

THE FIGURATION OF THE ARTIST IN THE
POETRY OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

by

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ABSTRACT

One of the major subjects of W. B. Yeats's poetry is poetry itself; concomitantly, one of the key speaking voices in the poetry is the poet as poet. While this poetic voice is unmistakably Yeats's own, Yeats insists that a poet "never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table," for he is "part of his own phantasmagoria." The speaker is a created figure, as a character in drama.

This thesis analyzes three "poses" which Yeats adopts in order to project a moulded a figure of the artist within his lyrics. After some definition of terms and a brief consideration of the symbol in Yeats's work, the discussion falls into three divisions: a study of the poet as Irish story-teller or *shanachie*; a study of the poet as visionary or magus; and finally, a consideration of the poet as old man. In all three cases, the "pose" deliberately draws on a long tradition, and the thesis indicates the reasons for Yeats's selection of these traditions.

The "pose" which an artist chooses largely determines which symbols he employs; Yeats's *shanachie*, for example, may in mentioning the "bell-branch" or the *Sidhe*, hope to evoke a knowing response from an audience steeped in Celtic culture. Further, the act of adopting a "pose" is a way of evoking symbols, of calling them forth from what Yeats calls

the *anima mundi*. In the role of visionary, for example, the poet is assuming a particular perceptual framework and opening his mind to visionary symbols.

Story-teller, magus and old man illustrate the development of the artist in Yeats's lyrics. These roles are interwoven and overlapping, and as the poet incorporates all three, his work becomes a composite of the symbols they offer him. The lyrics included in the discussion represent Yeats's poetry from his first published volume to the posthumous *Last Poems*.

The study of Yeats's poetic "poses" serves as an entrance into the world of archetypal symbols which Yeats uses. The thesis claims that the poet's participation in the timeless realm of symbols transforms the figuration of the artist into a symbol which bridges the gap between temporal limitations and the "artifice of eternity."

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INTRODUCTION

(I)

Students of William Butler Yeats are seldom forced to surmise what the poet might have felt about his own work, for Yeats has provided more than ample commentary about his own art as well as that of others. His *Autobiography*, though filled with recountings of personal experiences, is also a statement of poetic theory and an account of his growth as an artist. His collections of essays largely concern his experiences writing and the artistic conclusions to which they have led him. Yeats's personal letters, many of which he intended for publication,¹ and his diaries consist almost entirely of discussions of his own and others' writing. Yet some of the most intriguing and important ideas Yeats articulated about art occur in the poems themselves. A

¹In a letter to Katherine Tynan dated December 12, 1913, Yeats expresses slight annoyance that she published parts of his letters in her book Twenty-Five Years without consulting him. He cautions her: ". . . if you are going to publish any more letters of mine, please let me see them first. I may even, in defiance of all right conduct, improve them" (The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade, p. 586). We also learn from two 1914 letters that Yeats was engaged in preparing his father's letters for publication, so the idea is certainly not alien to him.

great number of the poems during every period of his writing life employ the voice or persona of the artist consciously and directly discussing the nature of art.

One can argue that every poem is, in a sense, about art, since each creative work affirms the value of art and affirms for the reader the value of participating in the experience of the poem. George T. Wright, in an extremely perceptive book called *The Poet in the Poem*, suggests that the poet's aim in writing verse is: ". . . not to have the reader undergo a direct apprehension of human experience, but to have him undergo an apprehension of sung human experience. Attention is not drawn away from the experience presented, but toward the fact of its being sung. The poet tells of the importance of poetry. The craft itself has meaning for people . . . Every poem is an assertion of the value of singing, at the same time that it is a realization of that value."² Yeats, while he was undoubtedly aware of this implicit affirmation of the value of art in everything he wrote, also chose to affirm that value explicitly. What is so fascinating about the poems in which the artist discusses the difficulties involved in transforming his experience into "sung" experience is the inextricability of process and

²George T. Wright, The Poet in The Poem: The Personae of Eliot, Yeats and Pound (Berkeley, California, 1962), p. 41.

product. Thus, while Yeats writes about his discouragement as an artist ("All Things can Tempt Me" and "The Fascination of What's Difficult"), about the audience and their reaction to his poetry ("The Fisherman" and "The People"), about his own internal struggles ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation"), and about the visions from which his art emanates ("The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" and "Byzantium"), we have before us the finished product of the process of creation which is the subject of the poem. We can see the poem rather like a series of boxes within boxes: the poet writing about a poet talking about writing. In exploring the levels of meaning in such poems, we find that Yeats tells a great deal not only about the artist, but about the whole world of the imagination in which the artist is participant.

A study of the voice of the artist as projected in Yeats's lyric poetry reveals through the poetry itself an organized, growing figuration of "The Poet" in Yeats's work. A. Norman Jeffares, Joseph Hone, Richard Ellmann, Virginia Moore, and other of the best Yeats critics have developed a "portrait of the artist" from Yeats's biography and letters, and have provided a comprehensive background against which we can view the poetry. Until recently, however, no one has concentrated primarily upon the developing artist presented within the poetry itself. Wright forms some general con-

clusions about personae, with particular attention afforded to Yeats, Pound and Eliot. While he offers some extraordinary insights into the poetic voice, his study is both broadly aimed and brief; consequently, he does not deal with Yeats's personae in much detail. Both Thomas Parkinson (*W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry*) and C. K. Stead (*The New Poetic*) attack the tricky problem of the artist's relationship to the work of art and the audience, a kind of eternal triangle. Stead works all too briefly with a large body of poetry from the early twentieth century and devotes little detail to Yeats.

Thomas Parkinson, however, has gone a long way in defining specifically for Yeats the relationship between artist and artifact. As in his earlier critical work, *W. B. Yeats: Self Critic*, Parkinson sees drama as the key to the structure of all the poet's work:

Two main ideas . . . underlie the ruminations that Yeats made on the puzzling problem of the relation between maker and artifact. The first idea is that the poet established his personality by actions that were in the most profound sense artificial: hence the recurrence of such terms as "pose" or "role" or "artifice" . . . The second idea is that lyric poetry--and life itself--were understood as a dramatic process. ³

Parkinson goes further in suggesting that the "dramatic" poet may speak in five different modes: as "individuated being

³Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry* (Berkeley, California, 1964) p. 36.

whose life gives weight to his work;"⁴ as a more social character representative of class or culture;⁵ as a "prophet and pure agent of the community of spirit;"⁶ as dramatist, "the shaper of personifications of passions;"⁷ or as "editor of books."⁸ The suggestion that these facets of the speaker exist, is important but Parkinson does not continue in his book to develop any of these "modes," nor even to clarify his reasons for choosing these five. Actually, Yeats is explicit as to why particular "modes" or poses are necessary for him as a lyric poet, and his reasons warrant extended discussion further on in this introduction.

Sister M. St. Augustine Lemieux in a 1966 study⁹ also directly considers the problem of the "I" in Yeats's poetry outside primarily biographical discussions. She deals only with the poems in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*; as a result, her presentation does not trace any development in the modes of the "I," but concerns a more static manifestation of the artist. Basically, Sister Lemieux, perhaps taking her cue from Parkinson, divides the "I" into several different "modes": the concealed "I," the meditative "I," the mythical "I," and others. According to her conclusion, the self

⁴Ibid., p. 42.

⁵Ibid., p. 47.

⁶Ibid., p. 52.

⁷Ibid., p. 54.

⁸Ibid., p. 55.

⁹Sister M. St. Augustine Lemieux, p.m., Modes of the I: Yeats's Selves in 'The Winding Stair and Other Poems,' Unpublished dissertation (University of Notre Dame, 1966).

which emerges from Yeats's poetry is the public image of the artist's private ideal self and not to be equated with the biographical figure.¹⁰ She also proposes that Yeats's poetry in *The Winding Stair* reflects a search through artistic style for the self behind all the selves, a kind of "transcendental Yeats." Despite some occasional semantic puzzles, it seems to me that Sister Lemieux's study places some valuable new focuses on Yeats's poetry, particularly her analysis of how Yeats creates from his life and his friends a whole mythic structure. I question her category of the "concealed I," one in which the "I" is not directly expressed. We must, after all, assume a speaking voice for any poem. Sister Lemieux seems to believe that when the speaker does not announce himself directly as "I" that Yeats is concealing something.

In the "Reveries" section of his *Autobiography*, Yeats speaks explicitly about his use of what Parkinson and Lemieux may well mean by "modes":

I was about to learn that if a man is to write lyric poetry he must be shaped by nature and art to some one out of half a dozen traditional poses, and be lover or saint, sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life; and that none but that stroke of luckless luck can open before him the accumulated expression of the world. 11

¹⁰Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹W.B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (New York, MacMillan [1916], 1965), p. 57. All future references to this work will be to this edition and will be designated simply Autobiography.

One vital consideration critics fail to emphasize is that these poses are not accidental; neither are they Yeats's innovations for the sake of explaining his particular method. They are "shaped by nature and art," they are traditional, and because their roots go much further back in time than the poet's, they offer him access to "the accumulated expression of the world."

The present study proposes to examine certain poses of the speaker in Yeats's lyrics for an understanding of the concept of the poet presented through them. The speaking poet, though we never forget that he is Yeats, is, as Parkinson suggests, *artifice* in the most profound sense; he is Yeats fashioned as "The Poet," the carefully shaped figuration of the artist who can conduct his reader into the imaginative realm of art. It is partly the use of voices bearing a proud tradition which lends the figuration of the speaker his authority.

Because of the necessity of limiting the discussion, I have selected poems in which the speaker clearly discourses on the subject of poetry. I have, however, made no attempt to consider all poems of this description, since the subject of a poem is, of course, largely a matter of interpretation. It becomes evident that the pose Yeats assumes in a particular poem determines to a great extent not only what he says about art, but the symbols he employs and his style of writing as well; for the pose becomes a way of seeing.

Three of the traditional voices which Yeats projects represent a chronological development of the figuration of the artist: the Irish storyteller or *shanachie*, the visionary poet or magus, and the old man. These figures are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they overlap, and sometimes all three are combined in a single poet figure. They cannot be seen as strictly chronological, for an old man appears in some of Yeats's earliest works and the ballad-singer, closely related to the story-teller, figures prominently in the *Last Poems*. However, each of these figures is clearly a vital part of the total concept of the artist as Yeats conveys this concept.

In the discussion which follows, a chapter is devoted to each of these three of the poet's poses. The method I have employed is a detailed consideration of a few select poems in which these figures discourse about art. The poems selected are, I think, representative in each of the three cases. I have also attempted to concentrate on poems about which there are not already vast quantities of critical commentary; thus, the omission of "Among School Children," even though the poet's voice in that poem echoes qualities of both visionary and aged poet. The notable exceptions to this guideline are the Byzantium poems and "Lapis Lazuli," which I found too crucial both to Yeats and my argument to omit.

The attitudes or poses, as Yeats terms them, bear a close relationship to the "mask," a word one automatically associates with Yeats. In the sense of the mask used in drama--particularly the Japanese Noh Theatre--the meanings are closely aligned. The word *persona* is the Latin equivalent for the Greek *Prosopón*, or dramatic mask, derived from the name for the mouthpiece inside the mask which amplified and altered the voice of the speaker; then it came to signify the mask of the actor, and finally the actor's role.¹² The distinction between the mask with this etymological heritage and the word as we generally use it is an important one which both G. T. Wright and John Jones attempt to clarify:

The mask of the drama is not what it is in our ordinary usage, a device for hiding the face. On the contrary, the mask of drama, or of primitive dance, is clearly intended to reveal more than it hides, to affirm more than it obscures . . . the stylized mask symbolizes, stands for something--an attitude, a view of life, one aspect of the universe --which is of too great significance for the expressiveness of any human fact to be able to convey. ¹³

Jones further emphasizes the revealing qualities of the original "mask:" "We should allow mask and face to draw semantically close together, and then we should enrich the

¹²John Jones, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (London, 1968), p. 44.

¹³Wright, p. 9.

face far beyond our own conception, until it is able to embrace . . . the look of the man together with the truth about him They stated; they did not hint or hide."¹⁴

While Yeats's stylized expression through his dramatic poet speakers is interrelated with the use of dramatic mask, I have purposely avoided using the word to refer to the figuration of the poet because it inevitably causes confusion. Yeats employed the term "mask" in very particular ways, first articulated in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* in 1917:

'I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on the re-birth as something not one's self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed . . . If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask' 15

In Yeats's mythology as expressed in *A Vision*, an individual's mask is always opposite his personality or "Will." We find the most dramatic working out of the theory in *The Player Queen*, where the actress who wears the queen's mask literally

¹⁴Jones, p. 45.

¹⁵W. B. Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, Printed in *Essays* (London, 1924), pp. 496-497. All further references to Per Amica Silentia Lunae will be to this edition.

becomes the queen.¹⁶ Richard Ellmann offers a concise summary of some of the possible meanings of the word:

To start with its simplest meaning, the mask is the social self. Browning had spoken of two 'soul-sides, one to face the world with,' and one to show the beloved. But Yeats's doctrine assumes that we face with a mask both the world and the beloved. A closely related meaning is that the mask includes all the differences between one's own and other people's conception of one's personality In addition, the mask is definsive armor: we wear it, like the light lover, to deep from being hurt Finally, the mask is a weapon of attack; we put it on to keep up a noble conception of ourselves; it is a heroic ideal which we try to live up to. 17

If Yeats uses mask to mean all of these things along with its implications when part of the Great Wheel in *A Vision*, then the word cannot be limited to the figuration of the poet, even though the poet above all others must find his mask, for, "We make . . . of the quarrel with ourselves poetry."¹⁸ Yeats asserts that the Renaissance poets became creative persons by" . . . turning from the mirror to mediation upon the mask."¹⁹ A "Daimonic man" of Phase 17, Yeats found his

¹⁶For an extended discussion of the masks in this play, see William Becker, "The Mask Mocked: Or Farce and the Dialectic of Self," Sewanee Review, LXI, i (Winter, 1953), pp. 82-108.

¹⁷Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948), pp. 172-173.

¹⁸Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, p. 492.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 496.

mask in the opposite Phase 3, "Simplification through intensity." Surely his lifelong attempt for "Unity of Being" can be seen as the struggle to realize that mask. The figuration of the poet Yeats projects in his lyrics may tell us much about the mask; indeed, we may observe his relationship with his opposite, as in "Vacillation" or "Daemon and Beast," but this figure, even when we may identify him with Yeats's opposite, cannot with accuracy be called his "mask."

Most important, the poses which Yeats assumes in his poetry must be understood in their capacity to reveal, not to conceal; through them the poet tries to attain ". . . that point of artifice where the true self could find its tongue."²⁰ Perhaps Parkinson's analysis of Yeats's comments on the poet Henley indicate why a biographical study of a poet does not completely reveal this "true self:"

Henley thus became an emblem of the artist, a being whose life projected a persona that embodied a complex of aesthetic forms that were frequently the opposite of his public character or private self. He was the center of a personifying passion that allowed him to adopt a role and thus unlock a range of expression quite separated from his biological or social condition. ²¹

C.K. Stead reminds us that while "self-portraiture" suggests "self-expression," it must be remembered that this act is

²⁰Yeats, Autobiography, p. 84.

²¹Parkinson, p. 28. Yeats's recollections of Henley on which Parkinson founds his statements can be found in the Autobiography, pp. 82-88.

non-realistic for Yeats: ". . . to dramatize himself was not to express his own personality; it was to adopt a persona."²²

This idea of role-playing for the poet should perhaps be put in a context larger than that of Yeats and his contemporaries. In *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum states that for the romantic poet²³ there remains " . . .

²²C. K. Stead, The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot (Middlesex, England, 1964), p. 35.

²³Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York, 1957). Although Langbaum addresses himself to a specifically romantic problem, his analysis is apt for Yeats even though Yeats may not be considered specifically "Romantic." To argue in what ways Yeats is Romantic would only serve to confirm the baffling difficulties in finding an adequate definition for Romanticism. Certainly he was greatly influenced by his reading of the Romantic poets, especially Shelly, as comments in both his essays and Autobiography make clear. George Bornstein (Yeats and Shelley, 1970) and Harold Bloom (Yeats, 1970) insist that the influence is crucial to every part of Yeats's writing. Graham Hough (The Last Romantics, 1947) and Frank Kermode (The Romantic Image, 1957) count Yeats among the Romantic fold according to their definitions. Allen Tate remarks in "Yeats's Romanticism" (reprinted in John Unterecker, ed., Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 155-162) that "Yeats's romanticism will be created by his critics." Bloom, however, contests this remark and devotes much of his recent book to establishing Yeats as an unmistakably Romantic poet because he internalizes what Bloom considers a Romantic quest. Langbaum, in the work quoted, has defined what constitutes Romanticism broadly, and insofar as he includes Robert Browning within this sphere, it is safe, I think, to include Yeats as well.

the critical awareness that the self is something other than the object, that the identification has been deliberately undertaken and is only temporary . . . For whether the romanticist projects himself into the past, nature, or another person, he never forgets that he is playing a role."²⁴ The "role" achieves the subjective-objective marriage in a dynamic and dramatic relationship between poet and the object of his poem. The speaker in Yeats's "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," for example, shifts the focus continually from the "object," his vision, to the "subject," himself, and back again. As a result, subject and object are defined in terms of each other: we see the vision through Robartes's perception, but his perception changes through the poem, and he is changed as a result of the experience. "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," along with much of Yeats's other work, seems to fit what Langbaum calls "poetry of experience," a poem about the structure of experience itself. The communication of this artistic experience requires a certain kind of central character, and Langbaum's identification of him is significant:

²⁴Langbaum, p. 25.

Because the observer has the same function whether or not he bears the poet's name, we should not--in these poems where he is Wordsworth or Keats or Shelley--think of him as the man his friends knew and his biographers write about; we should rather think of him as a character in a dramatic action, *a character who has been endowed by the poet with the qualities necessary to make the poem happen to him.* 25

Langbaum's distinction between biographical poet and speaker is, I think, too sharp; but while I see no danger in approaching that speaker as Wordsworth or Shelley or Yeats, our view of the biographical poet should not be an obstacle to our seeing him as qualified to experience the events of the poem. In the case of "The Double Vision," the poet must be endowed with the capability of receiving supernatural vision regardless of the individual reader's assessment of Yeats's ability as a seer. To understand the qualities which Yeats projects through this poet figure requires some knowledge of the tradition of the visionary poet as much as it requires background on Yeats's life and circumstances at the time of the writing of the poem.

The second section of this introduction will concern itself with the nature of the artist's relationship with the symbol in Yeats's work. In any discussion of Yeats's artist, the symbol is of primary importance, for without

²⁵Ibid., p. 52, emphasis mine.

the symbol there is no art for Yeats. Consequently, I found a preliminary consideration of the symbol essential in developing any further points. As I have already suggested, the pose the artist chooses to adopt determines to some extent the symbols which become available to him. Then symbols, like the pose itself, become part of what Yeats calls the artist's phantasmagoria:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy . . . he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. Dante and Milton had mythologies, Shakespeare the characters of English history or of traditional romance; even when the poet seems most himself . . . he is never a bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. A novelist might describe his accident, his incoherence, he must not; he is more type than man, more passion than type. He is Lear, Romeo, Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play, and even the woman he loves is Rosalind, Cleopatra . . . He is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power. 26

²⁶W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 509.

(II)

Yeats's first published volume of poetry, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), contains almost no poems on the subject of poetry, and the speakers are for the most part characters other than the poet. The dramatic speaking voice was already very much a part of Yeats's style; "Anashuya and Vijaya" (originally entitled "Jealousy"), "Ephemera," and "The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes" originated as part of the dialogue within his early plays.

Even though we must look to the poems in *The Rose* for the emergence of the figuration of the poet, two poems in the section "Crossways," "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" and "The Sad Shepherd," introduce the figure of a singer.²⁷ The association of the shepherd-singer and the poet is as old as the pastoral tradition from which Yeats is working.²⁸ The

²⁷"The Song of the Happy Shepherd," The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russel Alspach (New York [1940] 1968), p. 64. All future quotations from Yeats's poems, unless otherwise designated, will be from this edition, with page and line numbers cited in the text. "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" was originally an epilogue to Yeats's first printed play, The Island of Statues, subtitled "An Arcadian Faery Tale." Oddly enough, the speaker is not the shepherd, but a satyr carrying a sea-shell. I assume that the satyr sings the shepherd's song, unless his figure is somehow meant to merge with that of the shepherd.

²⁸In the Autobiography (p. 61), Yeats calls The Island of the Statues an arcadian play in imitation of Edmund Spenser.

speaker of "The Happy Shepherd" laments the loss of the woods of Arcady and their replacement by the "Grey Truth" of materialism and science. He offers in its stead the value of poetry: "Words alone are certain good." Changing things such as warring kings and even "the wandering earth herself" offer no permanent value; they are preserved only in "reading some entangled story:"

Go gather by the humming sea
 Some twisted, echo-harboured shell,
 And to its lips thy story tell,
 And they thy comforters will be,
 Rewording in melodious guile
 Thy fretful words a little while,
 Till they shall singing fade in ruth
 And die a pearly brotherhood;
 For words alone are certain good:
 Sing, then, for this is also sooth.
 (p. 66, 35-44)

The shepherd's story re-told through the medium of art seems to be transformed into "certain good." The final line in the poem, "Dream, dream, for this is also sooth," connects dreams with the song of poetry, and the poet's "songs of old earth's dreamy youth" (line 54) bring joy to sick children of the world.

