrocento painting mentioned in "Under Ben Bulben" (*ll.*53-62): perfect and peaceful. In their perfection they are the eidos, the Ideal, they have offered many possibilities to human beings concerned with ordering their race. Now, however, the art form almost offers too many possibilities. Which is the *true* form that unites all the disparate visions of the woman? In the face of soul the art form becomes ambiguous. It is now a bronze head, in contrast to one of Phidias's sculptures, and it is clearly representative of a living human being; in particular it is a head of Maud Gonne (Jeffares 1984, 419), and viewing it is inevitably accompanied by the many complex feelings that the poet associates with her. The problem is that the poet has a number

of possible forms with which to describe the woman he knows, and the bronze head, rather than providing a definitive model, provokes the poet to think of all the alternatives. She is by turn a tomb-haunter, a gentle woman full of light, or a composite of both these things; or even a wild race-horse, a child, and finally, supernatural. Where soul is concerned it seems art has a different role to play. It can express possibilities, unite contradictions, and help soul to explore, but it offers nothing like the certainty that it gives in dealing with race.

"A Bronze Head" is linked to "The Statues" not only by the presence of actual statues, but also by the features of rhythm, and almost exactly the same stanza form. They are intended, I believe, to mirror each other, and to be poems that show art at work mediating between man and race ("The Statues"), and between man and soul ("A Bronze Head"). The difference between them is apparent. Whereas "The Statues" ends with a clear affirmation that it is possible for art to rescue the Irish race, "A Bronze Head" ends with an expression of disgust at the state of the world, and a weariness with it all, expressed in "And wondered what was left for massacre to save" (*l*.28). This is another gloss of the concluding line of section four of "Under Ben Bulben": "Confusion fell upon our thought" (*l*.67), and must inevitably recall "No Second Troy": "Was there another Troy for her to burn?" (Allt 1957, 257 *l*.12).

Just as "The Statues" is qualified by "News for the Delphic Oracle", so "A Bronze Head" is qualified by the final poem in this third movement of *Last Poems*, the quatrain "A Stick of Incense". The poet looks at the disorder and chaos in which

his meditation on the bronze head ends, and decides that instead of attempting to understand the original order and trying to return to it, with art forms as inspirational images, he should concentrate on more immediate sensations (Bradford 1968, 83-84). The pendulum has swung from the extreme of race, across art, and is entering the fourth and final movement of the collection which is infinitely more personal. Art has carried the poet from race, and is about to deposit him in soul.

V

V

Irish poets, learn your 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.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

VI

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

*Cast a cold eye*
*On life, on death.*
*Horseman, pass by!*

While Yeats appears to have dallied dangerously at the end of the fourth movement with notions of chaos, and of loss of meaning in any but an immediately sensory way, in these final parts of "Under Ben Bulben" he returns to the idea of art as a stay against confusion. This time, however, the stay against confusion is not to be found in anonymous art and perfectly proportioned sculpture, but in the creations of the Irish poets themselves, using the Irish people as subject matter. In the poems that gloss these final stanzas he is concerned with his own art as a reflection of what he believes poetry should be, and with the question of how a poet should be.

The opening poem is "Hound Voice" (Allt 1957, 621) and Yeats seems immediately to be taking his own advice about subject matter. Here are the "Hard-riding country gentlemen" (UBB *l*.75), and perhaps even ". . . the lords and ladies gay" (Ibid *l*.78) to whom Irish poets are to look for models. They are more than just members of the Irish gentry, however. Yeats is speaking of the women he has loved, and in a way that is deliberately antithetical to things that are "All out of shape from toe to top" and people who have ". . . unremembering hearts and heads" (Ibid. *ll*.71-72). The hunt is an extremely stylised and inherited tradition, and the use of the image recalls the superhuman horsemen and women of the first stanza of "Under Ben Bulben". As the hounds in the poem remember the voices of the huntsmen, so Yeats and the women whom he loved have always recognised each other spiritually. It is Yeats's belief that the time will come when it will be appropriate to exercise these recognitions once more, and it will lead to a moment of gaiety:

"And chants of victory amid the encircling hounds" (l.21).

It is evident in this poem that Yeats is using subject-matter that is much more personal than that of the previous movements. He is also following the resolution of "A Stick of Incense" and using the immediate sensations of the hunt to explore the meanings of his relationships, and thereby his soul. The poem shares the same form as "A Bronze Head" and almost that of "The Statues", and it is a combination of the two. In "The Statues", impersonal art has the power to order life, but with particular reference to racial and collective life. In "A Bronze Head", personal art faces the soul and becomes ambiguous, not seeming to offer any stay against confusion. Here Yeats has used art for extremely personal purposes, but because it is rooted in an impersonal and collective tradition it is able to sustain the poet's need for meaning. The story of the poet's life has been firmly located in his myth.