"The Sad Shepherd," however, dreams of sorrow, and his poetic attempt to transform his melancholy by singing into the seashell results only in failure: "But the sad dweller by the sea-ways lone/ Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan/ Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him" (p. 69, 26-28). The difference in outcome of the two songs

may be a warning to the artist against self-indulgence; but certainly the happy shepherd emerges as a figure whose values are firmly placed not only in the medium of song, but in the tradition of Arcady and a former world "on dreaming fed." Arra Garab sees the poet presented here as steeped in subjectivity:

The speaker . . . vows to attune himself to verities accessible to the still faithful heart of those who deep the trust of happier generations and their satisfying scheme of order . . . Because all else proves weak or untrue, he preaches solipsistic introspection and commends to the "sick children of the world" a womb-like . . . seashell--truly a classic image of subjective withdrawal, and of the work of art into which the unreconstructed artist withdraws as he prosecutes his underground mission. 29

His "underground mission" becomes literal as the poet retires to the grave of a hapless faun to sing his mirthful songs.

The pastoral literary conventions Yeats utilizes in these shepherd poems do not allow the emergence of the poet as Yeats later presents him, perhaps as much due to Yeats's discomfort with the conventions as any propensity for them to be too binding. The first poem in which we find a more deliberate figuration of the poet is the opening lyric of *The Rose*, a group of shorter poems contained in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, published in 1892.

²⁹Arra Garab, Beyond Byzantium: The Last Phase of Yeats's Career (De Kalb, Illinois, 1969), p. 13.

"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" prefaces not only the poems in *The Rose*, but also, I would suggest that it thematically prefaces Yeats's entire body of work after the first volume. A close examination of the poem reveals a great deal about the figuration of the poet who acts as speaker. It shows clearly that the poet's role is inextricably interwoven with the symbol, and although both are complex, both poet and symbol are identified and discussed in the lyric. The value of art, vaguely implied by seashell and song in the shepherd poems, is here made explicit and convincing. Not often considered a major work of Yeats's, the poem bears quotation in full:

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
 Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:
 Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;
 The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,
 Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;
 And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old
 In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,
 Sing in their high and lonely melody.
 Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
 I find under the boughs of love and hate,
 In all poor foolish things that live a day,
 Eternal beauty wandering on her way.

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 that crave;
 The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,
 The field-mouse running by me in the grass,
 And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;
 But seek alone to hear the strange things said
 By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,
 And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.
 Come near; I would, before my time to go,
 Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:
 Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.

(pp. 100-101)

In the form of an invocation, albeit to an unconventional muse, the poem is unquestionably about poetry and the poet's desires for his art. The speaker of the poem resembles the happy shepherd only insofar as he seems to be a singer: "Come near me, while I sing of ancient ways." The word "chaunt" in line 22 also reinforces this pose. G.T. Wright makes some pertinent remarks about the voice of the singer, which he considers the most traditional for the English lyric:

When the troubadours of Provence sent jongleurs to sing songs for them, they established a tradition that the lyric followed for many centuries . . . The jongleur is the lyric persona, and he sings through masks of his own, the different roles--lover, mourner, panegyrist--which compound his role as singer. As the origins of the tradition become obscured, the disparity between singer and poet decreases, and the lyric persona comes to be identified as singer or poet, or poet as singer. 30

The speaker in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," while he fits into the larger context of the singer in English lyrics, aligns himself much more specifically with the Irish singer. The songs he offers are not of his own making, but Irish legends: "Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;/ The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,/ Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold." The first chapter below will deal at length with the tradition of the Irish bard who re-tells

³⁰Wright, p. 30.

ancient legends in his song. Within "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," however, the poet's identification of himself proves slightly misleading, for he does not recount a legend in the lyric, but speaks instead about himself as the singer he would like to be. He also introduces other poems in *The Rose*, such as "Fergus and the Druid," "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," and "A Faery Song," poems which are legends re-sung. But the singer is only one pose of the poet in this introductory poem, and does not encompass the entire figuration.

To understand some of the other poses of the speaker, we must first be aware of some of the symbolic qualities of the muse whom he addresses, the Rose. In *The Symbolic Rose*, Barbara Seward follows the image of the rose and its gathering associations from medieval through contemporary literature. She claims that Yeats's rose embodies ". . . the first successful attempt since Blake to create in British literature a full-scale symbolic method . . ." and ". . . the first successful attempt since Dante to express traditional as well as personal meanings in this single symbol."³¹ She asserts that a history of the rose is automatically a history of symbolism, since it has flourished with symbolic writing: "Because of its ability to imply

³¹Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose* (New York, 1960), p. 89. The chapter called "Yeats and Transition" comprises pages 88-117.

indefinite levels of significance, the symbol has always held special appeal for religious or romantic writers seeking to express the inexpressible."³² Traditionally, the rose represents ideal beauty, both spiritual and physical. In Dante's *Paradiso* (Cantos XXX and XXXI), Heaven and all its glory are revealed to Dante in the form of a white rose.³³ Feminine physical beauty finds continual expression in the

³²Ibid., p. 4.

³³This vision of the rose comes to Dante after he says he ". . . perceived that I was raised above/ The limits of my own intelligence." Because Yeats knew Dante well, this beautiful passage from the *Paradiso* will help establish the power of the symbol Yeats is working with:

On high there shines a brilliance that displays
The sight of God to whatsoever creature
Finds its peace in sight of him alone.
It spreads into a circle of such width,
That its circumference would be too large
To form a girdle round the sun itself

. . .

And if the lowest grade reflects such light,
How vast indeed must be the amplitude
Of this great rose, in its remotest petals.

. . .

Into the yellow of th'eternal rose--
Which opens outward, rising tier on tier,
And breathes a breath of everlasting spring--
Did Beatrice--like one who holds his peace
And yet would speak--conduct me, . . .

. . .

Thus, in the semblance of a snow-white rose,
There was displayed to me the saintly throng
That Christ, with His own blood, had made his bride.

Dante, Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Lawrence Grant White (New York, 1948), p. 183.

rose, and Miss Seward's chapter on its use in French symbolist poetry may help to account for the frequent appearance of the rose in Yeats. For him, the image reflects personal, national, and occult meanings. As a personal symbol of beauty, the rose is undoubtedly identified with Maud Gonne, to whom many of the poems in *The Rose* are dedicated.³⁴ Her feminine counterparts of ideal beauty, Helen of Troy, Deidre, the Helen of Irish legend, and Mary Hines, subject of the blind Irish poet Raftery, call up a tradition of beauty at once both inspiring and destructive.³⁵ As a national emblem, the rose had long served as an embodiment of Ireland, as Yeats confirms in his note to the poem: "The Rose is a favourite symbol with the Irish poets . . . and is used, not merely in love poems, but in addresses to Ireland . . ."³⁶ Jeffares adds the information that, "Rose was the name of a girl with black hair in Irish patriotic poetry; she was Roisin Dubh, Dark Rosaleen, and personified Ireland."³⁷ For a poet singing of "old Eire and the ancient ways," this muse could hardly be more

³⁴A. Norman Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London, 1968), pp. 22-47 on The Rose.

³⁵Yeats emphasizes in A Vision (p. 67) that out of the union of Zeus and Leda came both love and war. Deidre's beauty brought on the death of her lover, and legend tells that a young man possessed by the beauty of Mary Hines, drowned while trying to catch better sight of her.

³⁶Yeats, "Notes" to Variorum edition, pp. 798-799.

³⁷Jeffares, Commentary, p. 23.

appropriate. His use of the rose symbol has emphasized in the speaking poet the roles of both patriot and lover.

Yet Ireland and the physical beauty of a woman are not encompassing enough to exhaust the symbol of the rose. The first clue to its occult implications is found in the poem's title. Prior to his composition of *The Rose*, Yeats had joined the "Order of the Golden Dawn," a Rosecrucian sect fathered by MacGregor Mathers, author of *The Kabbalah Unveiled*.³⁸ The order used as its emblem a four-leaved rose in conjunction with a cross,³⁹ a combination which could be termed a mystic marriage. Their intersection implies the meeting of temporal and eternal, a jointure made visually explicit in the short story, "Rosa Alchemica," when the rose petals on the mosaic ceiling of Michael Robartes' temple actually descend in the form of ancient divine beings and fall to the floor on which lies an image of a pale Christ upon a pale cross. There they join the mystic dance of the initiates into Rosicrucian order. The moment of the dance effects a union of divine with mortal and completes the alchemical process of pure distillation of material into spiritual. It is to this mystical, alchemical rose, then,

³⁸ Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 93.

³⁹ A reproduction of the emblem can be seen on the cover of The Secret Rose, a collection of short stories published in 1897.

that the poet forms his invocation.⁴⁰

"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" directs our attention not exclusively to the rose, but also to the figure of the poet and his attempt to bridge the gap between temporal and eternal, to find eternal significance in things that "live but a day." The singer sets the task of the poet apart from that of ordinary men who are "blinded by man's fate," suggesting here what Frank Kermode has seen as the isolation inevitable for the poet. "Love and hate" are but ordinary emotions; the poet's vision must find in them "eternal beauty wandering on her way." The mystical rose is called upon to form the basis of such vision.

In the second stanza, however, the speaker shifts his request: ". . . Ah, leave me still/ A little space for the rose-breath to fill!" Seeing may be sufficient for the mystic, but not for the poet, who must always concern himself with the language. Particularly for Yeats, whose objective was to build the culture of an entire nation, the

⁴⁰ Ellmann points out that Yeats was following the call of Stanislas de Guaita, in whose Rosa Mystica Yeats had read: "The Rose that I invite you to pluck--sympathetic friend who turn these pages--does not flower on the shores of far-away countries . . . Are you susceptible to a deep emotion of the intellect? and do your favorite thoughts so haunt you as to give you at times the illusion of being real? . . . You are then a magician, and the mystic Rose will go of her own accord, however little you desire it, to bloom in your garden" (Man and Masks, p. 94).

poet's vision is not a private one. The problem posed here is that posed by Blake in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" when the speaker asks Ezekiel and Isaiah if, in recording their visions, they will not ". . . be misunderstood and so be the cause of imposition." When Isaiah answers that he ". . . cared not for consequences, but wrote,"⁴¹ he speaks for the prophet (and, perhaps, for Blake), but Yeats's poet invoking the rose fears that he may "chaunt a tongue men do not know." His occult vision must be checked, "Lest I no more hear common things that crave . . . But seek alone to hear the strange things said/ By God to the bright hearts of those long dead." The poem indicates at least two poetic problems which its writer faces: he must sing of ancient ways and still render them meaningful to a contemporary and specifically Irish audience, and he must create his personal, esoteric vision a comprehensible poem. Meanwhile, he is acutely aware of his own limitations, for the "Rood of Time" also means a measure of time, and the poet's task must be accomplished "before my time to go."

With some idea of what the artist desires his art to accomplish, it remains to establish further the relationship between the poet and the rose he addresses. The "Rose upon the Rood of Time" is not only a symbol; in a more

⁴¹William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, printed in Blake: Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966), p. 153.

general sense, it represents the function of all symbols in poetry. In an essay called "The Symbolism of Poetry," published in 1900, Yeats writes:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. 42

Yeats makes apparent in this description that the symbol is no mere literary device, but a powerful force affecting both artist and reader. It is not contained privately within the mind of an individual artist, but rather called mysteriously into his mind. In his essay on magic, Yeats asserts a great mind or great memory (in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* he uses the term *anima mundi*) handed down through generations, and which can be "evoked by symbols."⁴³ In his experiments with various symbols, experiments which seem strikingly "scientific" for one who claimed to eschew science, Yeats had noted remarkable consistency in his subjects' reactions to the same symbols:

⁴²Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 156-157.

⁴³Ibid., p. 28.

I worked with others, sworn to the scheme for the most part, and I made many curious observations. It was the symbol itself, or, at any rate, not my conscious intention that produced the effect, for if I made an error and told some one to gaze at the wrong symbol--they were painted upon cards--the vision would be suggested by the symbol, not by my thought, or two visions would appear side by side, one from the symbol and one from my thought. 44

Even though the symbols in this passage seem disturbingly tangible, Yeats's conclusion, that there is inherent power in symbols, confirms his theory that the symbol is not of the poet's creation or control.

Virginia Moore has in *The Unicorn* followed the poet through several traditions from which his symbols are derived, including Druidism, Rosicrucianism, his Blake studies, and later, philosophy, spiritism, and Eastern religions. In every case, the symbols send roots back to beliefs and cultures centuries old. F. A. C. Wilson rightly concludes: "A traditional symbol, then, retained forever an archetypal validity, and would communicate with mysterious poignancy and power."⁴⁵ Wilson locates one mainstream of Yeats's thought in the Platonic and neo-Platonic symbolic system and traces, primarily from Yeats's plays, images rich with accumulated meaning. Through the symbol the poet enters, in a sense, into another world--a realm of trance, dream, or

⁴⁴Yeats, Autobiography, p. 173.

⁴⁵F. A. C. Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London, 1958), p. 30.

vision which Yeats was to describe as a state between waking and sleeping:

When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because of some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind? . . . our images must be given to us, we cannot choose them deliberately. 46

The necessity for symbolism in poetry was clear to Yeats by 1893, when he and Edwin Ellis collaborated on a two-volume commentary to accompany their edition of Blake's works. A 1924 essay on Blake opens: "William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with the symbol."⁴⁷ In "The Symbolic System" from the Yeats-Ellis commentary, Yeats remarks that Blake is dealing with "discreet degrees (a Swedenborgian term)" of reality, and that they are related to each other by ". . . correspondence; and by that alone, for all other methods imply identity."⁴⁸ He then attempts to provide a "table of correspondences" in Blake's poetry between the Divine Macrocosm and the human microcosm. Because these two levels are not continuous, analogies of one to the other are meaningless; but the symbol connects the two. Although Blake would undoubtedly have frowned at the table, his own

⁴⁶Yeats, Autobiography, p. 182.

⁴⁷Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 116.

⁴⁸The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, ed. Edwin J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, three volumes (London, 1893), p. 237.

statements about the symbol would indicate that Yeats was on the right track; according to Hazard Adams, the "' . . . shaping spirit of the imagination,' the poetic form of experience which opens the windows to a timeless spaceless reality of spirit . . . is expressed in human terms by a symbolical system."⁴⁹ What a poet expresses through the imagination, then, cannot be described or explained; it must be "seen," imaginatively grasped, and the vehicle through which we can comprehend the expression is the symbol.

Just as Yeats's concept of the symbol is interwoven with the doctrine of correspondences, so it cannot be divorced from the occult tradition in literature. Gwendolyn Bays has provided some background for this tradition in *The Orphic Vision*, and both her book and the assumption that the artist is visionary and prophet will come under consideration in the second chapter to follow. Yet if we are to grasp the relationship of poet to symbol in the rose poem at hand, then the meaning of the symbol to a visionary poet should at least be introduced. John Senior in *The Way Down and Out* argues that a satisfactory definition of the symbol may be impossible for us today, since scientific symbols pervade our vocabulary, but that the symbolist and occult poets announced unequivocally what they thought it was:

⁴⁹Hazard Adams, Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision (Ithaca, 1955), pp. 20-21.

A symbol, they say, is what the Hindu would call a yantra--an image which permits the mind to break through its ordinary limits in order to see things not as they seem, but are, and this is to perceive them as infinite. Plato says, in a famous passage in the *Phaedrus*, that the presence of a beautiful object often excites a vague sensation of something forgotten, a memory of some purer life of the spirit that our gross nature cannot quite remember . . . The value of the symbol is that, in evoking the sensation of vagueness, it stretches the limits of consciousness. As we have seen, among occultists the symbol is a means of leading the psyche into enlightenment. 50

If one recalls Yeats's description of the symbol as " . . . evoking indefinable and yet precise emotions," Mr. Senior's definitions seem particularly apt. Further, added to the suggestions of beauty in the symbol is Yeats's passage in "Symbolism in Painting" (1898):

All art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which medieval magicians made with complex colours and forms . . . if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence . . . 51

The emotions which the symbol stirs in us, come from the *anima mundi* and liberated from all bonds, provide the impetus to break through the mind's ordinary limitations and perceive

⁵⁰John Senior, The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature (New York [1958] 1968), p. 104.

⁵¹Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 148-149.

the correspondences. The artist who wields these symbols has no mean responsibility; he is medium of the infinite emotions.

One might conclude from the discussion so far that the role as medium for the symbol to effect its magic is a passive one for the poet. Yeats dispels that notion in another passage from "Symbolism in Poetry:"

Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression . . . poets and painters and musicians . . . are continually making and unmaking mankind. 52

The symbol gains life through the active expression of the artist, and only he can call the symbol from the *anima mundi* to make the emotion live for the reader of his art. Wilson reconciles the passive and active roles of the artist in this way: "An inherited symbolism, for him [Yeats], was always a living and personal thing, because it would have passed through the crucible of the poet's own private faith."⁵³ Donald Stauffer has tried to isolate and list the ten essential characteristics of Yeats's symbol,⁵⁴ but such an attempt contains the same pitfalls as Yeats's own attempt to provide a table of correspondences for Blake. A list

⁵²Ibid., p. 157.

⁵³Wilson, p. 31.

⁵⁴Donald Stauffer, The Golden Nightingale: Essays on Some Principles of Poetry in the Lyrics of William Butler Yeats (New York, 1949).

of categories is meaningless outside the context of individual poems. I have tried here to suggest some qualities of the symbol and to emphasize its crucial position in all Yeats's art.

In "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" the poet invokes the rose to come near because his images must be given him from outside. Because the symbol, as we have seen, is grounded in tradition and the great mind, it is essential to the poet who sings of ancient ways. More important, however, the rose represents all symbols because it is the correspondence providing the possibility of seeing "eternal beauty" in temporal things. The overall problem in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" is the poetical one of the artist's difficulty in entering into the world of the symbol, and only the voice of the artist can truly reveal this theme. The artist in the poem wants, literally, the best of both worlds, the temporal and eternal, "the rose upon the rood of time."

As one studies the emergence of the figuration of the poet in Yeats's lyrics, the relationship of poet and symbol becomes increasingly more intriguing. Further, as the symbol gives the artist new ways of seeing by effecting correspondences, so the artist's pose or role offers a similar advantage by allowing the artist a whole new range of expression. Like the symbol, the pose has its roots in ageless tradition, and so provides Yeats with a way of avoid-

ing what is trivial and passing. I have already hinted that Yeats's adoption of traditional lyric poses is a way of evoking particular symbols. I suggest further that the projected figuration of the artist becomes a symbol, a part of what Yeats calls "a tradition of myself." The extent to which this symbol is magnified as the poet in Yeats's lyrics gains depth and complexity is a major concern of the discussion to follow.

CHAPTER I

THE POET AS *SHANACHIE*

*Know that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song;*

"To Ireland in the Coming Times"

In 1901 Yeats published what could be called a re-assessment of his thinking about poetry in an essay called "What is 'Popular Poetry'?" He first summarized his former opinions: "I wanted to write 'popular poetry' like those Irish poets, for I believed that all good literatures were popular . . . and I hated what I called the coteries."¹ However, he explains that by 1901 his philosophy had altered, and he concluded that popular poetry as we usually understand the term is not "poetry of the people," but that it rather "never came from the people at all."²

Popular poets, whom Yeats epitomizes in Longfellow, are suffering from a shallowness in tradition and, Yeats suggests, try too hard for self-containment in their verse, which is free from all esoteric associations. Consequently, the only tradition they reflect is that of the educated middle class:

¹Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 4.

²Ibid., p. 5.

Longfellow, and Campbell, and Mrs. Hemans, and Macaulay in his *Lays*, and Scott in his longer poems are the poets of a predominant portion of the middle class, of people who have unlearned the unwritten tradition which binds the unlettered . . . to the beginning of time and to the foundation of the world, and who have not learned the written tradition which has been established upon the unwritten. 3

Yeats laments the fact that such poets do not borrow any beauty from writers who went before them:

. . . one can get all that there is in story and idea without seeing them as if moving before a half-faded curtain embroidered with kings and queens, their loves and battles, and their days out hunting, or else with holy letters and images of so great antiquity that nobody can tell the god or goddess they would commend to unfolding memory. 4

Poetry which in Yeats's terms is not "popular," but "of the people," represented in the essay by Shelley, Spenser, Tennyson, Omar Khayyám, and Ben Johnson, finds no audience in modern Ireland, which delights in the obvious. The counting-house has created a new class "without breeding and without ancestry," the Paudeens who jeered at *Playboy of the Western World* and taunted Maud Gonne Macbride after her separation.

In renouncing his former illusions concerning popular poetry, Yeats turns, surprisingly, to poetry of coteries which ". . . presupposes the written tradition [and] does

³Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁴Ibid., p. 6.

not differ in kind from the true poetry of the people, which presupposes the unwritten tradition."⁵ Thus he places his hope in small cliques of poets such as those in the Young Ireland Society, whose express aim was to recapture the unwritten Gaelic tradition and impart it to contemporary poetry. They present the only feasible alternative to an Ireland woefully deficient in the quality of both writer and reader.

Both audience and artist in Ireland had succumbed to the narrow interests of middle-class life. I have already emphasized Yeats's insistence that the symbols used in literature stretch back generations; therefore, it is not surprising that shallow verse concerned with temporary causes reviled him. He accuses even Robert Burns of "triviality of emotions" and "poverty of ideas."⁶ Yeat's conclusions about contemporary popular poetry are not explained by simply calling him a hopelessly idealistic young writer. Even if one consults sources other than Yeats, popular British poetry at the turn of the century left much to be desired.

C. K. Stead in *The New Poetic* analyzes the status of literature in England during the first decade of the twentieth century. To describe the audience he chooses from Arnold Bennett such phrases as "gigantic temperamental dullness," "lack of humour," and "sullen hatred of all ideas whatever:"

⁵Ibid., p. 8.

⁶Ibid., p. 6.

The popular poets, then, were not those who offered the complex qualities usually associated with good poetry, but those whose minds ran at the level of public expectation. Poetry was acceptable when it effectively versified Imperialist sentiments, the public school spirit, or patriotic fervor; otherwise it was unlikely to be read. ⁷

The examples of popularly acclaimed poetry which Mr. Stead provides in his well-documented chapter, "1909-1916: Poets and their Public," afford both extraordinarily humorous reading and a clearer idea of what men like Yeats, Pound, and D. H. Lawrence were battling. Stead concludes that: "No new poetry of substance could be written by men who remained dependent on the approval of popular reviewers and the general public at this time. There were no means by which good new poetry could find a wide audience."⁸ Stead says specifically of Yeats that he refrained for twenty years from allowing his books to be reviewed by the Irish newspapers because the Irish public could not be trusted to judge literary standards.⁹ Stead's analysis makes it clear that poets could not be assured much better judgment in England.

The difficulty with popular audiences is both a particular dilemma of Yeats's and a more universal problem of the triangular relationship between the artist, the audience, and the work of art.¹⁰ Yeats's literary response

⁷ Stead, p. 50.

⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰ Stead's book defines and probes this triangle in a brief but excellent discussion.

to the dilemma is reflected in "The Fisherman," dated June 4, 1914¹¹ and finally reprinted in *The Wild Swans at Coole*.

"The Fisherman" begins with a detailed portrait of the audience for whom the poem's "I" would like to write:

Although I can see him still,
 The freckled man who goes
 To a grey place on a hill
 In grey Connemara clothes
 At dawn to cast his flies,
 It's long since I began
 To call up to the eyes
 This wise and simple man.
 All day I'd looked in the face
 What I had hoped 'twould be
 To write for my own race
 And the reality;

(p. 347, 1-12)

The wise and simple fisherman attired in Connemara cloth represents Ireland's "people" as the poet wants to describe them, men whose uneducated but innate sensibilities would allow them to comprehend immediately lines from Shelley, Khayyám, or Ben Johnson. Such a man would be able not only to appreciate the beauty of a natural setting at dawn, but also concomitantly, the beauty of good art.

With this portrait of the fisherman, however, the poet contrasts a collage bitterly opposing his imagined audience; this other picture is of the audience he continually sees himself facing:

¹¹Jeffares, Commentary, p. 179.

The living man that I hate,
 The dead men that I loved,
 The craven man in his seat,
 The insolent unreprieved,

. . .

The clever man who cries
 The catch-cries of the clown,
 The beating down of the wise
 And great Art beaten down.

(pp. 347-348, 13-24)

This surely describes the "minds educated alone by school-masters and newspapers," which Yeats denounces in "What is Popular Poetry?" And the poem is clear that one danger of writing for this middle-class audience is the destruction of great art.¹² The artist in "The Fisherman" replaces that audience with one of his own creation:

Maybe a twelvemonth since
 Suddenly I began
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man,

. . .

A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream;
 And cried, 'Before I am old
 I shall have written him one
 Poem maybe as cold
 And passionate as the dawn.'

(p. 348, 25-40)

¹²For further literary evidence of Yeats's disgust with the audience modern Ireland offered, one need only turn to the volume Responsibilities, where disillusionment over the Hugh Lane controversy sparked such pieces as "Paudeen," "September 1913," and "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures."

"The Fisherman" is a particularly fascinating experience in the artistic process, for the poet-speaker is seen in the process of creating both poem and audience at the same time--of calling the picture to his mind's eye, giving it form, writing both "to" and "about" the person he imagines. We are given the experience of creation with the artist while we read the result of the creation.

This formation of a reader by the figure of the poet can be seen as an actual process on the part of Yeats. By rejecting the popular audience and writing for the wise and simple fisherman, the poet elects to write a verse "of the people" without popularizing it. At the same time, he hopes that his act of writing for the ideal audience will bring them into existence, the key to such ideas as "Unity of Culture." Whatever powerful force could work to draw Ireland together must, Yeats believed, be more cultural than political in nature. Conversely, culture, including literature, should have behind it strong national consciousness, representing cultural integrity as the national temperament shapes archetypal myths to its own needs.¹³ The plan of Yeats's literary coteries was to make the Irish reading public cognizant of their cultural integrity and literary heritage;

¹³G. M. Harper, "Yeats's Intellectual Nationalism," The Dublin Magazine, IV, ii (Summer, 1965), W. B. Yeats Centenary Edition, pp. 8-26.

ironically, such a plan required him to view his audience as they *would be* when he had shaped them.

In the process of creating an ideal audience in "The Fisherman," Yeats is also showing us an ideal poet, one who can scorn the fluctuations of public taste. That poet is attuned to the fisherman, and thus must be part of the great unwritten tradition in Ireland. In creating such an ideal poet, Yeats looks to Ireland's past for the mainstay of its traditions and finds the key figure of the *shanachie* or Irish story-teller. At ease both with the coteries and the peasants, the *shanachie* reconciles those two segments of society which in "What is Popular Poetry?" are viewed as the only potentially creative reserves.

The *shanachie* was, according to Padraic Colum, a central figure in Irish cultural and social history.¹⁴ Colum tells of fireside gatherings or *seanchas*, particularly in the Gaelic-speaking districts, where a professional *shanachie* narrated both stories and local history. Alwyn and Brinley Rees in *Celtic Heritage*, emphasize the importance of the tradition:

Old people speak of storytellers who could recite a different story every night the whole winter through, but it was unlucky to tell hero tales during the daytime . . . storytelling had a recognized place on certain ceremonial occasions:

¹⁴Padraic Colum, ed., A Treasury of Irish Folklore (New York, 1954), "Introduction," p. xiii.

during night vigils at holy wells, . . . at wakes and christenings . . . But pride of place was given to the hero-tales and wonder-tales, many of which would take an hour to deliver, some of them as long as six hours or more . . . The story tellers do not claim to be the authors of their stories. Most of the longer tales they round off with the traditional tag: 'That is my story! If there be a lie in it, be it so! It is not I who made or invented it.' 15

This was the cultural ancestry which men like Ferguson re-discovered when they translated Gaelic legends. Yeats, too, witnessed what remained of fireside gatherings, first when he collected stories for his 1893 volume, *The Celtic Twilight*, and later in 1897 when he accompanied Lady Gregory from cottage to cottage at Coole, transcribing folk tales. These were not, however, his first introductions to the peasant stories, for he had been brought up hearing his mother's tales of Sligo.¹⁶

The *shanachie* maintained a particular role in his society. He claimed foremost to be one of the people, sharing their emotions and experiences. G. T. Wright uses this figure in a more general discussion about the relationship between folk writer and audience:

¹⁵Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1961), p. 14.

¹⁶Yeats, *Autobiography*, p. 19. "She would spend hours listening to stories or telling stories of the pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point, or of her own Sligo girlhood, and it was always assumed between her and us that Sligo was more beautiful than other places."

They must speak the same language in more senses than one. The "I" of many old ballads, for example, is a folk storyteller who, like his audience, knows of the strangeness abroad in the world, of suddenness in love and death, of shock and grief and lapses in the clarity of causes. He claims no superiority to his audience; and his point of view, his attitude toward life, his view of the pungent realities, all are available to his listeners--are, perhaps, theirs before they are his. 17

His kinship with the peasant audience does not mean, however, that they are his only audience; Yeats claims that in Irish tradition through the seventeenth century, Gaelic legends had the attention and belief of both peasant and noble alike.¹⁸

It is not just ordinary experiences of birth, death, celebration, and grief which the story teller shares with his audience. The peasants, like their ancestors, are closer not only to the natural world than are the educated classes, but to the supernatural as well: "I have noticed that clairvoyance, pre-vision and allied gifts, rare among the educated classes, are common among peasants. Among those peasants there is much more of Asia where Hegel has said every civilization begins."¹⁹ The *shanachie's* stories had great appeal for the listener whose imagination reached beyond the limits of the everyday world:

¹⁷Wright, p. 34.

¹⁸Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 516.

When one inquires what kind of stories are these which have been credited with such extraordinary power, one finds that they tell of the adventures of heroes and heroines; enchantments and disenchantments; kings and queens, ogres and monsters and fairies . . . ghosts and revenants, prophesies and destinies; and quests for magic vessels and weapons, and similar marvels. 20

Alwyn Rees makes it clear that the *shanachie*, like his audience, really believed in all the marvels of the tales he told:

"Hector MacClean, writing in 1860, observed that the adventures of heroes such as Ossian were as true and real to the storytellers of Barra and those who listened to them as were the latest exploits of the British Army to the readers of newspapers."²¹

The title of *shanachie* carries with it throughout Irish history an honoured position in society which goes beyond that of spokesman for common human experience and social fulcrum at the winter fireside. The storyteller is a vital member of the ruling class:

In medieval Ireland and Wales, poets were . . . members of a privileged order within the learned class. Though, in Ireland, their profession was largely hereditary, their apprenticeship was both long and arduous, and an essential part of it consisted in learning hundred tales, 'to narrate them to kings and lords and gentlemen.' The learned class, comprising druids and poets, was comparable in many ways with the Brahmin caste in India . . . 22

²⁰Rees, p. 19.

²¹Popular Tales of the West Highlands, ed. and trans. J. F. Campbell, I, xiii, as quoted in Rees, p. 20.

²²Rees, p. 16.

The *shanachie* often served as historian and royal geneologist as well as story-teller. Rather like the court fool in Shakespeare's plays, he also exerted a strong influence on kings and was expert on the prerogatives and duties of the royalty. Perhaps the most striking piece of information Rees offers about the poet's position is that the master poet or *ollam* was *equal to the king himself before the law*.²³ Thus, in the play *On the King's Threshold*, Yeats draws from a strong tradition when his character of master poet demands the right to sit at the king's table with the other nobles of the kingdom. To relinquish his position to mere lawmakers and princes would be to allow the king to degrade his kingdom by denying Ireland her heritage. The land deprived of special powers which only the poet possesses would be a weaker kingdom, for ". . . such priestly functions as divination and prophecy also came within the province of these early Irish poets who . . . through ritual and trance . . . conduct their audience on journeys to another world."²⁴

In "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (April, 1916), Yeats comments that:

²³Ibid., p. 17.

²⁴Idem.

Realism is created for the common people and was always their peculiar delight, and it is the delight today of all those whose minds, educated alone by schoolmasters and newspapers, are without memory of beauty and emotional subtlety . . . A poetical passage cannot be understood without rich memory, and like the older school of painting appeals to a tradition. 25

Yeats found such a rich memory emanating from those in whom vestiges of the Irish storyteller remained. The fireside gatherings in villagers' homes where he listened to tales of magic and strange events were more akin to the *seanchas* of old than anything else modern Ireland had retained. In his essay on magic, Yeats once again emphasizes the difference between the perceptions of the peasant and those of the middle-class:

. . . our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our souls less sensitive. Our souls that were once naked to the winds of heaven are now thickly clad, and have learned to build a house and light a fire upon its hearth, and shut to the doors and windows. 26

In becoming alienated from the natural world and substituting the "grey truth" of materialism, we have lost our imaginative sensitivity to the supernatural--dhouls and fairies, spirits and gods. A poet who can recreate the voice of the peasant

²⁵Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 227.

²⁶Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 41.

can re-awaken that sense of mystery which the world of paudeens has all but destroyed. In his introduction to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, Yeats praises the collectors of Irish folklore, particularly Hyde:

They have made their work literature rather than science, and told us of the Irish peasantry rather than of the primitive religion of mankind, or whatever else the folk-lorists are on the gad after . . . They have caught the very voice of the people, each giving what was most noticed in his day [sic]. 27

To capture the voice of the people whose imaginative sensibilities were not numbed became for Yeats the very essence of poetry.

Richard Ellmann quotes Yeats at a meeting with George Moore as saying that one could learn to write from the peasants, "their speech being living speech, flowing out of the habits of their lives, struck out of life itself."²⁸ He was keenly conscious of the Irish poet's heritage in the story-teller. Even if we did not have his records of the old tales in *The Celtic Twilight* and *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* and a play like *On the King's Threshold*, his close collaboration with Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde would leave no doubt of his interest in the key figures of the oral tradition. In his introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*, he

²⁷Quoted by Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939 (London [1962] 1965), p. 59.

²⁸Ellmann, pp. 147-148..

lingers for a few pages over an old man named Paddy Flynn, a story-teller from whom many of the tales in the volume are derived:

He was a great teller of tales, and unlike our common romancers, knew how to empty heaven, hell, and purgatory, faeryland and earth, to people his stories. He did not live in a shrunken world, but knew of no less ample circumstance than did Homer himself. Perhaps the Gaelic people shall by his like bring back again the ancient simplicity and amplitude of imagination. What is literature but the expression of moods by the vehicle of symbol and incident? And are there not moods which need heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland for their expression, no less than this delapidated earth? . . . Let us go forth, the tellers of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet. 29

"Ancient simplicity and amplitude of imagination" were for Yeats the mark of the oral tradition. A story-teller's perspective was not limited to realism, and thus offered the poet and listener far more beauty than so called "popular" poetry.

This goal was not only aesthetic for Yeats, for "Unity of Culture" depended upon the ballast of a new national literature.³⁰ The Irish Dramatic Movement was initiated to bring "delight in good stories, in man's force and woman's

²⁹W. B. Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, in The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats (Stratford-on-Avon, 1908), Vol. 5, p. 5.

³⁰Cf. Zwerdling's opening chapter (The Heroic Ideal) on Yeats's goals for Ireland. He shows Yeats as truly unique; others in the movement were uninterested in the quality of the literature so long as it reeked of patriotism.

beauty" to the people of Ireland: "It seemed as if . . . all we had to do was make the town think as the country felt . . ." ³¹

Ireland's most famous *shanachie* of a contemporary era was a blind poet named Raftery to whom Yeats refers with allegiance. Like Homer, Raftery elevated archetypal Celtic beauty in the form of Mary Hines, the Irish parallel to Helen. Three stanzas in "The Tower" are devoted to Raftery's power in song:

Some few remembered still when I was young
 A peasant girl commended by a song,
 Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,
 And praised the colour of her face,
 And had the greater joy in praising her,
 Remembering that, if walked she there,
 Farmers jostled at the fair
 So great a glory did the song confer.

And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,
 Or else by toasting her a score of times,
 Rose from the table and declared it right
 To test their fancy by their sight;
 But they mistook the brightness of the moon
 For the prosaic light of day--
 Music had driven their wits astray--
 And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;
 Yet, now I have considered it, I find
 That nothing strange; the tragedy began
 With Homer that was a blind man,
 And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.

(pp. 410-411, 33-53)

The strong identification between the speaker and the old bard to whom he alludes is unmistakable. It is in the oral

³¹Yeats, Autobiography, p. 380.

tradition which includes Homer and Raftery that the poet wishes to be placed. Even late in his life, in a speech to the Royal Swedish Academy, Yeats quotes one of Raftery's poems, remarking on its bond with the "ancient world," and with country imagination.³²

The importance of Irish oral tradition to Yeats's subject matter and language has already proven a popular concern with Yeats critics.³³ Yet the tradition is also a marked influence on the entire concept of the artist as he is presented in Yeats's verse. The artist speaker is clearly Yeats, but Yeats as he wished to project himself in a particular Irish light. When one studies the figure of the artist, the *shanachie* both directly and indirectly becomes a part of that figuration. He is incorporated into the figuration so that the artist's role is given all the symbolic significance surrounding the ancient teller of tales. An analysis of some individual poems will make the use of this pose more clear.

In 1892 Yeats published a poem which adamantly expresses his ties with Gaelic tradition. Entitled "Apologia addressed to Ireland in the coming days," it served as a

³²Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 378-387.

³³See, for example, Bergit Bjersby, The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats (Folcroft, Pa., [1950] 1969) or Dorothy Hoare, The Works of Morris and of Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature (Cambridge, 1937). For the most recent and excellent source study for Yeats's legends, see Phillip Marcus, Yeats and the Beginnings of the Irish Renaissance (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

rebuttal to Maud Gonne and other of Yeats's fellow patriots who had leveled considerable criticism at the young poet, alleging that his poetry was not patriotic enough. Yeats explained that the poem, later revised and included in *The Rose* with the title "To Ireland in the Coming Times," defended "a passion for the symbolism of the mystical rose which has saddened my friends."³⁴ In this poem, as in the volume's opening piece, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," the speaker refers to himself as a "singer."³⁵ The "rose-bordered hem" clearly marks the feminine subject of his address as Ireland, although the rose imagery brings to mind all the associations connected with the symbol of the rose. The poet, who declares his devotion to "her, whose history began/ Before God made the angelic clan" (p. 137, 7-8), is more insistent than ever upon his role: "Nor may I less be counted one/ With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson . . ." (p. 138, 17-18).

Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45), leader of the Young Ireland party, wrote popular patriotic poems; James Clarence Mangan (1803-49) translated and adapted Irish material into

³⁴Quoted by Jeffares, Commentary, p. 46.

³⁵See earlier discussion of the rose above in section II of the Introduction. Here, as in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," we should note that the poet associates himself with singers of "ballad and story," but does not actually perform that role within the poem. Instead, he is a poet writing about poetry and its desired effect upon the reader.

his verse; Sir Samuel Ferguson was the translator of Gaelic legend whom Yeats highly praised for bringing the tradition back to life.³⁶ Each shared Yeats's aspiration for a dedicated Irish coterie which could restore to Ireland some of her literary heritage. A comment in Yeats's 1937 essay, "A General Introduction for my work," helps to elucidate his admiration for their work:

It was through the old Fenian leader John O'Leary I found my theme He gave me the poems of Thomas Davis, said they were not good poetry but had changed his life when a young man, spoke of other poets associated with Davis and *The Nation* . . . they had one quality I admired and admire: they were not separate individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people; behind them stretched the generations. 37

In his pleas to the reader to recognize him as one with Irish patriots, the speaker of "To Ireland in the coming Times" does not claim to be a *shanachie* of days long passed; he is rather an artist at the turn of the century who is keenly aware of his connection with the tradition of "ballad and story, rann and song." He is also quite explicit about the age-old connection of the singer with the other world:

. . . to him who ponders well
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of things discovered in the deep
Where only body's laid asleep.
For the elemental creatures go
About my table to and fro

. . .

Ah, fairies, dancing under the moon,
A Druid land, a Druid tune!

(p. 138-139, 19-32)

This picture of the poet visited by elemental creatures, although it makes a rather unsatisfyingly vague poetic image, leaves little doubt that the Irish singer receives special inspiration from an extraordinary Druid muse. The "deep/ Where only body's laid asleep" may refer to dreams later reflected in poetry,³⁸ but it also undoubtedly means death, and the poet's discoveries in that realm presuppose very special powers for the singer who, like Orpheus, may be allowed to enter the timeless world of death, or to communicate with spirits or ghosts.

In the last section (lines 33-48) of "To Ireland in the Coming Times," the artist offers a more personal elucidation of his function: "While still I may, I write for you/ The love I lived, the dream I knew." We should note that here the poet assimilates two levels of experience in his verse. The ballads and other Irish materials are not incompatible with the writer's personal dream and love. On a more strictly biographical level, one could say that

³⁶ Jeffares, Commentary, pp. 46-47.

³⁷ Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 510.

³⁸ There is little need to develop here the importance of dreams in Yeats's poetry; he stresses it plainly enough in the Autobiography. I would point to two fairly early poems, "A Dream of Death" and "The Cap and the Bells," both of which Yeats claimed to have derived and recorded directly from his dreams. The whole aspect of the dream in Yeats will receive more attention in my chapter on the visionary pose of the artist.

Yeats's fidelity to the "red rose-bordered hem" of Ireland and his devotion to Maud Gonne were not contrary. Thomas Parkinson's observation in *W. B. Yeats Self-Critic* adds still another dimension:

Yeats's argument is circular: one should have a distinctive national style, a way of speaking; but this way of speaking is a way of seeing. By fidelity to national experiences, the matter of folklore and heroic legend, one will attain a national style and--if one is true to his own sense of experience--personal. 39

Parkinson's statement suggests a further reason for basing the poetic voice on a traditional figure such as the *shanachie*, for it provides a way of speaking and a way of seeing with which the poet then attunes his personal manner of seeing. Line 45, "I cast my heart into my rhymes," intensified the personal quality in stressing the emotion the poet "casts" into his work. "Cast" can also read "mould" or "give shape to;" then the emphasis is on the shaping of emotion into verse, on the poet as artificer.