In "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore" (Allt 1957, 620), Yeats adopts a persona, and becomes one of the Irish he advises his fellow poets to write about. The tone of this elegiac ballad is half exasperated in its railings against death, and almost satiric of the conventional heroic and tragic material of ballads. In view of this it is surprising how conventional John Kinsella's ideas of paradise are. The yearning after Eden in the final stanza deflates the vigorous complaint of the first two stanzas, and the poem becomes profoundly moving, as all that John Kinsella can do in the face of his loss is to wish for a place where such loss does not occur. The poem is an understanding that after all, what is finally sought is gaiety, a

condition of stasis.

The use of a persona is common in Yeats, and as J.R. Mulryne explains, ". . . 'joy' turns out to be . . . the imaginative possession of an image; reconciling or cancelling the antinomies, it makes joy possible" (1968, 149). If there is no gaiety in the poem for John Kinsella, Yeats finds it as he uses the persona of Kinsella to unite the grief expressed in a coarse lament with a traditional poetic form and a conventional longing for paradise. The poem is perfectly whole, and poet and reader are satisfied.

In "High Talk" (Allt 1957, 622) Yeats adopts yet another persona, that of Malachi Stilt-Jack, and he proceeds to use it to discuss the writing of poetry. The stilt-walker's stilts have been stolen, and because he is an essential part of the circus procession he sets out to make another pair. As the stilts are constructed, so Yeats constructs the poem, itself an Alexandrine sonnet with a couplet rhyme, a complicated form which emphasises the pure artistry of the poet. The complaint that the stilts have been stolen echoes a much earlier poem, "A Coat" (Allt 1957, 320). In this poem too Yeats defies those who have used his poetry in ways he did not intend and determines to continue in his enterprise irrespective. In "High Talk" the reason for continuing to write, for making another pair of stilts, is that the poet is an essential part of the parade of life. He ". . . catches the eye" (*l*.1), and the women and children expect him. Yeats is locating his poetry firmly amongst the Irish people, and giving the poet a privileged position--that of entertainer--in that community. This anticipates the questioning of "The Man and

The Echo", where the poet is no longer certain of the value and role of his poetry.

The octave presents Malachi Stilt-Jack and his role, but in the sestet, the persona seems to slip, and Yeats can be seen meditating on that persona, wondering about the truth and effectiveness of it. Yeats tells his persona that what he has learned and what he has written is "All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all . . ." (*l*.11), and so bares the bones of the poem, showing that it is a metonym for writing poetry, and finally a metonym for gaiety itself. As the poem concludes Yeats and Malachi merge again, and

> night splits and the dawn breaks loose;
> I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;
> Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn. (*ll*.12-14)

As is appropriate in this final movement of *Last Poems*, the poem presents Yeats at his most self-conscious, examining his soul in terms of what finally counts most--his work. (Another poem which examines the same theme in terms of the same image, and which is anticipated here, is "The Circus Animal's Desertion").

"The Apparitions" (Allt 1957, 624), which follows "High Talk", is almost a contradiction of its predecessor. In the latter poem the poet is confident of his place and purpose, in the former, the poet seems all too aware of the possibility of misunderstanding, but prefers it to misappropriation of the kind evinced in "A Coat" (Allt 1957, 320). While it is true that the apparitions provide a screen for Yeats from his detractors, they

are not so successful in hiding him from himself. The second stanza shows Yeats grateful for an old man's privilege of being humoured--he is not obliged to face his unintelligibility--but the refrain undermines this security. Among all the apparitions that Yeats has used to obfuscate his meaning there is one that is particularly terrible. The final stanza makes it clear that this apparition is himself. Although age brings resolution and thereby joy, the old man has especial need of that gaiety "Because of the increasing Night/ That opens her mystery and fright" (*ll*.21-22). In this confrontation with death he is obliged to confront himself and can no longer rely upon the kind tolerance of old friends, or the protection his apparitions have usually given him. Malachi Stilt Jack is, after all, only a metaphor, of infinite use, and yet no use at all.