Like the speaker in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," the poet in "To Ireland in the Coming Times" expresses his continual awareness of time, which "made Ireland's heart begin to beat" and which also controls his personal expression:

From our birthday, until we die,
Is but the winking of an eye;
And we, our singing and our love,
What measurer Time has lit above, . . .

(p. 139, 34-38)

Yet set against his temporal limitations are the elemental creatures and the place of "truth's consuming ecstasy," so that through his songs about Ireland the poet is able to tap resources beyond his mortal limitations.

"To Some I have Talked with by the Fire," first printed in 1895 as a "Dedication to a new book of verse,"⁴⁰ bears a more immediately recognizable resemblance to the world of the *shanachie*:

While I wrought out these fitful Dannaan rhymes,
My heart would brim with dreams about the times
When we bent down above the fading coals
And talked of the dark folk who live in souls
Of passionate men, like bats in the dead trees;
And of the wayward twilight companies
Who sigh with mingled sorrow and content,
Because their blossoming dreams have never bent
Under the fruit of evil and of good.

(pp. 136-137, 1-9)

The company seated around the fire smacks unmistakably of the flavour or the *seanchas*, particularly in light of the kinds of stories told in those gatherings of old--stories of adventures, enchantments, and magic. The "wayward twilight companies" probably allude to the Tuatha de Danaan, early immortals who took Ireland from the evil Firbolgs.

³⁹Thomas Parkinson, W. B. Yeats Self-Critic: A Study of His Early Verse (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), p. 4.

⁴⁰Jeffares, Commentary, p. 46.

Niamh, who transports Oisín for three hundred years, is one of these immortal beings, and the mingling of sorrow and content" seems to recall her people in the land of the first hundred years in Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín*. The "embattled flaming multitude" (Line 10), endowed with wings, are perhaps the wagers of "God's wars" mentioned elsewhere in "The Rose of Peace" and "The Rose of Battle." Like Yeats's old friend Paddy Flynn, this story-teller has at his disposal heaven and earth and whatever worlds he needs for expression.

One does not have to argue whether Yeats himself "believed" in Druids, Sidhe, "dark folk" or any of the magical experiences which make up Ireland's folklore (although his beliefs are partly set out in the essay on magic). Virginia Moore's important study, *The Unicorn*, devotes itself to this sticky problem of the poet's personal belief,⁴¹ but for the purposes of the figuration of the artist examined here, we must assume that the poet in the poem believes in the wonders he recounts--like the traditional *shanachie* in whom he finds his heritage.

Considering Yeats's ideals for his country and his dream of bringing back to art the imagination and beauty

⁴¹In her chapter on "Irish Lore and Druidism as Major Doctrinal Influences," Miss Moore summarizes druidic doctrine and Yeats's involvement in it. She concludes that: "No Druidic belief did he reject--neither the supernatural world nor cyclic time, nor the soul as light, nor reincarnation for a purpose" (p. 58). In the "General Introduction" Yeats says of Druidism: "I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it." (Essays and Introductions, p. 518).

which it seemed to have lost, it is inevitable that Yeats's work shows a longing for the past. The *shanachie* becomes for Yeats a symbol of attitudes and conditions in Ireland's past which were favourable to beautiful art. His three ideal artistic cultures--Ireland before the eighteenth century, Byzantium, and Italy during the Renaissance (particularly the court at Urbino)--all place the artist high within society. In "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures," Yeats bitterly laments contemporary society which, unlike Urbino, relegates art to the control of middle-class opinion which, as we have already seen in some detail, he detested:

What cared Duke Ercole, that bid
 His mummers to the market place,
 What th'onion sellers thought or did
 So that his Plautus set the pace
 For the Italian comedies?
 And Guedobaldo, when he made
 That grammar school of courtesies
 Where wit and beauty learned their trade
 Upon Urbino's windy hill . . .

(p. 288, 9-17)

What may seem a haughty attitude toward the "onion sellers," equivalent to present day Paudeens, becomes more palatable when one realizes that Yeats and his projected artist elevate art above every other force in society. Its control cannot be relegated to the practical minded populace; art and artists must have the protection and understanding of

the elite. Yeats's comment in *A Vision* in a passage perhaps more frequently quoted than any other is that he would choose to spend a month in Byzantium, had he his choice of any city in antiquity: "I think that in early Byzantium . . . religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers . . . spake to the multitude and the few alike." Harold Bloom accurately assesses this passage:

If the entire passage be transposed into a description of an idealized poetry, we can see what Yeats hoped for in his own work. The poet speaks to multitude and esoteric group alike, and with an almost impersonal voice. It is difficult to see this fulfilled in any actual poet . . . but Yeats's dream is a moving one nevertheless. 42

The mild nostalgia which underlines "To Some I have Talked with by the Fire" becomes a clear expression of longing for a former time in "The Dedication to a Book of Stories selected from the Irish Novelists:"

There was a green branch hung with many a bell
 When her own people ruled this tragic Eire;
 And from its murmuring greenness, calm of Faery,
 A Druid kindness, on all hearers fell.
 It charmed away the merchant from his guilt,
 And turned the farmer's memory from his cattle,
 And hushed in sleep the roaring ranks of battle;
 And all grew friendly for a little while.

(p. 129, 1-8)

⁴²Harold Bloom, Yeats (New York, 1970), p. 218.

The powers attributed to poetry in this lyric are considerable; true to their druid magic, poems and stories literally charm the listeners. To one familiar with Celtic lore, the image of the bell-branch is not a new one. In the story of Oisín, the bell-branch lulls him to sleep for the third hundred-year cycle in the land of the immortals. Another Irish tale reinforces the connection between the bell-branch and singing:

One day, as Bran son of Febal walks near his royal house, he hears sweet music behind him. The music lulls him to sleep and when he wakes there is a branch of silver beside him with white blossom on it. Bran takes the branch to the house and when all the hosts are assembled behind closed ramparts they see a woman in strange raiment in the middle of the house. To Bran she sings a long lay which all can hear, describing the splendour and delight of the world beyond the sea, with its thrice fifty islands, each of them larger than Ireland. As she departs, the silver branch--'a branch of the apple tree from Emain Ablach'--springs from Bran's hand to hers. 43

The bell-branch of the singer affords restfulness and magic, and the speaker in "The Dedication" laments the passing of an era when poetry exerted such powers over its audience. However, he counters with: "I also bear a bell-branch full of ease" (line 12). In its original context, of course, the bell-branch refers specifically to the book of Irish stories published in 1890 which the poem prefaces; but

⁴³Rees, p. 314.

reprinted in a collection of verse, the branch seems more generally to represent all the poet's verse.

The third stanza marks an interesting contrast to the Irish legend of Bran and the branch of Emain Ablach:

I tore it from green boughs winds tore and tossed
 Until the sap of summer had grown weary!
 I tore it from the barren boughs of Eire,
 That country where a man can be so crossed;

(p. 130, 13-16)

This unexpected wrenching image of "tearing" a branch of "ease" denotes a great struggle for the modern poet to obtain the branch. At the same time, the tree, if it represents the Irish tradition from which the bell-branch grows, seems much neglected of late and beset by a lack of cultural nourishment in a politically tempestuous land. The branch still retains the power to bring laughter and sadness; yet while the poet asserts his (and Ireland's) literary roots, the potency of the branch which can "bring you memories/ Of half-forgotten, innocent old places" (lines 21-22) pales in comparison to its former prestige described in the first two stanzas of the poem. We are made to feel a deep sense of loss. Yet somehow the figure of the poet contains both the tradition of the bell-branch and the present conditions in Ireland; for past and present are brought together in the poem, and the poet seems to bear the responsibility both of keeping alive the heritage and making its relevance

known to his "battered, badgered and destroyed" people. So while he is not as powerful as the *shanachie*, the modern story-teller can call upon the power of the symbols surrounding the adopted pose of the *shanachie*.

To comprehend how serious is the decline of poetry and the artist since times of old as Yeats envisions them, we must see the problem in even larger perspective than weary Ireland. The figure speaking in "The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers" offers a cosmic viewpoint:

The Powers whose name and shape no living creature knows
 Have pulled the Immortal Rose;
 And though the Seven Lights bowed in their dance and wept,
 The Polar Dragon slept,
 His heavy rings uncoiled from glimmering deep to deep:
 When will he wake from sleep?

(p. 174, 1-6)

While the poet could tear the bell-branch from the withered tree, he seems helpless in the face of these ominous powers. Unable to offer the branch of ease, he can plead with the elemental powers to provide the music: "Encircle her I love and sing her into peace" (line 9). The poem is reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Hesperides," and could be the song of the guardians of the golden apple, had they failed to caution Father Hesper: ". . . twinkle not they steadfast sight . . . Lest the red-combed dragon slumber/ Rolled together in purple folds./ Look to him, father, lest he wink, and the golden

apple be stol'n away."⁴⁴ The immortal rose of eternal beauty, like Tennyson's golden apple, grows on what Yeats designates in his notes as the "Tree of Life."⁴⁵

The responsibility of protecting the Immortal Rose of beauty from dark immortal powers certainly suggests a weighty role for the poet, and this is one example in Yeats's poetry where the speaking artist is surely projected beyond biographical considerations of the poet as Yeats the man. The poem's original title, "A Mystical Prayer to the Masters of the Elements, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael,"⁴⁶ casts the poet not only as spokesman for his people, but also in the tradition of poets who are ancient wise men, men who know the wonders of "Great Powers of falling wave and wind and windy fire" (line 7) --masters of earth, water, air, and fire. This poem recalls more vividly the "elemental creatures" of "To Ireland in the Coming Times."

The significance of the four elements in Yeats's poetry deserves an entire study in itself, and in "The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers," as well as in several other verses in *The Rose*, the elements become a part of the imaginative world of the artist, part of the story-teller's environment, and part of his manner of seeing and organizing

⁴⁴Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Hesperides," Poems of Tennyson, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), pp. 48-49, 45-53.

⁴⁵Yeats, Notes to Variorum edition of poetry, p. 174. Yeats also identifies the "Seven Lights" as the seven stars of the Great Bear and the Dragon as the constellation of the Dragon, "and these, in certain old mythologies, encircle the Tree of Life."

symbols. In a note to his volume of *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*, Yeats includes this information:

Gods of the Earth--occultists, from Paracelsus to Elephas Levi, divide the nature spirits into gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, undines; or earth, air, fire, and water spirits . . . They are invisible--except at rare moments and times; they inhabit the interior elements, while we live upon the outer and the gross . . . a tide of them flowing around the earth arouses there, emotions and changes, according to its nature. 47

This passage may well reveal something of the nature of the elemental powers with which the Irish poet pleads. A bit further on in the same note, Yeats makes it clear why it must be a *poet* who calls on their power:

--'They have,' says Paracelsus, 'an aversion to self-conceited and opinionated persons, such as dogmatists, scientists, . . . and against vulgar and quarrelsome people of all kinds; but they love natural men, who are simple-minded and childlike, innocent and sincere . . . ' 48

A figuration of the poet based on the *shanchie*, and with the aim of restoring the peasants' simplicity and understanding,

⁴⁶ Jeffares in his Commentary lists not only the original title of this poem, but also the information that in the poem as printed in The Second Book of The Rhymers' Club, the angels' names were replaced by three Irish angels, "Finvarra," "Faecra," and "Caolte." The title was then altered to "Aodh pleads . . ." and finally simply altered to "The Poet . . ."

⁴⁷ W. B. Yeats, Irish Fairy and Folk Tales (New York, 1918), p. 343.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 344.

is in league with the elemental powers against materialism and dogmatism of the modern world which is anxious to cast off tradition.

In *The Identity of Yeats*, Ellmann provides numerous examples of Yeats's use of the elements as symbols in his early poetry, and he relates it to Yeats's desire to devise a system of correspondences somewhat like Blake's. Certainly Yeats incorporates the elements into his "system" of the four lunar quarters as outlined in *A Vision*. In a letter of July 24, 1934, Yeats writes to Olivia Shakespeare some explanation of his symbolism:

Water under the earth	=	The bowels, etc.	<u>Instinct</u>
The Earth			
The Water	=	The blood & the sex organs	<u>Passion</u>
The Air	=	The lungs, logical thought	<u>Thought</u>
The Fire	=	<u>Soul</u>	

They are my four quarters: The Earth before [lunar phase] 8, the Water before 15, the Air before 22, the Fire before I. 49

The elements are most closely related to the *shanachie* in the figure of Red Hanrahan, a character in Yeats's prose and spokesman, like Aedh, for several of the early poems.

⁴⁹Yeats, Letter to Olivia Shakespeare, quoted by Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (New York, 1964), p. 36.

In *Stories of Red Hanrahan*, we first see him as a young schoolmaster, "the learned man and great songmaker,"⁵⁰ with his primer and his Virgil always in the skirt of his coat. His appearance is much like the description by Robin Flower:

'In Ireland . . . where the ruin of the seventeenth century scattered the students of the schools among the common folk, the wandering scholar--schoolmaster, poet and musician--was a known figure wherever anything of the old life survived until only the other day.' 51

Only after Hanrahan's initiation into the mysteries of the other world⁵² does he take on the enigmatic qualities of the *shanachie* and become a prophetic as well as learned character. His poetry and stories effect strong influence as we can see in "The Twisting of the Rope," when he literally enchants the daughter of the house--much like the young woman with the bell-branch enchants Bran and his company--with his stories of the other world. In one story, the song he teaches his students carries the power of a curse.⁵³

⁵⁰W. B. Yeats, Stories of Red Hanrahan, in Collected Works (1908), p. 201.

⁵¹Quoted by Padraic Colum, "Introduction," p. 13.

⁵²The initiation is recounted in "Red Hanrahan," the first story in the Hanrahan collection. As Red and the other villagers play cards with a strange old man on Samhain eve, the cards suddenly transform into a hare and a pack of hounds, which Hanrahan follows out into the night. They lead him to an enchanted house, and his adventures continue throughout the cycle of stories.

In several of Yeats's poems first attributed to Red Hanrahan and later simply to "The Poet," it seems evident that the *shanachie* must have originally influenced the figuration of the poet. Yeats's note to the volume *The Wind in the Reeds* not only elucidates the figure, but also ties him closely to the elements:

'Aedh,' 'Hanrahan' and 'Michael Robartes' . . . were personages in 'The Secret Rose' . . . I have used them in this book more as principles of mind than as actual personages. It is probable that only students of the magical tradition will understand me when I say that 'Michael Robartes' is fire reflected in water, and that Hanrahan is fire blown by the wind, and that Aedh, whose name is not merely the Irish form of Hugh, but the Irish for fire, is fire burning by itself. To put it a different way, Hanrahan is the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather permanent possessions . . . 54

By dropping the names of the characters as speakers in several poems and incorporating them into the voice of "The Poet," Yeats is, I suggest, including the qualities represented by each and the nature of the elements themselves into his

⁵³This story, "The Curse," ends in a humourous bit of irony. Hanrahan's curse is directed against old age in order to prevent a January-May marriage in the village; but the curse turns viciously on Hanrahan himself since he, too is old. For further discussion of this particular curse, see below the chapter on the poet as old man.

⁵⁴Yeats, Notes to the Variorum of poetry, p. 803. Aedh [Aodh], who was designated in at least one version as the speaker of "The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers," is, of course, described in terms of fire, the purest element. This would seem to be appropriate to the importance of his function as mystical poet in the poem compared, say, to the simplicity of Hanrahan.

increasingly complex figuration of the artist. His description adds to the importance of personages like Hanrahan, and it seems appropriate that this wandering scholar and story-teller represents, more abstractly, a changeable simplicity of the imagination--the very quality which Yeats stated that he was trying to re-introduce in Ireland through his verse.

Probably the most fascinating of the poems in which the *shanachie* is incorporated into the speaker is "The Grey Rock," included in *Responsibilities* in 1914. Addressing himself to the "Companions of the Cheshire Cheese," or the Rhymers' Club, the poet actualizes his claim to be a story-teller by recounting a legend within the poem: "Here's an old story I've remade,/ Imagining 'twould better please/ Your ears than stories now in fashion, . . ." (lines 3-5). With this introduction, the story-teller proceeds with his tale of the gathering of Celtic gods at Slievenamon. He interrupts his story with passages, varying only slightly in rhyme scheme and not at all in rhythm, from the story itself; these insertion, like the introduction, are addressed to the Rhymers.

In "The Grey Rock" Yeats brings together the seemingly opposing streams of Irish legend and the English Rhymers' aesthetic into a balanced and effective union, contradicting Daniel Hoffman's assertion in *Barbarous Knowledge* that these two facets in Yeats cannot be unified:

[The Irish singer's] themes were loving and fighting, ever the two staves of balladry . . . they synthesized into the same stanza a reckless death and a glimpse of somber, brooding countryside . . . this kind of poetry is a masculine occupation, a skill communally admired, a prowess. This is a conception of the poet's role in his society entirely different from what Yeats found among the Rhymers' Club in London, those elegant and isolated aesthetes dying of drink and drugs. 55

Love and heroic action are two major themes of "The Grey Rock," but we see in the poem two poses of the artist (which Hoffman finds irreconcilable) fused--or at least attuned--in the person of the speaking poet.

The artist Yeats projects in "The Grey Rock" develops partly through his comments about his "Companions of the Cheshire Cheese," partly through associations made with Goban in the story--since Goban was not only a winemaker, but an artificer of the gods as well⁵⁶--partly in the poet's analysis of his own poetry, and finally, indirectly through our associations with the story-teller in Irish tradition.

The gods, gathered at Slievenamon, are drunk with Goban's wine, "that juice which made them wise" (line 26). Jeffares notes that Yeats associated Goban with legendary wisdom (in *Mythologies* he is called the "Aristotle of the

⁵⁵Daniel Hoffman, Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats Graves, and Muir (New York, 1967), p. 34.

⁵⁶"Goibhniu's manufacture carries a guarantee that it will never make an erring cast and that no one whom it wounds will survive" (Proinsias MacCana, Celtic Mythology [Toronto, 1970], p. 36).

books")⁵⁷ but here the picture is primarily that of the artificer hammering wine cups out of silver:

The smoky torches made a glare
 On metal Goban'd hammered at,
 On old deep silver rolling there
 Or on some still unemptied cup
 That he, when frenzy stirred his thews,
 Had hammered out on mountain top
 To hold the sacred stuff he brews
 That only gods may buy of him.

(pp. 271-272, 18-25)

The connection between Goban's wisdom-bringing nectar and the poetry of the Rhymers is established in the first stanza with the words, ". . . at bottling of your wine/ Old wholesome Goban had no say." The artist pictured in the figure of Goban is strong and passionate as he moulds his raw materials into forms for containers of sacred wisdom.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Jeffares, Commentary, p. 101.

⁵⁸There is some problem with Goban's exact identity in Irish lore. Padraic Colum's only Goban in his Treasury of Irish Folklore is a mortal being, but still a metal-worker who can fashion armour better than anyone else in Ireland. Yeats's reference in Mythologies does not recount the story told here in "The Grey Rock," and is unrevealing. Part of the confusion may lie in disagreement over whether or not the Danaan people were mortal or immortal. T. W. Rolleston in Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race (p. 110) identifies Goban as "the Smith, the great armourer and artificer of Irish myth, who corresponds to Wayland Smith in Germanic legend." Proinsias MacCana (Celtic Mythology, p. 36) calls him one of the greater deities (and has convincing archaeological evidence for his claim), and adds that his most important role was providing for the Otherworld Feast known as the Fledh Ghoibhnenn. Whoever partook of the feast was rendered immortal. 'The staple of this feast was an intoxicating drink corresponding to the amrita of Indian tradition and to analogous beverages of the gods.' In "The Grey Rock" Yeats clearly presents Goban as a god, and I find MacCana's information beautifully meshed with events in the poem.

An equally passionate goddess, "rock-nurtured Aoife," appears before the gathering of gods to demand revenge upon her mortal lover who has betrayed her. Yeats's continual shifting from the legendary characters to contemporary figures is masterful. With Aoife's appearance, the speaker brings us sharply to an awareness of our own mortality:

We should be dazed and terror-struck,
If we but saw in dreams that room,
Those wine-drenched eyes, and curse our luck
That emptied all our days to come.

(p. 272, 37-40)

Simply dreaming of beings such as Aoife would make a mortal dissatisfied with pale mortal shadows: "I knew a woman none could please,/ Because she dreamed when but a child/ Of men and women made like these . . ." (lines 41-43).⁵⁹

At line 49 the poet suggests that his tavern comrades may be counted among the immortals:

You kept the Muses' sterner laws,
And unrepenting faced your ends,
And therefore earned the right--and yet
Dowson and Johnson most I praise--
To troop with those the world's forgot,
And copy their proud steady gaze.

(p. 273, 59-64)

⁵⁹John Unterecker identifies the woman as Florence Farr; Jeffares sees a parallel with Maud Gonne and her marriage to Macbride. It seems to me that the poem demands no specific counterpart for the "woman none could please" outside the poem, although both men argue convincingly.

The artists are clearly separated from the woman who dreamed of immortal beings; they have earned the privilege of partaking of the feast of the feast of the gods. The poem's shift is now a subtle one, for the mortals have been elevated to the status of the gods on whom Yeats now focuses attention. Following Aoife's story of the young man who, unlike Oisín, relinquished the two hundred years she offered him in favour of loyalty to the King of Ireland's son, Aoife casts herself before her fellow gods and poses the central question:

'Why are they faithless when their might
Is from the holy shades that rove
The grey rock and the windy light/
Why should the faithfulest heart most love
The bitter sweetness of false faces?
Why must the lasting love what passes,
Why are the gods by men betrayed?'

(p. 275, 109-115)

These questions are the key issues in "The Grey Rock," and while they are an integral part of the story-teller's legend, they are fraught with contemporary relevance--for poets, for Ireland, for modern society as Yeats viewed it. Why have men turned from the lasting traditions which give their society the strength of generations? Why have poets, not faithful to "the sterner Muses" turned to mere pandering of public taste? Why do men not love that which is eternal? Aoife's answer comes in the form of a delightful Bacchic drenching with Goban's wine, and she, "No more remembering what had been,/ Stared at the gods with laughing lip" (lines 122-123).

In the final stanza the poet weaves the strands of his poem together; in fact, the speaking artist himself becomes the fusing agent. Unlike the young warrior who spurned Aoife's favour because of his passion for temporal causes, the poet figured here has "kept my faith, though faith was tried,/ To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot" (lines 124-125). In the context of the legend, the "rock-born foot" is Aoife's; in the context of the contemporary poets, the foot belongs to "the sterner Muse." The projected artist has been true to his course.

"The Grey Rock" concludes with a final message to the dead Rhymers:

And the world's altered since you died,
 And I am in no good repute
 With the loud host before the sea,
 That think sword-strokes were better meant
 Than lover's music--let that be,
 So that the wandering foot's content.

(p. 276, 126-131)

The poem successfully develops a fairly complete picture of the artist through the complex figuration of the story-teller. In re-making the legend of the passion of love and battle, the poet participates in the timeless symbols of legend and keeps the story alive for his people. In addressing the Rhymers, the poet not only makes the story of Aoife and the gods "relevant," but he participates fully in the problems of contemporary poets. Finally, in recounting the story

of the immortals at Slievenamon, he symbolically partakes of the "Feast of Goibhniu" and participates in the world of the gods. All levels of the poem meet in its creator. Like Goban, the poet forges his art; like Goban, he pours out the powerful wine of his poetry to the gods--in this case the Rhymers, who have become identified with the gods. The figuration of the artist becomes a symbol for the meeting of all these worlds, as the "grey rock" itself was a symbol for the meeting-place of gods and men.

Yeats's motivation for looking backward in Irish history and for centering on the Irish oral tradition has by now become clear. If a poet based on the *shanachie* sees his main task as recounting stories handed down through generations, how "creative" is his act? For a partial answer, we can turn to Yeats's introduction to *The Celtic Twilight* and the explanation of his role in collecting the peasants' stories:

I have desired, like every artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy world, and to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who would look where I bid them. I have therefore written down accurately and candidly much that I have heard and seen, and, except by way of commentary, nothing that I have merely imagined. I have, however, been at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries, go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine. 60

⁶⁰Yeats, The Celtic Twilight, Collected Works, p. 1.

In poetry, of course, the story-teller shapes the stories more intricately into verse; but even in prose, the artist is much more than a passive recorder, for he "creates a little world" out of beautiful traditions. That world is limited in the sense that the *shanachie* communicates primarily with his own people, and we must be at some trouble to acquaint ourselves with Gaelic tradition if his world is to include us. Perhaps that limitation partially explains Yeats's decision to branch out into other mythologies as well. Yet the created world is not beset with the same limitations of realistic and mundane concerns as ours, and to enter the world of the story-teller is an expanding experience for the reader.

The value of creating a beautiful world woven of *shanachies'* tales depends largely upon the importance one gives tradition, and as we have already seen, nothing could be more vital to a writer's symbols in Yeats's view than their grounding in tradition.

Like that wrestler Antaeus (who, as son of Terra, remained invincible so long as he touched the earth), poets who would create vital art must draw their sustenance from 'contact with the soil' Poetry is made profound and lovely, invincible and proud, only when its roots grow from the 'deep down' depths of nourishing tradition, 'below all that is . . . modern and restless.' This, Yeats tells us, is the sole test of value. 61

⁶¹Arra Garab, Beyond Byzantium (DeKalb, Illinois, 1969), p. 80.

In "The Celtic Element in Literature," Yeats reiterates that, ". . . literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times . . . and the Celtic, the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river or European literature."⁶² At the conclusion of *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats asserts that only a few people in a society which has cast out imaginative tradition can understand imaginative things; this imagination is the essential feature of the artist Yeats projects through his work.

The *shanachie* is one of the central connections between Yeats and the imaginative tradition. His power as a symbol is immense. To understand something of the response his stories demand from the listener (or reader), it may be helpful to quote at length Yeats's own response to Irish singers and story-tellers he heard on Kilkarten Road as recounted in *The Celtic Twilight*:

I was carried so far that it was as though I came to one of the four rivers, and followed it under the wall of Paradise to the roots of the trees of knowledge and of life. There is no song or story handed down among the cottages that has not words and thoughts to carry one as far . . . one knows that they ascent like medieval geneologies through unbroken dignities to the beginning of the world.

⁶²Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 185.

Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial . . . and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. Wherever it is spoken by the fire-side, or sung by the roadside, or carved upon the lintel, appreciation of the arts that a single mind gives unity and design to, spreads quickly when its hour is come. 63

Yeats hoped desperately that "its hour had come" in Ireland, and that through the influence of imaginative coteries, the Gaelic folk heritage could be recognized and acclaimed. In "What is Popular Poetry?" Yeats had bitterly accused popular verse of shallowness and ignorance of tradition; folk art offers stories and symbols which go back "through unbroken dignities to the beginning of the world." He had charged popular poetry with triviality--the very trait which he says folk art refuses. Only timeless and universal concerns become part of the story-teller's memory. Because the subject and symbols of folk legend are at the base of all great art, it is back to this source that the modern poet must turn. When he understands this "way of seeing," then he can base his own poetry on a lasting foundation.

The *shanachie*, whose stories have the power to carry one to the beginnings of the world, is an essential part of

⁶³ W. B. Yeats, The Celtic Twilight and a Selection of Early Poems (New York, 1962), pp. 128-129.

Yeats's figuration of the artist, and although the figuration gains further dimensions, he never loses his roots in the oral tradition. As a symbol, he transcends the temporal world and opens to us new realms of imaginative possibility.

And for this cause it were right for thee to buy
the poems of the poets, and to keep the poets in
Ireland, and since all the world is but a story,
it were well for thee to buy the more enduring
story, rather than the story that is less
enduring. 64

⁶⁴"The Judgment of St. Colum Cille," quoted by Rees, p. 342.

CHAPTER II

THE POET AS MAGUS

Prayer is the study of Art.

The only real symbol is the art symbol, and the artist is a prophet.

William Blake

I thought that for a time I could rhyme of love, calling it *The Rose* because of the rose's double meaning; of a fisherman who had 'never a crack in his heart;' . . . or of some cheerful fiddler, all those things that 'popular poets' write of, but that I must some day--on that day when the gates began to open--become difficult or obscure. ¹

We would be hard-pressed to pin down the "day when the gates began to open" for Yeats; but it is clear that his concept of poetry and the poet become more complex than "popular" poetry would allow, and even more inclusive than the intricate persona of the *shanaachie* could voice. For it is not only the vision of a race that the poet must keep alive in his work, but his own intensely personal vision as well.

I have already discussed Yeats's belief in the magical basis of the symbol, which is alive in the *anima mundi* to be brought to conscious mind by the poet. A great deal has

¹Yeats, Autobiography, p. 170.

already been written on the subject of Yeats's occult interests, and writers such as Virginia Moore and F.A.C. Wilson compel us to take Yeats's mystical and metaphysical interests seriously. Miss Moore's chapters on "The Order of the Golden Dawn," Druidism, Spiritism, and the poet's long-standing mystic marriage to Maud Gonne prove invaluable to any student of the poetry. Wilson, in both *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* and *Yeats's Iconography*, has been willing to consider Yeats's occult references at face value and to illuminate their literary and philosophical sources rather than to regard them as "ornaments" to the work. John Senior notes part of the critical problem in *The Way Down and Out*:

So many readers, loving Yeats and finding his occult beliefs incredible, have felt it necessary to defend the former by denying the latter. It would be simpler and more democratic to admit that good, even great, poetry can come out of systems of thought repugnant to us. It is my contention that Yeats meant just what he said . . .

Yeats believed in 'magic;' everything he did was in its name. ²

Even Harold Bloom, who remarks that most of the alchemical and occult imagery in Yeats is "mere clutter,"³ notes in his recent study a particularly strong influence on Yeats

²Senior, p. 146.

³Bloom, p. 122.

in the tradition he calls the "New Romantic Magus," dating back to Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso."⁴

I cannot here, as with the story-teller, trace Yeats's concept of the poet as visionary to one specific tradition; the path leads in too many directions, all of which Yeats undoubtedly knew. One could go back to Plato and his picture of the poet as one who falls into a trance and receives revelations. Yeats read Stephen MacKenna's translations of Plotinus,⁵ who attacked Aristotle's concept of art as imitation of nature and ". . . maintained that the artist . . . must shape it [nature] as the sculptor does his marble in accordance with his own inner vision. Artistic excellence . . . depends upon the quality of the artist's vision."⁶ Both Harold Bloom and George Bornstein (*Yeats and Shelley*) devote entire chapters to Yeats's interpretation (or,

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵Stephen MacKenna joined the Irish Literary Society (Yeats, Autobiography, p. 155), and in 1924 Yeats persuaded the Irish Royal Academy to award MacKenna its highest honour for his translation of Plotinus, which he described as "worthy at its best to take its place among the masterpieces of English prose" (Hone, p. 363). After the publication of A Vision, Yeats commented, "So far . . . my thought has been that of Plotinus but there is a fundamental difference . . . Plotinus gives the real existence no antagonist but matter . . . Our religious thought is antithetical so must insist on an antagonist, a black gyre (Hone, pp. 375-6). See also Virginia Moore, The Unicorn, pp. 316-322.

⁶Gwendolyn Bays, The Orphic Vision (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964), p. 4.

as Bloom claims, misinterpretation) of Shelley as a "mystical" or visionary poet, and his derivation of his image of the artist from such prototypes as Shelley's *Alastor*. This influence, along with Yeats's continued fascination with Blake, opens the whole realm of romantic literature as a source for the visionary concept of the poet.⁷

Even if we depart from the English and Irish traditions (and some of the visionary characteristics associated with the *shanachie* have already been noted in the previous chapter), European literature offers its own tradition of the poet as mystic, which Gwendolyn Bays partially treats in *The Orphic Vision*:

On the continent . . . this tradition [the "platonic-Plotinian tradition of visionary poetry"] . . . underwent a significant change toward the end of the eighteenth century. In the literature of French and German Romanticism, the poet is again a seer, but in a very different sense. The mystic has become a magician, an explorer of dreams and the night, an adept of Mesmer's "animal magnetism" The long-abandoned Homeric theory of the poetic process as a lowering of consciousness or the Virgilian descent into Avernus was rediscovered. 8

As early as the eighteenth century, German philosophers and poets were not only exploring the relationship between

⁷See above, p. 13, esp. footnote 23.

⁸Bays, pp. 12-13.

dreams and literature, but men such as Franz von Baader (1765-1841) claimed that: "It is this interior perception, not the one which copies the exterior, which illuminates the progress of genius . . . every true artist, every authentic poet is a seer or visionary; every true work of art is the monument of a vision."⁹ These concepts, inherited by the French poets, were brought to fruition through later artists like Nerval, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, whom Miss Bays's book studies in some detail. She comments on the continuation of the French visionary heritage:

The idea of the poet as seer, however, does not end with Rimbaud and Romanticism. In both the Symbolist and Surrealist movements, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries witnessed two further rebirths of this perennial philosophy. Brunetiere, a contemporary critic of Symbolism, viewed this movement as a disaffection for Positivism and Naturalism and as a rediscovery of a sense of mystery by young men of letters of the late 1880's. More recently, Guy Michaud in his four-volume study of Symbolism, concludes that the real merit of this movement consists in two particular contributions: (1) the rediscovery of the essence of poetry in its affinity with mystical experience, and (2) the poet's consciousness of himself and his task, "*la reprise de l'âme dans ses propres profondeurs.*"¹⁰

That Yeats was familiar with the later *Symboliste* group, primarily through the influence of Arthur Symons, is made

⁹Franz von Baader, an 1828 treatise, quoted by Bays, p. 55.

¹⁰Bays, p. 14.

clear in C. M. Bowra's *The Heritage of Symbolism*. Yeats himself describes the experience of attending Villier de l'Isle Adam's *Axël*,¹¹ a symbolist drama for which he wrote the preface to Finberg's 1925 translation. Regardless of whether one places Yeats in the Symbolist category (Arthur Symons does so in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, a kind of manifesto which he dedicated to Yeats;¹² John Crowe Ransom claims that there never has been a Symbolist poet in English literature¹³), any detailed study of the poet's life reveals that he was bombarded from all sides by the concept of the relationship between poetry and mysticism.

As has already been pointed out, the tradition of the *shanachie* was no exception in casting the poet as visionary. The story-teller was said to possess extraordinary powers, both social and religious. Part of the power seemingly

¹¹Yeats recounts the event in his preface to *Axël*, translated by H.P.R. Finberg (London, 1925). J. P. Frayne (*Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, 1970, p. 322) notes that he attended the play with Maud Gonne, who must have been able to translate some of it for him. Even though limited in understanding by the language barrier, he was deeply moved and was fond of quoting the line, "As for the living--our servants will do that for us" (*Autobiography*, p. 203). In the chapter "The Tragic Generation," Yeats' reminiscences of Symons strengthen ideas of the influence of these French poets on his thinking: "He was making those translations from Mallarmé and from Verlaine, from Calderon . . . which are the most accomplished metrical translations of our time, and I think that those from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the later poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds* to *The Shadowy Waters*, while Villiers de l'Isle Adam had shaped whatever in my *Rosa Alchemica* Pater had not shaped."

¹²Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York [1899] 1958).

existed within the stories themselves, the retainers of ageless racial traditions. In a note to *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), Yeats amplifies his own special relationship to the stories he told in his early works:

When I wrote these poems I had so meditated over the images that came to me in writing 'Ballads and Lyrics,' 'The Rose,' and 'The Wanderings of Oisín,' and other images from Irish folk-lore, that they had become true symbols. I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very unlike dreaming, when these images took upon themselves what seemed an independent life and became a part of a mystic language, which seemed always as if it would bring me some strange revelation . . . what is most mystical still seems to me most true. 14

Some eighteen years before the strange experience of the dictation of *A Vision* to Mrs. Yeats, which many critics find so difficult to accept, Yeats claims a trance-like state brought on by images which he himself had used, and creating a "mystic language" of revelation. In the early chapters of his *Autobiography*, too, Yeats recounts inexplicable experiences as a young man and experiments with symbols which confirmed his belief in the supernatural. Nearly all of these events revolve around symbols and the powers which they can evoke.

¹³John Crowe Ransom, "Yeats and His Symbols," *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York, 1950), p. 85.

¹⁴Yeats, Notes to *Variorum* of poetry, p. 800.

The poems selected for analysis here all employ the voice of the artist who is either involved in or speaking about his "vision." It becomes increasingly clear that the nature of the artist's relationship with the symbol in his work marks him as a visionary poet. The artist who dares to open himself to the world of the symbol takes on the mantle of the magus. Further, within this added dimension, the poet himself not only participates in this literary "manner," but the figuration of the poet in his poems becomes a symbol with the same power and traditions as the symbol.

The Shadowy Waters provides some excellent examples of Yeats's practice of immersing himself within a strong tradition. It is a common enough practice among poets to preface major works with invocations to the gods, the muses, or some other supernatural source of inspiration. Yeats's poetic variation on the practice in a prefatory poem to *The Shadowy Waters* revives a tradition even older than the invocation. The artist offers the poem as a libation: in the final lines:¹⁵

¹⁵While the openings of many of the Homeric Hymns contain "invocations," nearly all of the hymns have similar conclusions--an offering up of the song to one of the gods. They do not make such direct analogy to pouring wine, but it seems to me that the effect is much like the ending of "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole." In Hymn XVI, for example, "To Asclepius," the poet concludes, "An so hail to you lord! I seek your favour with a song. "To Pan" ends with, "And so hail to you, lord! I seek your favour with a song. And now I will remember you and another song also" (Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. London [1914] 1964, pp. 441 & 447.

As men in the old times, before the harps began,
Poured out wine for the high invisible ones.

(p. 219, 43-44)

We have already noted the connection Yeats establishes between wine and poetry in "The Grey Rock," where the Rhymers' verse is identified with Goban's wine, there too served to "the high invisible ones." Since divine spirits have already inspired the images of the poem and play, by labelling his poem a "libation," the artist places himself in a position of favour with the gods. At the same time, although *The Shadowy Waters* and its prefatory verse are dedicated to Lady Gregory, the poet's statement that, "I have made the poem for you" [the invisible ones] would seem to place the artist's work above or outside human judgment; in a sense, the poem claims not to have been written for *us*, but for a kind of "super-consciousness."

"I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole" is one of the first instances where the speaker is clearly adopting the pose of visionary in a context that is not exclusively part of Gaelic tradition. The picture of the poet and of his world of inspiration presented here is one Yeats continues to develop in his later poetry, although it is not contradictory to the poet in the role of *shanachie*. I am convinced that the work has received far too little critical attention, perhaps partly because Yeats did not publish it separately from the play. Yet the poem merits our attention here

because the claims it makes for the poet are far-reaching, and the questions it poses are significant. Because I intend to consider it here at length, and because of its relative obscurity, I will quote it in full:

I walked among the seven woods of Coole:
 Shan-walla, where a willow-borded pond
 Gathers the wild duck from the winter dawn;
 Shady Kyle-dortha; sunnier Kyle-na-no, 5
 Where many hundred squirrels are as happy
 As though they had been hidden by green boughs
 Where old age cannot find them; Pairc-na-lee,
 Where hazel and ash and privet blind the paths;
 Dim Pairc-na-carraig, where the wild bees fling 10
 Their sudden fragrances on the green air;
 Dim Pairc-na-tarav, where enchanted eyes
 Have seen immortal, mild, proud shadows walk;
 Dim Inchy wood, that hides badger and fox
 And marten-cat, and borders that old wood
 Wise Biddy Early called the wicked wood: 15
 Seven odours, seven murmurs, seven woods.
 I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,
 Yet dreamed that beings happier than men
 Moved round me in the shadows, and at night
 My dreams were cloven by voices and by fires; 20
 And the images I have woven in this story
 Of Forgael and Dectora and the empty waters
 Moved round me in the voices and the fires,
 And more I may not write of, for they that cleave
 The waters of sleep can make a chattering tongue 25
 Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence.
 How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows?
 I only know that all we know comes from you,
 And that you come from Eden on flying feet.
 Is Eden far away, or do you hide 30
 From human thought, as hares and mice and coneys
 That run before the reaping-hook and lie
 In the last ridge of the barley? Do our woods
 And winds and ponds cover more quiet woods,
 More shining winds, more star-glimmering ponds? 35
 Is Eden out of time and out of space?
 And do you gather about us when pale light
 Shining on water and fallen among leaves,
 And winds blowing from flowers, and whirr of feathers
 And the green quiet, have uplifted the heart? 40

I have made this poem for you, that men may read it
 Before they read of Forgael and Dectora,
 As men in the old times, before the harps began,
 Poured out wine for the high invisible ones.

September 1900

(pp. 217-219)

The first sixteen lines set the scene with a brief description of each of the seven woods. The beauty of the lines results partly from the soft and rhythmic quality of the Gaelic names such as Shan-walla (old wall) and Pairc-na-carraig (field of rock).¹⁶ Lady Gregory's estate at Coole is clearly esteemed as a pinnacle of nature's beauty and solitude. Yet it is not primarily the immediate, natural beauty which the speaker celebrates, for within this opening descriptive passage, he also hints at the supernatural legends connected with the grounds at Coole: "The enchanted eyes" at Pairc-na-tarav have seen "immortal, mild, proud shadows walk," and Wise Biddy Early had designated one wood as "the wicked wood."