"A Nativity" (Allt 1957, 625) seems to belong in the tradition of "Leda and the Swan" and "The Second Coming", being a birth poem of ominous overtones. This time however the birth is one of doubt in the efficacy of art. Yeats has encouraged the Irish poets to perfect their craft so "That we in coming days may be/ Still the indomitable Irishry" (UBB *ll*.82-83). In "A Nativity" he has created the ultimate scene. Delacroix has done the figures, Landor is responsible for covering the stable, and Irving and Talma, actors both, are guardians who get rid of fly and moth, and knave and dolt with equal dexterity. But, and this is the question of the poem, in this most perfect of nativities the woman is struck with terror at the look on her child's face. For all the work that has been put into providing the perfect context, the artists have not been able to guarantee that the

child to be born is the one that is desired. In this notion that there is something that does not succumb to the ordering and perfection of art the poem hearkens back to "The Statues", and the Buddha before whose blank gaze order and meaning are dispelled.

The same anxiety as to the worth and use of his poetry is Yeats's theme in "The Man and the Echo" (Allt 1957, 632). Here, as earlier in the collection, we are taken on a visit to a place in the rock, but this time Delphi is in Ireland, and the oracle is dependent on the man himself: an echo can only return what it is given to speak. Now, at the end of his life, Yeats wishes to know if it is possible to connect his poetry to particular events. His advice to the Irish poets in general assumes that poetry does have a direct effect on the world, but when it appears that his work may be held responsible for death and madness and loss of tradition, he despairs, and desires death. These are things quite alien to the results he hoped for, much as the child born in "A Nativity" is not what was anticipated.

The echo has no choice but to repeat the words preceding Yeats's silence, and this is its function: to throw the poet back at himself so that he can hear and judge his words. As soon as Yeats hears "Lie down and die" (*l*.19), he knows that his desire is a cowardly one. His work demands to be done, and there is no way for him to avoid it. Now Yeats speaks with the conviction of a man in the service of a cause larger than himself, he can take his own advice, and he turns his anxiety into a desire to see his work finally ordered before he dies. The concern of old age is not that the work has or has not had certain effects, but that it

is done and needs to be ordered and accepted so that the poet can pass through this stage of life:

> And till his intellect grows sure
> That all's arranged in one clear view,
> Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
> Then stands in judgement on his soul,
> And, all work done, dismisses all
> Out of intellect and sight
> And sinks at last into the night.
> (*ll*.30-36)

This is similar to the conclusion of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", where Yeats is ". . . content to follow to its source/ Every event in action or in thought;/ Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!" (Allt 1957, 479 *ll*.65-67). In this poem the action is followed by a moment of gaiety. In "The Man and the Echo" Yeats does not notice the potential for resolution in his action, but becomes concerned with the nature of ". . . that great night . . . " (*l*.38). This concern is carried from "The Apparitions" where Yeats is seen using the blessings of old age to strengthen him in facing death. Having decided that his art is valuable and important, and having reconciled himself to what he has to do about it as he nears his death, the echo prompts him to worry about the nature of that death. This line of questioning and searching is not pursued, however. Yeats drops his voice and ceases speculation as life and death in unmitigated harshness intrude upon his meditation, which now seems to be a dream.

This poem reinforces "A Nativity" in that they are both concerned, finally , with the inefficacy of art in the face of life. It is not that art has no effect on life, but rather that it is impossible to tell what that effect will be, and even that

sometimes life is more immediate and important than art. The upshot of this for the poet is to learn to reconcile himself to his particular place, and to take joy in that. Gaiety is also about accepting limitations.

"The Circus Animals' Desertion" (Allt 1957, 629) defines more clearly just what those limitations are. In this poem Yeats returns to the image of the circus, using it as a metonym for his entire oeuvre, with his individual poems as the animals and performers. It is a very apt image for Yeats's poetry, considering his consistent use of the technique of adopting a persona, and as Parrish points out, having listed every occurrence of Yeats's animals, "The profusion of animals here--both on the hoof, as it were, and in the vehicle of a metaphor--may give new force to Yeats's complaint of desertion at the waning of his inventive power" (1963, vi).

The essence of the poem is that the poet has lost inspiration, which is the very thing that makes him a poet, and now, as a ". . . broken man" (*l*.3) he feels that he ". . . must be satisfied with [his] heart . . ." (*l*.4). In the second part of the poem Yeats looks over his poetic career, and this examination enables him, in the third part, to understand that although it seems as though those earlier and greater creations "Grew in pure mind . . ." (*l*.34), they in fact began just where the poet presently is: "In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (*l*.40).