From line seventeen, it becomes clear that the poet's chief concern is the incorporeal, the immortal shadows whose presence he feels. From one viewpoint, the poem clearly recounts Yeats's personal experience; the geographical placement

¹⁶Jeffares translates each of the Gaelic names of the woods in his Commentary, p. 534.

at the Gregory estate and the information that the poem prefaces the story of Forgael and Dectora, principal characters of *The Shadowy Waters*, identify the "I" unmistakably as W. B. Yeats at Coole Park in 1900. Yet, more importantly, Yeats is dealing here with poetry and the poet's sources of images; consequently, the voice is not only personal. The series of rhetorical questions beginning with line thirty is phrased in the plural, and the "we" extends, I would suggest, to all poets who can sense the "proud immortal shadows" in the natural world--to all poets who could be termed "seers."

The lines "I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,/ Yet dreamed that beings happier than men/ Moved round me in the shadows . . ." (lines 17-19), imply that at some former time, immortal beings were visible to those with the special enchanted gift of sight. Now, however, such perception is not possessed by the poet, and his vision of the immortals must come from his dreams. Unlike the peasants who, in *The Celtic Twilight*, claimed to have seen fairies and demons, the poet images the immortals, and his day-dreams are reinforced at night with dreams "cloven by voices and fires." In lines 21 through 25, the poet states unequivocally that the images which he used in *The Shadowy Waters* emanated from these dreams, and that he then "wove" the images together.¹⁷ The images appear to be independent of the poet: they "move around him," as the elemental creatures move about his table in "To Ireland in the Coming Times."

In lines 24 through 26 the poet suggests the ineffable and esoteric nature of his dream images, whose wisdom is "half silence." This quality is restated in the question, "How shall I name you" (line 27), which indicates as much a problem with expression as with identification: how can the poet convey his dream-experience to the reader who has not shared his visitation by the images? Donald Stauffer briefly confronts this problem of communication in *The Golden Nightingale*:

If a symbol is the only possible expression of some invisible essence, how can we analyze it at all? Are we not confronted with the dilemma of all mystics, who cannot describe their mystical experience because if it were describable it would not be unified but composite? How then is a unique experience transferable? A start toward a solution lies in Yeats's belief in the Great Mind and the Great Memory--that the thoughts of any mind, those of the dead as well as of the living, are not bounded by personality, but may flow into other minds. 18

¹⁷I have already briefly noted the importance of dreams to Yeats's poetry. One might further consult the notes to On Baile's Strand, for Yeats claims to have "dreamed" the events of the play. The poem here seems to indicate that The Shadowy Waters is a kind of dream-play, and this may account for what appears to me to be not only mysterious but vague in the play. It has, for example, a much more abstract setting than Yeats's other dramas--merely somewhere on some ocean. Further, the actions of the characters, especially Forgael and Dectora, are at times as if in a trance. Even the strange man headed birds, derived from ancient imagery of the soul, are rather like what might appear in one's dream.

¹⁸Stauffer, p. 27.

The images, then, which have manifested themselves in the poet's dream are also potentially a part of his reader's heritage, passed through the *anima mundi*, as are the immortals he questions. This series of rhetorical questions is voiced in a manner reminiscent of Blake's questioning of the Tyger, and culminates in the query, "Is Eden out of time and out of space?" The answer here is an implied yes, and the suggestion that Eden exists simultaneously with, but 'covered by' the natural world is echoed in the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondences which Yeats discussed in his commentary on Blake.¹⁹ Once again, as in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," the poet implies that he must bridge the gap between the unseen and the natural worlds; in this case, the dream becomes the medium for the bridging images.

The voice in "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole" seems remarkably restrained; he does not overwhelm us with

¹⁹Irish lore has a variant of the doctrine of correspondences: things above are as below--only reversed in time. Several expressions of it are found in the peasant conversation in The Celtic Twilight, but Yeats uses it most explicitly in The Hour Glass. The First Pupil says, "We have chosen the passage for the lesson Master. 'There are two living countries, one visible and one invisible, and when it is summer there, it is winter here, and when it is November with us, it is lambing-time there.'" The wise fool Teague responds: "To be sure--everybody knows . . . when it is spring with us, the trees are withering there . . . and have I not myself heard the lambs that are there all bleating on a cold November day . . . And maybe when it's night with us, it is day with them, for many a time I have seen the roads lighted before me." (Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats, New York, 1953, pp. 197-198).

the power of his vision, and even the tone of the questions at the end is not strikingly urgent. The speaker seems to accept the limitations of his knowledge: "I only know that all we know comes from you,/ And that you come from Eden on flying feet." Although he wonders about the nature of the immortal world, his object here is the weaving of images brought him from "beyond" into a story. If the images are all we know, at least they transcend the knowledge which can be gained from the natural world. The restraint, perhaps even serenity of the language, may well be the poet's attempt to reproduce in his art what the dream produced for him, for in the enigmatic silences, the dream leads toward wisdom. In contrast, a "chattering tongue" implies a covering up rather than a penetration. After asserting that man's knowledge comes from voices outside himself, voices which speak through dreams, the poet can only bring the reader to questions. The questions, however, avoid the definition and abstraction that an answer might bring, and keep the poet and the reader participating actively in the imagery.

The enigmatic tone of the poem is reinforced by Biblical echoes in the imagery which seem out of place, considering the unorthodox nature of the "gods" implied here, the mystical and alchemical imagery of *The Shadowy Waters*,

and Yeats's other works of the same period.²⁰ The "proud immortal shadows" come from Eden,²¹ and the implication that enchanted eyes were at one time capable of seeing these now-invisible spirits may suggest that "Dim Pairc-na-tarav" and perhaps all of Coole once existed in a prelapsarian state. "Is Eden out of time and out of space" may remind us not only of the timeless world of the Sidhe and "The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland," but also may point ahead to Byzantium, the artifice of eternity which also exists independent of time and space.²²

The image of dreams "cloven by voices and fires" faintly echoes the cloven tongues of flame which descended

²⁰The Wind Among the Reeds, published in 1899, evinces Yeats's involvement with Irish legend and especially with the immortals or Sidhe, but nothing in the imagery of the poems there displays Biblical overtones--not even the apocalyptic "The Valley of the Black Pig." The 1903 In the Seven Woods contains a number of love lyrics, and the "other-wordly" verses such as "The Happy Townland" again use ethnic, not Biblical, imagery.

²¹The Parrish-Painter Concordance (Ithaca, 1962) reveals that this is one of two uses of the word "Eden" in Yeats's poetry (the other time it appears is in "Veronica's Napkin," and it is used occasionally in the plays), and the only occurrence of "Eden" with something of its traditional meaning of paradise. Critics have long noted the Biblical overtones in the opening line of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," but Yeats's poetry, particularly of his early career, is remarkably free of traditional Christian symbols. Even the rose and the cross gain their symbolic import from an alchemical and not orthodox Christian context.

upon the apostles at Pentacost, bringing both supernatural power and the ability to "speak in tongues." Similarly, the poet in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" suggests that to be enfolded by the mystic rose would be to "chaunt a tongue men do not know." In "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole," the flames and voices descending in dreams bring to the speaker the mystic language of symbols. The poet further describes the immortals as "cleaving the waters" of sleep, again subtly Biblical, since the dividing of the waters signifies God's intervention in man's favour. If the images here are intentionally Biblical, their function may be to underline the religiosity of the poet's experience, perhaps even to lend an air of orthodoxy to the "proud immortal shadows."

One important parallel with Yeats's later visionary works is the account of the poet figured here and the experience of Yeats's composition of *A Vision* nearly twenty years later. His instructors, through Mrs. Yeats's automatic

²²This point will be elaborated further in my discussion of the Byzantium poems below. Bloom's observation about Byzantium and Yeats's other historical ideals aptly places them in the realm of the "Eden" in this poem: "Yeats was not one of those rare visionaries who love the future, and he was most certainly a man who, in Stevens's phrase, had studied the nostalgias, who loved a number of pasts, most of them historically quite non-existent. The Urbino and the eighteenth-century Dublin of Yeats's nostalgias are mere idealizations . . . Byzantium would be a pernicious myth if Yeats had made the mistake of insisting too categorically on its historical adequacy; it moves us because it is out of space and out of time" (Yeats, p. 67).

script, tell him that they have come to give him metaphors for his poetry. Like the immortals here, they control the images which the poet shapes.

The poet speaking in "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole" clearly exemplifies the figuration which Yeats wished to project. He is in tune both with nature and with the supernatural. Further, the realm of the artist's imagery here is not at odds with nature (as it is in the later Byzantium poems, where the poet scorns natural forms in favour of the goldsmith's creations). The divine ones here are compared to "hares, mice, and coney" who hide from human activity. Although they evade human thought (line 31), they enter human dreams, and in the area of dreams, the poet is master. He must be receptive to the shadow images of his dreams in order to weave their wisdom into his poetry. In this poem, at least, the artist's world of the imagination begins in the dream, and "in dreams begin responsibilities:"

Then, too, from whence come the images of the dream? Not always, I was soon persuaded, from the memory, perhaps never in trance or sleep . . . I had as yet no clear answer, but knew myself fact to face with the Anima Mundi described by Platonic philosophers . . . which has a memory independent of embodied individual memories, though they constantly enrich it with their images and thoughts. 23

²³Yeats, Autobiography, p. 175.

Yeats's clearest and most provocative discourse about the relationship between dreams and the artist's vision can be found in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which Bloom calls Yeats's "introduction to the visionary centre."²⁴ In the essay "Anima Hominis" Yeats describes a beautiful woman he once saw "between waking and sleeping;" she was shooting an arrow into the sky: "I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning, in the humility of the brutes."²⁵ Further on, in the accompanying essay, "Anima Mundi," Yeats adds to his notion of the moment of vision:

²⁴Bloom, p. 178. I highly concur with Mr. Bloom that *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is absolutely central in Yeats's prose. However, I have never seen the title traced to its source. Professor Robin Blaser brought my attention to the original passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book II, line 255. The passage reads: "et iam Argiva phalanx instructis navibus ibat/ a Tenedo, tacitae per amica silentia lunae/ litora noto petens, flammam cum regia puppis/ extulerat, . . ." (emphasis mine). Within the body of his essay Yeats quotes the entire line which is underlined above. William Morris, whose translation of Virgil Yeats might have read, translates it: "And now the Argive host comes forth upon its ordered ships/ From Tenedos, all hushed amid the kind moon's silent ways,/ Seeking the well-known strand, when forth there breaks the bale-fire's blaze . . ." (*The Aeneid of Virgil*, London, 1876).

²⁵Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, p. 503.

Before the mind's eye, whether in sleep or waking, came images that one was to discover presently in some book one had never read, and after looking in vain for explanation to the current theory of forgotten personal memory, I came to believe in a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation. 26

Communication with this great memory or *anima mundi* is, he adds, "through association of thoughts or images."²⁷ The dream images, of course, do not make a poem; they are only the beginning of the artist's task. In "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole," the poet uses the dream in a quest to do the same thing that the artist in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" longs to accomplish: to discover and record "In all poor foolish things that live a day/ Eternal beauty wandering on her way."

The dream, sleeping or waking, does not comprise the only source of vision for Yeats's artist. "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" proposes not specifically a dream, but a vision which "the mind's eye" calls up for the poet. A detailed explication of this poem is essential to any exploration of Yeats's artist as a visionary. I have confined the discussion so far to poems wherein the "I" identifies himself as the poet, viewed biographically as Yeats, but emphasizing qualities deliberately projected to describe the

²⁶Ibid., p.510.

²⁷Ibid., p. 527.

poet as Yeats creates him. "The Double Vision," however, appears to be the monologue of a particular man, not Yeats at all. Significantly, however, we find the figure of Michael Robartes included with Aedh and Red Hanrahan in the note quoted earlier: "I have used them in this book more as principles of mind than as actual personages

'Michael Robartes' is fire reflected in water . . . the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or the adoration of the Magi."²⁸ In still

another note to "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," Yeats adds:

"Years ago I wrote three stories in which occur the names of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne . . . They take their place in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavour to explain my philosophy of life and death."²⁹ One might add that through

these characters he also endeavours to explain, at least in part, his philosophy of art. In "The Double Vision,"

Michael Robartes clearly is figured as both a visionary and a poet ("And after that arranged it in a song"), but if we

are to judge from Yeats's comments, the "character" of Robartes is part of the poet's phantasmagoria which Yeats

builds up throughout his poetry. He is, I think, as pertinent

²⁸Yeats, Notes to Variorum edition of the Poetry, p. 803.

²⁹Ibid., p. 821.

to the study of the figuration of the artist as the poet whom we assume to be Yeats. It is, of course, Robartes whose voice is used in the 1925 edition of *A Vision* to relate the geometric system supposedly left him by the Judwalis tribe; thus, he first serves as spokesman for Yeats's system. Robartes, Aherne, Hanrahan, and Aedh appear in Yeats's lyrics as poets, and we can almost see them as collocated to form a composite figuration of the artist.

The setting for both parts of Robartes' vision is appropriate, particularly in light of the visionary qualities of the *shanachie* discussed earlier. Alwyn Rees remarks that Cashel carries special significance in Irish legend:

At Uisnech and Tara . . . was an assemblage of such symbols as a hill, a stone, a palace, a seat, a tree, a well, a fire--and they were places of contact with the supernatural world. The other centres had similar concentrations. For example, some of the principal features of Cashel, capital of Munster, may be gleaned from [a tale told by Aedh's swineherd] . . . He saw a yew tree on a rock and in front of it an oratory with a flagstone before it and angels ascending from the flagstone and descending upon it. The vision was interrupted by a druid: The place (Cashel) would be the residence of the kings of Munster forever . . . 30

Here at Cashel, a place of contact with the supernatural world, on a grey rock, a further symbol supernatural intervention (already encountered in Yeats's poem of that name), Michael

³⁰Rees, p. 186.

Robartes stands. For the reader familiar with the legends of Cashel, Yeats's choice of setting calls to mind a set of expectations involving supernatural appearances associated with the place. Although Cashel is specifically an Irish setting, Robartes cannot be considered primarily as a *shanachie* figure. Standing on the rock at Cashel does not prompt him to recite old stories, nor are the Cashel legends used as the basis for his vision. What he describes is replete with symbols which are not characteristically Celtic, but universal.

Michael Robartes' vision is clearly not an "accidental" one available to any passer-by at Cashel; rather, it is "called up" by the mind's eye. The visionary eye summons a perfect picture of the "primary" state which Yeats was to call Phase I in *A Vision*, a condition of "complete passivity, complete plasticity"³¹ when the moon is completely dark:

Under blank eyes and fingers never still
 The particular is pounded till it is man.
 When had I my own will?
 O not since life began.

Constrained, arraigned, baffled, bent and unbent
 By these wire-jointed jaws and limbs of wood,
 Themselves obedient,
 Knowing not evil and good;

(p. 382, 5-12)

³¹W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, rev. ed. (New York [1937] 1967), p. 183.

These lines parallel *A Vision's* prose description:

Mind has become indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood; body has become undifferentiated, doughlike . . . and mind and body take whatever shape, accept whatever image is imprinted upon them, transact whatever purpose is imposed upon them, are indeed the instruments of supernatural manifestation, the final link between the living and more powerful beings. 32

We should note that Phase I is of necessity the artist's vision, for this condition excludes all human life: only where there is discord, the struggle between objectivity and subjectivity, the *primary* and the *antithetical*, is there human life. Yeats's diagram of the Great Wheel demonstrates that concord visually: the primary phase, also called "complete objectivity," and associated with passivity and the North, is opposite the antithetical, called "complete subjectivity," and associated with "Unity of Being" and the south.³³ Part of the difficulty with "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" lies in our unfamiliarity with these abstract ("They do not even feel, so abstract are they"), robot-like inhabitants of the moonless phase who are "So dead beyond our death" (line 15).

³²Idem.

³³Ibid., p. 86.

The second part of Robartes' vision is again "on the grey rock of Cashel." "I suddenly saw . . ." echoes the beginning of the vision in "The Cold Heaven:" "Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven/ That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice" (p. 316, 1-2).³⁴ As one might expect, the second vision is the exact opposite of the first; it marks the supernatural antithetical Phase 15 of the full moon. The Sphinx and Buddha represent not only Western and Eastern cultures, but here are also symbolic of the intellect (required to solve the Sphinx's riddle) and the heart, respectively. They also both emblemize knowledge of the supernatural. Between these two symbols Robartes sees another figure which combines elements of both the Sphinx and Buddha:

And right between these two a girl at play
That, it may be, had danced her life away,
For now being dead it seemed
That she of dancing dreamed.

(p. 383, 21-24)

³⁴In "The Cold Heaven," as in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," the speaker's vision drives him to a kind of frenzy. In "The Cold Heaven" the power of his emotion is more urgently expressed:

And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished . . .
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light . . .

(p. 316, 3-9)

Like the beings of Phase I, the dancer is "dead"--at least to human life as we know it. Frank Kermode in his magnificent chapter on the dancer remarks that in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes:" ". . . one sees her as the very heart of Yeats's thinking about poetry and women (considered as having such powers of self-unification as to become emblematic of the Image). The dancer here reconciles antithetical movements: the division of soul and body, form and matter, life and death, artist and audience."³⁵ If one turns briefly to Yeats's description of Phase 15 in *A Vision*, Kermode's claims about the centrality of the dancer image to both Yeats's system and his ideas about art seem justified:

Thought and will are indistinguishable . . . nothing is apparent but dreaming *Will* and the Image that it dreams . . . The words "musical" and "sensuous" are but descriptions of that converging process. 36

So the dancing girl, in dreaming of dancing, fuses the act and the dream, the Will and the Image. Such a being possesses the greatest possible beauty,"³⁷ for her dance has brought her "bodily perfection."

³⁵Frank Kermode, The Romantic Image (London, 1957), p. 60.

³⁶Yeats, A Vision, p. 135.

³⁷Ibid., p. 136.

Two further passages from *A Vision* add still another dimension to the complexity of the dancer figure: "The being has selected, moulded and remoulded, narrowed its circle of living, been more and more the artist, grown more and more 'distinguished' in all preference."³⁸ This delineation of the inhabitants of Phase 15, when we apply it to the dancing girl, implies that she is both the artist contemplating an image and, at the same time, the product of the artist's vision. She has entered the world of the image which she contemplates and has become that image. Robartes, too, for the moment of his vision, enters the world of his symbols, and for that timeless moment becomes a part of the fifteenth phase. Hazard Adams has noted, quite accurately, I think, that the dancer here, like Salome, symbolizes visionary experience: ". . . a strange balance of opposites caught momentarily by the mind's eye. She is the 'needle's eye' drawing the antithetical Sphinx and Buddha into a single configuration."³⁹ One might add that Robartes himself in the last stanza of the poem holds the same position: "caught between the dark moon and the full," he becomes the symbol of his own visionary experience.

Yeats adds that in Phase 15, the phase of the full moon:

³⁸Ibid., p. 136.

³⁹Adams, Blake and Yeats, p. 230.

Fate is known for the boundary that gives our destiny its form, and--as we can desire nothing outside that form--as an expression of our freedom. Chance and choice have become interchangeable without losing their identity. 40

The rhetoric here is certainly obscure if not totally baffling, for it is the language of paradox. But the paradox is central. The passage becomes clearer when juxtaposed with a note to the play *Calvary*, in which the figure of Michael Robartes is credited with recounting a teaching of Kusta ben Luki of the Judwalis tribe:

Kusta ben Luki has taught us to divide all things into Chance and Choice; . . . for they are indeed the first cause of the animate and inanimate world. They exist in God, for if they did not He would not have freedom, He would be bound by His own Choice. In God alone, indeed, can they be united yet each be perfect without limit or hindrance. 41

The fifteenth phase, then, where Chance and Choice are one, exists "in God." The images or beings which prevail there, the Sphinx, the Buddha and the dancer, are divine. The artist, through his vision of the images, transcends the temporal world to glimpse, at least, the "artifice of eternity." But again, as Kermode emphasizes, that glimpse is only temporary:

⁴⁰Yeats, A Vision, p. 136.

⁴¹Yeats, notes to Four Plays for Dancers, quoted by Jeffares, Commentary, pp. 219-220.

The Dancer, in fact is, in Yeats's favourite expression, "self-begotten," independent of labour; as such she differs totally from the artist who seeks her. She can exist only in the predestined dancing place where, free from Adam's curse, beauty is born of itself, without the labour of childbirth or the labour of art; where art means wholly what it *is*. 42

One further point which should be made concerning the second half of Robartes's vision is the importance of "contemplation" emphasized in the last stanza of Part II. In their intense contemplation--the Sphinx on "all things known and unknown;" the Buddha, on "all things loved and unloved;" and the dancer, on the image of the dance so much that she "outdanced thought"--they have "overthrown time" to enter a timeless world. This idea of contemplation will gain increasing importance in "All Souls' Night."

In the final section of "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," the artist expresses his response to his vision:

I knew that I had seen, had seen at last
That girl my unremembering nights hold fast
Or else my dreams that fly
If I should rub an eye,

(p. 384, 49-52)

Again, one cannot escape in Yeats the perennial relationship between the dream and the vision. In "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole," the dream itself serves as the medium

⁴²Kermode, p. 85.

through which the artist receives his images; here, the poet suddenly recognizes his waking vision as a *déjà vu* experience-- a solidification of the dancer which his dreams have been unable to capture, but which has remained in his unconscious memory.

Having once seen these two phases outside the human realm, Robartes is caught in the human world of discord "between the pull/ Of the dark moon and the full," and is no longer contented, just as "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" and Aengus could no longer accept the limitations of the world they knew after even a remote glance of the immortals.

As John Unterecker points out, Robartes responds to his vision first emotionally ("Thereon I made my moan,/ And after kissed a stone") and then artistically⁴³ by recreating his visionary encounter in verse:

And after that arranged it in a song
Seeing that I, ignorant for so long,
Had been rewarded thus
In Cormac's ruined house.

(p. 384, 65-68)

Yeats warns us in the last section of the extraordinary power of the artist's vision; his description indicates that Robartes's emotional state after the vision verges on madness, for he is brought to "folly" and "frenzy." "The dark moon and

⁴³John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats (New York, 1959), p. 155.

the full" are, he admits, common images, but in the perspective of his vision at Cashel, they shed their commonness for "the frenzy of our western seas."

"The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" once more poses the nearly inconceivable position of the poet. Robartes, and concomitantly, any seer-poet, is a man qualified to receive divine knowledge from a vision. The first and fifteenth phases further present a suspended trance-like state, the "marmorean stillness" which many critics have noted in Yeats's work. "The Double Vision" is not only an explication of parts of *A Vision*; it works as a powerful piece in itself.

The process of calling up images is, for Yeats's artist, no mere accident. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats recalls in one of Goethe's letters a passage stating that one "must allow the images to form with all their associations before one criticizes."⁴⁴ Yeats himself has discovered, he further comments, that the artist's absorption must become complete, and that he must "call them [the images] up by their association with traditional forms and sounds:"

⁴⁴Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, p. 508.

You have discovered how, if you can but suspend will and intellect, to bring up from the 'subconscious' anything you already possess a fragment of. Those who follow the old rule keep their bodies still and their minds awake and clear, dreading especially any confusion between the images of the mind and the objects of sense; they seek to become, as it were, polished mirrors. 45

Yeats admits that he had no natural gift for this kind of clear quiet, "as I soon discovered my mind is abnormally restless."⁴⁶ He had instead to invent a process for complete absorption and mediation. This meditative facet of the visionary artist is reflected in "All Souls' Night."

In the collection *The Tower*, Yeats placed "All Souls' Night" after "The Gift of Haroun Al Raschid," a narrative poem which seems to recount through Arabian characters Mrs. Yeats's strange experiences which led to *A Vision*. Yet even more crucial in Yeats's canon, "All Souls' Night" is carefully placed at the conclusion of *A Vision*.⁴⁷ Unlike "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," "All Souls' Night" presents us not with an artist recreating his vision, but rather with an artist's preparation for the visionary encounter.

One biographical point which the poem particularly brings to mind is Yeats's long-standing interest in spiritism. Miss Moore has devoted a chapter of *The Unicorn* to the grow-

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 509.

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ The poem was not, however, originally composed as a sequel to A Vision; Jeffares dates its composition as November, 1920, five years before the publication of A Vision. It first appeared in The New Republic in March, 1921.

ing fascination in the poet with the thought of communicating with the dead, and her evidence from diaries and letters, along with the artistic evidence Yeats left in such works as *Words Upon the Window Pane*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and *Purgatory* provides a convincing case even without the complex discussions in *A Vision*. The poet even spent some time communicating through a medium with a spirit who called himself Leo Africanus and claimed, though he had lived in the fourteenth century, to be Yeats's "opposite."⁴⁸ The communicators of *A Vision*, although never clearly identified, appear to speak from a ghostly realm of the dead with a power of penetration which is, for Yeats, at the heart of the artist's experience.

In "Rapallo," the opening essay of *A Vision*, Yeats comments: "At Oxford I went constantly to All Souls Chapel, though never at service time, and parts of *A Vision* were thought out there."⁴⁹ In his first version of the book, he speaks of "moments of exaltation like that in which I wrote 'All Souls' Night.'"⁵⁰ Yet the poem hardly strikes one as

⁴⁸See Moore, *The Unicorn*, pp. 225-240. Leo Africanus first spoke to Yeats at a seance on April 10, 1911. When Yeats later looked up the name, he found that Leo was a historian and geographer as well as writer. As opposites, they might become complete by association: "Leo had been unscrupulous, Yeats was overcautious; Leo 'hard and keen like a hunting dog,' Yeats soft; 'Leo a brooding and braggart shade,' Yeats gregarious yet shy" (p. 236).

⁴⁹Yeats, *A Vision*, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁰Yeats, *A Vision*, 1925 edition, quoted by Jeffares, *Commentary*, p. 314.

an exultant or religious moment of vision; the opening scene is consciously and quietly set. The poet, alone at a table on All Souls Night and having set two glasses of wine, waits for a ghostly visitor.⁵¹ He then calls up ghosts of dead acquaintances in a ritual fashion:

. A ghost may come;
 For it is a ghost's right,
 His element is so fine
 Being sharpened by his death,
 To drink from the wine-breath
 While our gross palates drink from the whole wine.
 (p. 471, 5-10)

In the second stanza the poet longs for a concentration so great that nothing can sway him. His use of the analogy of mummies wound in mummy-cloth is a frequent image in Yeats's poetry, and here brings to mind his idea of a "life-in-death" or "death-in-life" trance.⁵² This state of mind is vital to him as a poet if he is to express "A certain marvellous thing/ None but the living mock" (lines 16-17). The setting and heightening of concentration reflect that desire expressed in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* to achieve the

⁵¹Unterecker (p. 198) claims that the other glass is set for Georgie Yeats, and that Yeats and she together call up the ghosts, but I find nothing to justify this reading. Even when the speaker is viewed biographically as Yeats, a second person fits neither with the express desire for concentration nor with the picture of the poet as host to spirits. Surely the extra glass is set for potential visitors, who may savour the fumes of the muscatel.

⁵²F. A. C. Wilson traces as Yeats's source for this phrase an epigram of Heraclitus: "Men and gods die each others' life, live each others' death" (W. B. Yeats and Tradition, p. 237).

still body and clear mind necessary to call forth images. Deep concentration or meditation as part of the artistic method is, like nearly every other part of Yeats's art, part of a long tradition, most noticeable in English literature in Donne and the "Metaphysical" poets.⁵³ In "All Souls' Night" this kind of meditation bears much weight in the artist's relationship with the precious symbol

Louis L. Martz appropriately chooses the concluding stanza of this poem as an epigram for his book, *The Poetry of Meditation*. His study deals primarily with the seventeenth century "Metaphysical" poets; yet, in his "Conclusion," he places Yeats in the meditative current (despite the absence of the orthodox Christian form of meditation), and calls *A Vision* "Yeats's private handbook of meditation."⁵⁴

Martz quotes in his "Introduction" a definition of meditation dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century: "Meditation which we treat of, is nothing els

⁵³A letter to Grierson in 1912 reveals Yeats's fascination with Donne's work. Although I do not presume to make a case for Donne's "direct influence" on the later poet, certainly Yeats admired the power and the passion in Donne: "I write to thank you for your edition of Donne . . . I have been using it constantly and find that at last I can understand Donne . . . I notice that the more precise and learned the thought the greater the beauty, the passion; the intricacy and subtleties of his imagination are the length and depths of the furrow made by his passion. His pedantry and his obscenity--the rock and the loam of his Eden--but make me more certain that one who is but a man like us all has seen God . . . (The Letters of W. B. Yeats, p. 570).

⁵⁴Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven, 1954), p. 329.

but a diligent and forcible application of the understanding, to seek, and know, and as it were to tast some divine matter . . ." ⁵⁵ Louis Richeome, a Jesuit monk in the 1660's, extends this concept of meditation by adding a further step, "contemplation:"

Contemplation is more than meditation . . . For the understanding having attentively, and with many reasons to and fro meditated the mystery, and gathered divers lights together, doth frame unto her self a cleere knowledge, whereof without further discourse . . . she enjoyeth (as I may say) a vision which approacheth to the knowledge of Angells, who understand without discourse. ⁵⁶

The passage is, of course, steeped in a medieval framework; but the method and object of the meditation do seem remarkably akin to that described by the poet in "All Souls' Night." He opens with what was designated in meditative practice as setting the scene with great precision. The beginning faintly echoes that of Donne's "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day." There, it is the striking of midnight on the longest night of the year which sparks the poet's memory of his dead beloved; in "All Souls' Night," midnight on All Souls' Night is an equally propitious time for calling up memories of the dead.

The procedure in formal meditation as Martz describes it includes the art of memory, and the memories take the form

⁵⁵Martz, p. 14.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 17.

of precisely described images. For Herbert they may have been the temple and each object in it; for Yeats's poet, they are the ghosts of three mystic friends. His description is in great detail--a necessary practice in making the concentration on the images more intense.

The first of the three former friends called up in the poem, William Thomas Horton, produced mystical drawings influenced by Blake's art, and, like Blake, he was in his boyhood subject to strange appearances of angels.⁵⁷ What Yeats concentrates on here is Horton's platonic relationship with Audrey Locke and the continuance of that bond after her death. Not unlike Dante's contemplation of Beatrice:

Two thoughts were so mixed up I could not tell
 Whether of her or God he thought the most,
 But think that his mind's eye,
 When upward turned, on one sole image fell;
 And that a slight companionable ghost,
 Wild with divinity,
 Had so lit up the whole
 Immense miraculous house
 The Bible promised us,
 It seemed a gold-fish swimming in a bowl.

(pp. 471-472, 31-40)

The image of the woman, when it gains complete devotion, is fused with God, "wild with divinity," and for Horton the whole realm of the supernatural suddenly became as clearly visualized as the natural gold-fish in the bowl. This vignette

⁵⁷ Jeffares, Commentary, p. 314.

of Horton parallels the attempt of the speaking poet to achieve a similar devotion to the images of the dead.

Florence Farr Emery, the next of the invited ghosts, acted and sang in some of Yeats's early plays, and inspired his early essay on poetry and the psaltery.⁵⁸ Her beauty was of the kind Yeats most admired in women--like the qualities Michael Robartes recommends to the dancer. In his *Autobiography* Yeats recalls:

She had three great gifts, a tranquil beauty like that of Demeter's image near the British Museum reading-room door, and an incomparable sense of rhythm and a beautiful voice, the seeming natural expression of the image She could only express hers through an unfashionable art, an art that has scarce existed since the seventeenth century . . . I formed with her an enduring friendship that was an enduring exasperation . . . "How can you be a character actor, you who hate all our life, you who belong to a life that is a vision?" 59

Immensely impressed by Mathers, she had also been a fellow occultist in The Order of the Golden Dawn. But Yeats concentrates on only one small part of her experience in "All Souls'

⁵⁸In "Speaking to the Psaltery," from Essays and Introductions, Yeats records his response to Miss Farr's method of recitation: "A friend, who was here a few minutes ago, has sat with a beautiful stringed instrument upon her knee, her fingers passing over the strings, and has spoken to me some verses from Shelley's "Skylark" . . . and some of my own poems. Wherever the rhythm was most delicate, and wherever the emotion was most ecstatic, her art was most beautiful."

⁵⁹Yeats, Autobiography, p. 81.

Night:" what she learned from an Indian teacher (although the vocabulary sounds suspiciously more Yeatsian than Eastern) about the journey of the soul after death:

. How it is whirled about,
Wherever the orbit of the moon can reach,
Until it plunge into the sun;
And there, free and yet fast,
Being both Chance and Choice,
Forget its broken toys
And sink into its own delight at last.

(pp. 472-473, 54-60)

Again the poet brings us to the fifteenth phase of the Great Wheel, to that divine place where Choice and Chance unite. There the soul, like the dancer in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," contemplates its own beauty. Perhaps a verification of this journey is the "mummy-truth" which the poet expects to obtain from the ghosts whom he summons.

Finally the artist calls up MacGregor Mathers, not without a humorous reminder of the occultist's madness and arrogance: "But he'd object to the host,/ The glass because my glass;/ A ghost-lover he was/ And may have grown more arrogant being a ghost" (lines 77-80). Yet the old mystic's erratic and half-insane nature is excused: "For meditations upon unknown thought/ Make human intercourse grow less and less" (74-75). Again Yeats warns the reader of the danger to the artist of visionary pursuits. The speaking poet, like Mathers, is a "ghost-lover," and in his contemplation of Mathers, he sees his own situation reflected--the price

of his own "meditations on unknown thought."

With the line "But names are nothing" (line 81), the poet turns from his memories of individual mystics to a more general image: the refinements of the ghosts' elements which symbolizes the "mummy-truths." In the final stanza the speaker reveals his achievement of his objective--a meditation that nothing can disturb:

Such thought--such thought have I that hold it tight
Till meditation master all its parts,
Nothing can stay my glance
Until that glance run in the world's despite
To where the damned have howled away their hearts,
And where the blessed dance;
Such thought, that in it bound
I need no other thing,
Wound in mind's wandering
As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound.

(p. 474, 91-100)

"All Souls' Night" proposes a visionary experience for the poet; yet the poem closes without any mention of an actual vision. At the conclusion, the poet is still waiting for a ghost to sample the fumes of his wine. The speaker has "mummy-truths" to tell, yet we are never quite certain whether he has told them within the poem or whether spirits are to bring him those truths. Or, judging from the poem's placement in *A Vision*, perhaps we are to assume that the mummy-truths were brought by Yeats's instructors and recorded in *A Vision*. What the poem seems to celebrate is not a certain recorded vision like "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," but the *process* of the poet's mind wrapt in meditation, the process of calling

up images from the *anima mundi*. "All Souls' Night" does reinforce, as much as any one poem, the significance of the image to the visionary artist. A beautiful passage from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* expresses the meditation of the seer poet with great emotion:

We can satisfy in life a few of our passions and each passion but a little . . . But the passions, when we know that they cannot find fulfilment, become vision; and a vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern, the wheel where the world is butterfly. We need no protection but it does, for if we become interested in ourselves, in our own lives, we pass out of the vision. Whether it is we or the vision that create this pattern, who set the wheel turning, it is hard to say, but certainly we have a hundred ways of keeping it near us: we select our images from past times, we turn from our own age and try to feel Chaucer nearer than the daily paper. It compels us to cover all it cannot incorporate, and would carry us when it comes in sleep to that moment when even sleep closes her eyes and dreams begin to dream; and we are taken up into a clear light and are forgetful even of our own names and actions and yet in perfect possession of ourselves murmur like Faust, 'Stay, moment,' and murmur in vain. 60

One simply cannot overstress the importance of the vision in Yeats's poetry, and F. A. C. Wilson aptly observes that Yeats's work demands a serious reader:

⁶⁰Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 504-505.

There is a very real sense in which Yeats is a visionary writing for the visionary or for readers who feel in full sympathy with his beliefs; if we cannot at least inform ourselves as though we shared them, there is a level at which (as with Blake) his poetry is not for us. 61

Yeats's response to the experience of vision was, as Wilson further notes, "joyous: . . . it convinced him that the human mind was blessed; that its origin was heaven, and that it still dimly retained the memory of its home."⁶² As is clear in the *Autobiography*, diaries, and essays, each new experience was a source of great excitement for the poet, and when, in 1917, four days after his marriage, his wife tried her hand at automatic writing, Yeats was ready to devote his life to unravelling the mystery of the symbols which came to her.⁶³

The two "Byzantium" poems form, I think, the culmination of Yeats's presentation of the poet as seer. The symbols Yeats uses in the poems, the bird, the moon, the dome,

⁶¹Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition, p. 17. For a fine introductory discussion of Yeats as a visionary, I would suggest the introductory chapter of this book ("The Subjective Tradition," pp. 9-49). For a more detailed biographical account, I have already mentioned Miss Moore's book, The Unicorn, Alex Zwerdling's Yeats and the Heroic Ideal also contains an extended chapter on the visionary, placing him in the context of the hero.

⁶²Wilson, p. 22.

⁶³"Introduction to 'A Vision,'" A Vision (1937 edition) p. 8. Yeats says he "offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences."

the dance, and Byzantium itself--all contain the power of tradition, and have analogues throughout the poet's other works. While the poet is not discussing, as he does in some of the other poems, the process of writing, his concern is very much with the world of art and the poems focus, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in the poet's canon, on the artist's involvement with the images he uses. The world of the poet's imagination does not remain quite so suspended as it does in "All Souls' Night;" rather, the imagination takes on both shape and historical perspective in the eternal Byzantine setting.

Critical commentary on these two poems is already of tremendous proportions. I am not attempting here either to refute existing interpretations or to provide revolutionary readings. What I do propose is a focus of our attention on the artist within the poems. I quite agree with Ellmann that while the poems, particularly "Byzantium," are often interpreted as a presentation of afterlife,⁶⁴ the works primarily present "the act of making a poem."⁶⁵

In a letter to Olivia Shakespeare which Curtis Bradford dates as 1926,⁶⁶ Yeats comments, "I had just finished

⁶⁴Wilson in his reading of "Byzantium," invaluable in its source material for the images, uses afterlife, or more specifically purgatory, as his basis for interpretation.

⁶⁵Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 270.

⁶⁶Curtis Bradford, "Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A Study of Their Development," Yeats, ed. John Unterecker (New Jersey, 1963), p. 94.

a poem in which a poet of the Middle Ages besought the saints 'in their holy fire' to send their ecstasies." Originally, then, the concept behind the speaker of the poem (and this is clearer when one examines the early drafts of the poem) was not obviously biographical, but a poet figure historically removed, sailing "among sun-browned pleasant mariners"⁶⁷ to the historical city of Byzantium. As the final drafts developed, however, the context of both poet and city became less historically restricted and moved more into the realm of the imagination.⁶⁸ The speaker of the published draft of 1928 is no longer only a "medieval poet;" he is identified simply as "I," and the contents of the poem clearly pinpoint him as an artist.⁶⁹ Both artist and Byzantium have, like Coleridge's Xanadu, become timeless. Thus, Yeats could say in his often-quoted radio broadcast of September 8, 1931, that he was in "Sailing to Byzantium,"

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 103. In that version, the poem was entitled "Towards Byzantium."

⁶⁸As I have already noted (see especially footnote 21, p. 12), both Yeats's Urbino and his eighteenth century Dublin, while actual historical cities, are also fictitious in the sense that they represent ideal cities and are not intended to be historically accurate.

⁶⁹There is certainly justification from Yeats's personal comments as well as within the poem, for reading the poem biographically. However, too strict an interpretation in this light can be misleading. I would cite as an example Jeffares's unqualified identification of the country in the line "That is no country for old men," as Ireland in both his Commentary and the notes to his edition of W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry. Yeats's description of the sensual world is surely more universal than this restrictive biographical pinpointing allows.

". . . trying to write about the state of my soul
I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey
to that city."⁷⁰

In the first stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium," the poet confronts us with images of the natural, sensual world, "whatever is begotten, born and dies." The world is simultaneously both abundant with life ("The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas") and dying. "Sensual music" is provided by the song of "dying generations" of birds, a far different use of the image from the cock in "Solomon and the Witch," who signals the coming of a new phase, or Yeats's usual association of birds with the soul (*The Shadowy Waters* or "The White Birds," for example), and greatly contrasted with the bird in the final stanza of this poem. All of the physical images are carefully set off against the heavily weighted final line of the stanza, the neglected "Monuments of unageing intellect." The monuments, unlike the physical world, are changeless: they are art.

The second stanza dialectically returns us to the physical world, for we shift from "unageing monuments" to an "aged man." Yet the alternative to this "paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick," is provided by music--not a sensual strut, but a song of the soul.

⁷⁰Quoted by Jeffares, Commentary, p. 254.

Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;

(p. 407, 13-14)

Here the song and monuments, far from their opposition in the first stanza, are equated; both are representative of art, and one can infer from the connection between the song and the studying soul that art comes from the soul, the eternal man as compared to the temporal ageing body.

And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

(p. 408, 15-16)

The connectives "and therefore" would indicate that Byzantium, the city of the soul, is the city of art where the soul can contemplate its own image, as the dancer in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" "of dancing dreamed." The seas may be the "mackerel-crowded seas," or the Platonic sea of life as in *The Shadowy Waters*; but they also serve here and in "Byzantium" (as well as in "News for the Delphic Oracle") as the transporting medium from one state to another.⁷¹

⁷¹If one sees Byzantium as a vision of the afterlife, Yeats's paradise, then the sea here bears some resemblance to the Greek River Styx. Lentricchia (Gaiety of Language, p. 103) concludes that the natural world in "Sailing to Byzantium" is "messy" because of the chaos implied in "salmon-falls" and "mackerel-crowded seas." He has, I think, failed to note the significance of the salmon in Irish legend (not to mention the beauty of fish), where it is symbolic of the richness of life. One way that the hero, such as Lugh, is identified in Celtic legend, is that he falls into the water and emerges with a live salmon in his hand.

The last two stanzas of "Sailing to Byzantium" are set within the holy city, where the poet pleads with the holy sages for "instruction" and purification. As Ellmann has noted, in the lines "O sages standing in God's holy fire/ As in the gold mosaic of a wall," the words "as in" remain ambiguous. Are the sages artistic figures, "monuments," or are they only "like" mosaics?