The poem is perfectly circular, beginning with the poet resigning himself to his heart, and ending with his realisation that, strange and ragged as it may be, that same heart is the

source of all that he thinks of as great. In its concern with poetry and its place in the poet's life, it is aptly placed in this movement of *Last Poems* where the poet's soul is under examination. It is a progression from "The Man and the Echo", where, although the subject in question is the same, Yeats seems to despair of finding answers. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" understands that the work can be ordered, viewed as a performance, and dismissed, and that what is left is the poet facing the man, being content to lie down in his heart. Whereas "The Man and the Echo" sees a radical split between the man and the poet, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" unites them. Finally Yeats is at home with his soul, his work and his race, all united in this most gay of poems. And this is, above all, the function of art: to make life livable. As Stephen Donadio comments:

> In Nietzsche's view, therefore, art serves as "the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant to life," for inasmuch as it involves a process of reordering and transforming exerience in accordance with some pattern of meaning it inevitably represents human existence as possessing purpose and coherence.
> (1978, 222-223)

But this is not Yeats's last word. That he has saved for "Politics" (Allt 1957, 631). Curtis Bradford describes the poem as Yeats's ". . . gay goodnight . . ." (1968, 87), citing the words from "Oedipus at Colonus":

> Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;
> Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have
> looked into the eye of day;
> The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn
> away.
> (Allt 1957, 459 *ll*.10-12)

Yeats has, indubitably, lived, with great pain and great joy, but it has embroiled him in "The fury and the mire of human veins"

("Byzantium" *l*.8, Allt 1957, 497). The only way in which Yeats can approximate to the condition of perfect unity represented by never having lived, is to seek gaiety, a condition in which all oppositions are resolved, and nothing cared for beyond that moment. In "Politics" all that is desired is the possession of the woman--possible for only a moment--and the rest of the world may vanish. In this poem wisdom itself is not sufficient to compensate for the physical decline of old age, and he acknowledges this in himself warmly, humorously, in a moment that is gay. It is this spirit that can accomplish what Yeats most desires:

> *Cast a cold eye*
> *On life, on death.*
> *Horseman, pass by!*

# CONCLUSION

In *The Wild Swans at Coole* there is a poem called "The Fisherman" (Allt 1957, 347). In this poem Yeats speaks of "Imagining a man" (*l.*28) for whom he will write his poetry, and this man is none other than himself. He is, however, "A man who does not exist,/ A man who is but a dream" (*ll.* 35-36). He is an image, an ideal invented by Yeats which he constantly holds out before himself and to which he constantly aspires. My contention in this thesis has been that Yeats is persistently trying to find a way to create himself, and that the way he settles on as the one most likely to generate this self is the system that has at its heart the idea of gaiety. What kind of man, then, does Yeats finally succeed in imagining?

Two poems that go some way towards addressing this question and drawing conclusions from the body of the thesis are the Byzantium poems. The first of these is "Sailing to Byzantium" (Allt 1957, 407). In this poem, the man Yeats creates is more concerned with his soul than anything else, and this is an inevitable characteristic of a man whose central system of belief seeks the moment of transcendence, especially now that the man is old. Young people find that moment in a physical way, as the first stanza of the poem suggests:

> That is no country for old men. The young
> In one another's arms, birds in the trees
> --Those dying generations--at their song,
> The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
> Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
> Caught in that sensual music all neglect
> Monuments of unageing intellect. (*ll.*1-8)

Yeats recognizes his jealousy of this fecund world, but he does not rave against it; it is after all inevitable that the young should not care about things that are unageing. It becomes a central concern, however, as soon as youth disappears. Then there is nowhere to look for gaiety but in the soul.

The second stanza continues the argument that what redeems an old man is not his body but his soul, which must ". . . clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress" (*ll.*11-12), and goes on to explain that the only way in which the soul can learn to sing is by studying "Monuments of its own magnificence" (*l.*14). Hence the reason for the voyage to Byzantium, which is one of the supreme monuments of the magnificence of the soul.

Another of the characteristics of the man who believes in gaiety comes to the fore in the third stanza, when we discover that it is not Byzantium in general which can teach Yeats's soul to sing, but the art of that city. Art is one of the ways in which the chaos of life is ordered, and the mosaic that Yeats sees is particularly significant of this, being millions of small and disparate pieces carefully linked to make a large, ordered picture. From the *ego* of the young in the first stanza, Yeats approaches the *eidos* of the mosaic, and his plea before it is to be taught to become *eidos* in himself:

> . . . be the singing masters of my soul.
> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity. (*ll.*20-24)

The man who believes in gaiety is an artist who believes that it is possible to order the multiverse into a universe, and to

experience life holistically. He knows however, that this is an illusion: eternity is artificial, it is created and imposed, and it does not exist of itself. Yeats confronts the mosaic on the wall with the story of his own life, all the pieces in his hands, and he asks that he be taught to construct them according to the tenets of a system so that they will have meaning when they are read in the context of that system, which is the equivalent of a myth.

The final stanza of the poem is a reiteration of Yeats's desire to avoid the process of life, and to become *eidos*. He wishes to become an art form, so that he can take his place in the order of things, and be a source of timeless truth to those who see him and hear his song. The man that Yeats imagines is the artist desiring to become his art and to affect people by that timeless art, not by his transient life. This poem is not, like some of the great poems, an enactment of the achievement of gaiety, but an expression of the intention of the artist to achieve this state, and an exploration of what is necessary in order to do so.

"Sailing to Byzantium" is collected in *The Tower*, and its companion poem, "Byzantium", appears many poems later in the subsequent collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. Yeats has therefore had a while to think about what kind of man he wants to be, and what the implications of these desires are. "Byzantium" (Allt 1957, 497), is spoken by someone who has more than a passing acquaintance with the city, and having sailed there, the speakerhas obviously spent some time there. He has a better idea of the true nature of this monument of the soul, and

it has some ugly features:

> The unpurged images of day recede;
> The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
> Night resonance recedes, night-walker's song
> After great cathedral gong; (*ll*.1-4).

Even so, the construction of the city--its art--continues to dominate the scene and to provide an alternative vision:

> A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
> All that man is,
> All mere complexities,
> The fury and the mire of human veins.
> (*ll*.5-8)

The dome in its exquisite and simple perfection nullifies humankind, which becomes *merely* complex. The value here is clearly allocated to the unitary wholeness of the dome, and by extension, of all art, as opposed to the multiplicity of people and their unshaped world. This reiterates what "Sailing to Byzantium" has expressed about the power of art to order, and the desire of the artist to be ordered.

"Byzantium" continues with the artist's approach to the supernatural world. Now that the distractions of the unpurged daily life of Byzantium are over, he can continue his pursuit of the *eidos*, and the first place he looks is amongst the dead. This is because death presents the opportunity to ". . . unwind the winding path" (*l*.12). That is, to return down the path of life and to explore it with the benefit of the ultimate hindsight, much as Yeats attempts to do with his own life in "Under Ben Bulben". Death is also, before the cycle recommences, a brief moment of respite from the world of process, and this is what the artist seeks.

In "Sailing to Byzantium" Yeats expressed his wish to become the work of art, the golden bird, and thereby to become the ideal. He now returns to this image of the bird as the work of art, and says that it has two options---it:

> Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
> Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
> In glory of changeless metal
> Common bird or petal
> And all complexities of mire or blood.
> (*ll*.20-24)

Either the bird can announce death to all who listen to it--that is it can proclaim their mortality--or it can rage against the diverse and fragmented nature of the world represented by real birds and flowers and people. Scorning the real versions of itself is tantamount to announcing their mortality, but it does so by emphasising its own immortality, which is much harder to tolerate, and much more difficult to ignore. It is this potential for immortality that makes the object a miracle, not a bird or a piece of handiwork, and makes it so desirable to the artist.

In the fourth stanza those newly-dead spirits summoned in the second begin to arrive, and it transpires that Byzantium is the right destination for them, because there they are purged of their mortality in a ritual of dance and flame. In the first poem the soul, still captured in its mortal shell, is taught to sing by the pilgrimage to Byzantium. Now, the soul is released from its bondage to the body and it burns with the flame of eternity and partakes in the dance in which the dancer and the dance are indistinguishable:

> . . . blood-begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,
> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.
> (*ll*.28-32)

This is unmistakably a moment of gaiety, but it is dependent on death. And this is the difficulty for the man Yeats has made: he is very much alive, very much part of the process of the world. He stands and watches as the spirits keep coming to Byzantium to be purified by the shaping art produced there, and he celebrates the achievement of those artists:

> Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
> Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
> The golden smithies of the Emperor! (*ll*.33-35)

They hold back the flood of process and transform it with their art into something eternally and statically true. It is not only the smiths who cast the golden birds who contribute to this eternal verity but also the makers of the mosaics. The mosaics too have a role to play, and they

> Break bitter furies of complexity,
> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.
> (*ll*.37-40)

These last four lines are where Yeats expresses the ambiguity of his man's position. Ostensibly, he desires what Byzantium has to offer, and yet, even as he details what must be destroyed, he remains fascinated by the images of process. The unpurged images of day that were banished at the beginning of the poem return in full force here, overwhelming the image of the shade in the second stanza, to express just how bitterly complex it is to be a man who believes in gaiety. Not even the ideal man which Yeats

strives to be can escape the pain of knowing that gaiety is transient and temporary, and the self that he creates throughout the course of his poetry mirrors both his joy and his anguish at this knowledge.

Yeats's man is then, finally, an artist and a mystic, a human being who suffers and desires release, and a realist who knows that he can never pay the full price for that release.

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