. . . the painted figures and transfigured saints symbolize each other with exact equivalence, for an image is in the world of art as holy as a sage. 72

If we see Byzantium as the realm of art and the imagination, then we can see the poet, as he enters Byzantium, enter into that world of the imagination or artifice, represented by the image of the poet poised before the gold mosaic. The line "Consume my heart away" is changed from the earlier version:

O saints that stand amid God's sacred fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall
Transfigure me and make me what you were. 73

In altering the line, Yeats has made the fire image more obviously purgative. While it can be misleading to attempt an explication of a poem through an earlier version of the

⁷²Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 254.

⁷³Bradford, p. 102.

work, in this case the early draft may make the poet's request a bit clearer. While meditating on the symbols he wishes to be transfigured into the symbol, to fuse creator and creation:" . . . gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity." In order to achieve his goal, the poet must be freed from all connection with the physical dying animal.

The singing bird in the last stanza provides a direct opposition to the bird in Stanza I who celebrates the cyclic nature of life. The eternal form of the golden bird is set upon the golden bough of the Tree of Life, and Wilson illustrates that this bird represents not only the purified soul,⁷⁴ but that he is also the perfected symbol. Richard Ellmann summarizes:

The golden bird, symbol of the reconciliation of opposites, symbolizes: 1) the protagonist, who fades into it 2) the poem itself, the created artifact 3) the poet, who becomes what he creates. 75

It seems to me that Ellmann need not have separated the protagonist and the poet here, for the speaker experiencing the process of artistic vision *is* always the poet. While he is singing to "keep a drowsy Emperor awake," the fused artist-artifice calls attention to his own reality and to his own value as a symbol, since he is calling on the Emperor to

⁷⁴Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition, pp. 238-239.

⁷⁵Ellmann, p. 254.

attend to the eternal song of the imagination. The final lines demonstrate a more complete representation of the power of the symbol than almost any lines in Yeats, for the final music is "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." The symbol, then, is timeless, eternal. The bird most nearly exemplifies John Senior's description quoted earlier of the Hindu *yantra*, which "allows the mind to break through its ordinary limits in order to perceive things not as they seem, but are, and this is to perceive them as infinite."⁷⁶ The sensual music of time has been obliterated, and the past and future are at once eternally present:

. . . the golden bird singing in and of eternity represents not only a satisfying form for the re-incarnation of the suffering poet, but exemplifies as well the process by which art may be created; for in the pattern of journey, prayer, purgation and apotheosis, we can see the analogue for the process whereby the dedicated artist transmutes the chaos of finite experience into ordered and eternal imaginative worlds. ⁷⁷

For me at least, there remain some reservations about the completeness of the artist's transmutation through his vision in "Sailing to Byzantium." In the third stanza, the poet is still pleading for his place in "the artifice of eternity," and the final stanza, like "All Souls' Night," is left tentative:

⁷⁶Senior, p. 43

⁷⁷Arra Garab, Beyond Byzantium, p. 29.

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,*

(p. 408, 25-26, emphasis
mine)

The poet projects the image of the bird, and he clearly delineates the process involved in being "transmuted" into that image; yet, as far as one can discern from the poem, he never experiences the completed apotheosis.⁷⁸ He is still the natural man. We cannot necessarily deem this a failure in the poet's vision, although John Senior does. He claims that the symbolist poet (and his definition includes Yeats) "wanted to catch the absolute on the printed page."⁷⁹ However, this may be an oversimplification and unfair to Yeats, for if the absolute can be captured or pinpointed, even in art, then it is no longer "absolute;" if it is expressible in time, then it is no longer eternal. It may be that Yeats's symbol, and concomitantly his visionary poet, can only point to reality: he can bridge the gap between temporal and eternal, but never completely close it.

Before any further assessment of the "success" of the seer in Yeats's poetry, we should first consider the final

⁷⁸Bradford in "Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A Study of their Development" argues that when Yeats changed the final lines from, "And set me on a golden bough to sing . . ." to "Or set upon a golden bough to sing . . ." he eliminated any ambiguities about the status of the poet: ". . . the reincarnation has miraculously occurred" (p. 115). On the contrary, I think the revision tends to render the line even more ambiguous, for the first version leaves little question that the poet is still totally mortal and still requesting the status of an image. In the final version, I still find no satisfactory clarification of the poet's definite "reincarnation."

poem in this present discussion. If we accept Yeats's letter to Sturge Moore (April 16, 1930) as an accurate statement of intention, "Byzantium" is intended as an exposition of the conclusion of "Sailing to Byzantium," which Yeats felt he had left unclear: "This poem originates from a criticism of yours. You objected to the last verse of "Sailing to Byzantium" because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else."⁸⁰ Although I find Moore's objection unwarranted, the Byzantium of the second poem has a more pervasive air of mystery about it and the purgatorial aspects are more dominant. The speaker does not "sail the seas;" instead, at the sound of "great cathedral gong," the "unpurged images of day" give way to the purged images of the holy city.⁸¹ The "night-walkers' song," because of its placement within the long phrase of the first four lines, is slightly ambiguous: it may be a parallel to the bird's sensual music in "Sailing to Byzantium," and therefore one of the unpurged sounds silenced by the gong; or it may

⁷⁹Senior, "Introduction" to The Way Down and Out, p. xxiv.

⁸⁰Yeats, Letter to Sturge Moore, quoted by Bradford, p. 115.

⁸¹The poem makes continually cognizant of the historical medieval setting as well as the timeless "artifice of eternity." In early drafts, the dome and cathedral are designated as "St. Sophia's dome" (cf. Bradford); the final draft has "A Starlit or moonlit dome," which still affords the tone of medieval art, but is less restrictive than the "St. Sophia's dome."

follow the sounding of the gong after the other sounds recede. In the second reading, I would take the "night-walkers' song" to refer to the poem itself.

The first stanza is rather like the dimming of lights in a theatre, and in the hush, on the stage of the poet's mind, appear images. I would not refute readings of "Byzantium" as the experience of the soul after the gong sounds human death (archetypally associated with night). The appearance of the "shade" with "A mouth that has no moisture and no breath," the "cock of Hades," and the dolphins carrying spirits to the "other world" all provide internal evidence for the reading. Further evidence is supplied by Wilson in carefully documented Greek, Egyptian, and occult precedents for the images.⁸² Yet one can also see the process described as taking place within the poet's imagination in the "death-in-life and life-in-death" (line 16) trance when the artist's mind is cleared of all quotidian concerns ("the images of day") and opened to perceptions from the *anima mundi*. The two readings may converge if Bloom is correct in saying that Yeats, following Shelley:

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Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition, pp. 231-243.

. . . believed inspiration a kind of death, and Byzantium is for Yeats a state of inspiration, a kind of death, and an actual historical city, all at once. For this to be possible, phantasmagoria is necessary, and Yeats begins and ends his poem as a phantasmagoria . . . Yeats has a vision of a quasi-historical 'Byzantium;' he stands somehow in its streets as night comes on. He stands also in his own mind's eye, observing a struggle of images to make a poem, and he stands finally in Eternity, beyond the generative sea . . . 83

Thus the sound of the gong may mark the passing of life, but it can also be compared to the sound of the midnight bell in "All Souls' Night," which inspires the poet's summoning of the ghosts.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than shade.

(p. 497, 9-10)

The poet, now turned away from "all mere complexities," can focus on the images in his mind's eye; as in "All Souls' Night," he has "mummy-truths to tell." The fact that he is breathless when he perceives the breathless image indicates the intensity of his meditation. The first lines of both the second and third stanzas may appear almost as quibbling over words; after all, the distinction between "shade" and "image" or between "miracle" and "golden handiwork" seems remarkably subtle. Yet what is involved here is a process

⁸³Bloom, p. 390. I further suggest that if we call the speaker of this poem Yeats specifically, then we should also be willing to see his action as representing on a larger scale the inspiration of any visionary poet.

of clarifying and perfecting the symbol:

. . . for we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect, that we may love them. Religious and visionary people . . . see symbols in their trances; for religious and visionary thought is thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection. 84

The image which the speaker hails as superhuman seems to serve as a kind of Virgilian guide through the world of the imagination. Oddly enough, the golden bird, when it appears in this poem, does not envelop or transfigure the poet; but it may well retain the designation from "Sailing to Byzantium" of what the poet will be, "once out of nature." The bird is not singing, but it "Can like the cocks of Hades crow." Handiwork of the Emperor's smithies, this work of art, symbolic of both poet and poem in the earlier work, is here called "a miracle."

Yeats introduces another important cock in "Solomon and the Witch," and the near perfect consummation of the lovers causes him to cry out. As Solomon explains:

'A cockerel
Crew from a blossoming apple bough
Three hundred years before the Fall,

⁸⁴Yeats, "Symbolism in Painting," Essays and Introductions, p. 149.

And never crew again till now,
 And would not now but that he thought,
 Chance being at one with Choice at last,
 All that the brigand apple brought
 And this foul world were dead at last,
 He that crowed out eternity
 Thought to have crowed it in again.'

(pp. 387-388, 9-18)

In the perfect union of intellect (Solomon) and the heart (Sheba), Chance and Choice would be united, as they are in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," where the dancing girl reconciles the opposites of Sphinx and Biddha. Also, as with Robartes, a "blessed moon" marks the union, and the cock from the apple bough would crow in the new cycle, perhaps another prelapsarian state. In "Byzantium," the cock is "by the moon embittered." The moon may represent change, the cyclic nature of the fallen world and "all complexities of mire or blood," or, as in "Solomon and the Witch," the moon may be approaching its fullness, the hour at which the cock will crow in eternity once more.

To become part of the cock's changeless world, blood-begotten spirits must, at midnight, pass through the purging flames and be freed of "all complexities of fury." The flames, "begotten of flame," are *pure* images. Several times in his prose, Yeats speaks of the power of symbols to create or call up other symbols:

One must allow the images to form with all their associations before one criticizes . . . If you can suspend also desire, and let them form at their own will, your absorption becomes more complete and they are more clear in colour, more precise in articulation, and you and they begin to move in the midst of what seems a powerful light. 85

In the moment of contemplation, one enters "a state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is enfolded in symbols."⁸⁶ When the will no longer attempts to control images and the symbol in a sense controls the artist, then the images beget other images: thus, the superhuman image which first floats before the poet in "Byzantium" leads him to the image of the bird, which then gives way to the flames, begetting other flames. The trance is complete:

Dying into a dance
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

(p. 498, 30-32)

This concept seems closely related to what Yeats elsewhere calls "fire-born moods." If we turn once more to Yeats's discussion of the *anima mundi* in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, we find these two most relevant sections:

⁸⁵Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, p. 508.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 509.

From tradition and perception, one thought of one's own life as symbolized by earth, the place of heterogenous things, the images as mirrored in water and the images themselves one could divide but as air; and beyond it all there was, I felt confident . . . the fire that makes all simple. Yet the images themselves were four-fold, meaning in part from the predominance of one out of the four elements or that of the fifth element, the veil hiding another four, a bird born out of the fire. 87

There are two realities, the terrestrial and the condition of fire. All power is from the terrestrial condition, for there all opposites meet and there only is the extreme of choice possible, full freedom . . . in the condition of fire is all music and all rest. 88

"It is always," Yeats claims in the same essay, "to the Condition of Fire . . . that we would rise."⁸⁹ This, it seems to me, is what happens to the artist in "Byzantium," and insofar as the poet can convey the clarity and profound simplicity of his images to his reader, he too can approach the Condition of Fire. These "fire-born moods" are essential to Yeats's concept of vision, and Bloom is one of the few to remark on its importance:

Yeats is too bewilderingly complex for any one passage to hold his essence, and still this comes closer than any other I know. What Yeats wanted, as a poet, was to reach at last what, following Blake and Shelley, he called the Condition of Fire, and the extreme variety of his art longed always . . . to be 'struck dumb in the simplicity of fire.' 90

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 511-512.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 523-524.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 532.

⁹⁰ Bloom, p. 91.

The Fire is only another reminder of the significance of the elements as symbols in Yeats's work; the visionary poet, like the *shanachie*, is attuned to the elemental spirits. The flames in the poem are at once both elemental and purgatorial. Yeats uses the word "complexities" four times in "Byzantium;" only in the agony of the trance of Fire which has the power to simplify, can the fury of complexities be renounced.

The poem's final stanza presents some difficult ideological and syntactical problems. From the vantage of the world of symbols, the speaker looks back on the complexities of mire and blood. Like the mythical artist Arion, "Spirit after spirit" rides the dolphins to Byzantium. Each threat of the natural world is "broken" or stilled by artifice. The smithies who hammered out the golden bird "break the flood" of the sea of life; the "marbles of the dancing floor," setting for the fiery dance, "break bitter furies of complexity;" the all-important "images that yet/Fresh images beget" break the "dolphin-torn" and "gong-tormented" sea. If one recalls the gong of the first stanza which signals the passing of images of day, then it only makes sense that the sea of life would be "tormented" by the sound. The position or "allegiances" of the poet in this struggle within the last stanza seems unresolved. Turning from his concentration on the flames, he shifts his attention once more to the complexities which the whole

poem has attempted to clarify. This seems not too unlike the action of Lot's wife in looking back on a city from which she should have been glad to flee forever. As with "Sailing to Byzantium" the apotheosis seems never quite effected, and the vision is of what is possible rather than what actually occurs. The "fire-born mood" slips easily away. Yet in that moment the artist's achievement should not be underrated:

. . . to him [Yeats], it seems safe to say, 'Byzantium' was primarily a description of the act of making a poem. The poet . . . takes the welter of images and masters them in an act of creation. This mastery is so astonishing to the poet himself that he calls the creation of his imagination superhuman. The image of the golden bird, 'more miracle than bird or handiwork,' may be understood to represent a poem; the bird sings, as do Yeats's poems, either like the cocks of Hades of rebirth--the continuing cycle of reincarnating human life, or with greater glory of the eternal reality or beatitude which transcends the cycles. . . . Never had he realized so completely the awesome drama of the creative act. . . . 91

Because of the movement back into the generative world, Wilson terms "Byzantium" a "disintegrating vision" for the artist.⁹² Sister Lemieux concludes that the city of Byzantium has value for the poet only in a dialectic relationship with the natural world; the poet develops by continually moving between the "images of day" and the imaginative world of

⁹¹Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 270.

⁹²Wilson, p. 243.

midnight. As she aptly phrases it, the poet seeks "entrance as a student, not as a permanent resident."⁹³ In other words, Byzantium is a nice place to visit, but one wouldn't want to live there. Whatever explanation one chooses, Hazard Adams's statement that Yeats never prophesies (even in *A Vision*) a Blakean apocalypse, seems clearly accurate:⁹⁴ that is, for Yeats one cannot achieve visionary unity within the world of time.

There are, as Adams points out, two ways of viewing the world for Blake: one can see history as a single linear movement from creation into infinity or one can see time moving cyclically. For Blake, each of these is a half-truth.⁹⁵ Vision in Blake's poetry involves a change in perspective, and once the Eternal Man perceives the world as timeless and spaceless, then he does not lose that vision. Golganooza, and later, Jerusalem, are eternal cities to which the natural world is transformed through the visionary eye. For Yeats, the change in awareness is fleeting. Historical Byzantium with its unity of culture takes its place on the Great Wheel, and eternal Byzantium, the symbol, is opposed to the natural world. In order to achieve in any lasting way what the city symbolizes, Yeats requires much more than a change in perspective: the Wheel must come full circle.

⁹³Lemieux, "Modes of the 'I,'" p. 86.

⁹⁴Adams, p. 167.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 60.

In one of his letters Yeats defines "vision" as "the intense realization of a state of ecstatic emotion symbolized in a definite imagined region."⁹⁶ In light of the meditative tradition evidenced in "All Souls' Night" and the "Condition of Fire" described metaphorically in Yeats's essay on the *anima mundi*, the word "ecstatic" rings true, for it is used not only by Christian mystics, but passes into the mainstream of English literature through the metaphysical poets (Donne's "The Extasie," for example), who also combined meditation with the art of poetry. The "definite imagined region" is Byzantium, which symbolizes to the poet the "Unity of Culture" that he longed for in Ireland. The city as a meeting place of Eastern and Western cultures further fascinated Yeats, whose interests were divided between the two. And the art of the ancient city embodied for Yeats the ideal which the poet, especially the visionary poet, should capture in his work. This comment in a 1911 textbook on Byzantine art found in Yeats's library, may give further hints as to why Byzantine art was the ideal:

Its forms do indeed evoke and quicken the sense of real life, but it is a life elect and spiritual, and not the tumultuous flow of human existence. They are without the solidity of organisms which rejoice or suffer; they seem to need no sun and cast no shadow, emerging mysteriously from some radiance of their own . . . 97

⁹⁶Yeats, Letters, ed. Wade, p. 583.

⁹⁷D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, "Byzantium," in Yeats, ed. Unterecker, p. 135. See the end of Yeats's early play The Island of Statues; Naschina, who has become immortal, casts no shadow.

Numerous critics have posited reasons for Yeats's choice of Byzantium. One article in particular entitled "Byzantium" by D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, relating some of Yeats's findings when he visited the area, helps to establish the artistic magnetism which the city exercised on the poet. As a complex historical city, it allows Yeats innumerable possibilities as a symbol; in the "Byzantium" poems, its most outstanding symbolic value is as an ideal city of images. Ellmann notes that for Yeats, ". . . only images are real; they are 'self-born'; being perfect and unageing, they mock men's enterprise."⁹⁸ The poet's vision bridges the gap between "men's enterprise" and the perfected image.

John Senior, as I have mentioned earlier, sees Yeats's vision as failure--not from an aesthetic, but an occult, point of view and his criticism bears quotation at length:

We should expect, from our knowledge of occult belief, that Yeats would rise now into the resolution of the dialectical condition of man, into the awareness of the unity of atman and brahman, and blast the trumpet of this knowledge: Everything is one, here is there, body is soul, the blood and the fire are one. But Yeats, though he obviously knows intellectually that this is what he ought to find, never attempts to fake, in his poetry, the fact that he has not found it. One of the terrors of occultism is the realization of how far the thinker is from the thought. Yeats is honest and afraid. Instead of the final unison of light, the antiphonal choruses return--the vacillations. ⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 252.

⁹⁹ Senior, p. 166.

Even though the vision is not permanently transforming, Yeats's artist as he is projected through the poems gains tremendous depth and importance because he identifies himself as a magus. I have intentionally selected in this chapter only a few of the visionary poems. Although they are, I think, reasonably representative of the figuration of the poet we are meant to perceive, they were selected because the artist speaking within them celebrates the *process* of vision as well as the vision itself. The poet, having progressed beyond even the magical claims of the *shanachie*, asserts special validity for his work, for he insists that symbols are given him from beings more powerful than himself--from immortals who "cleave his dreams," from spirits who blessed the rock at Cashel, from ghosts who harbour mummy-truths. If the function of the artist is to "discover immortal moods in mortal desires,"¹⁰⁰ through the ecstasy of fire-born moods brought on by the appearance of the symbol, then Yeats's visionary poet, as he is developed through the lyrics, becomes a symbol of the possibility of art. A natural man, he becomes sensitive to the *anima mundi*, he participates in the symbol, and having entered into the world of the symbol as in "Byzantium," he, like the rose upon the cross, becomes a symbol of the meeting of temporal and eternal. He can, for

¹⁰⁰Yeats, quoted by Bloom, p. 71.

the visionary moment, cry out with "Ribh in Ecstasy:"

What matter that you understood no word!
Doubtless I spoke or sang what I had heard
In broken sentences. My soul had found
All happiness in its own cause or ground.
Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot
Godhead. Some shadow fell. My soul forgot
Those amorous cries that out of quiet come
And must the common round of day resume.

(p. 557)

CHAPTER III

THE POET AS OLD MAN

*Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call;*

"An Acre of Grass," p. 576.

The cry of the poet in "An Acre of Grass" reflects the nature of yet another "I" of the artist in Yeats's verse. His plea for "an old man's frenzy" shows a fierceness and a determination far different from the acceptance in "I walked among the Seven Woods of Coole," where the poet accepted whatever incomplete bits of truth came to him, and a vast shift in tone from the pleas to the "far-off" secret rose. It suggests the savage indignation which Yeats so admired in Swift. It demonstrates an impatience magnified by the old man's keen awareness of his own mortality.

What might be called a fascination with the person of the old man in Yeats's poetry cannot be explained entirely as Yeats's psychological response to his own old age, for the speaker of the aged man goes back to much earlier periods of Yeats's writing. Arra Garab points to a passage

in one of Yeats's letters written at the age of sixty-seven:
 "My first denunciation of old age I made in the Wanderings of
 Usheen (end of part I) before I was twenty and the same
 denunciation comes in the last pages of the book."¹ The
 verses referred to in *The Wanderings of Oisín* are Oisín's
 lament to St. Patrick:

Ah me! to be shaken with coughing and broken with old
 age and pain,
 Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with
 remembrance and fear;
 All emptied of purple hours as a beggar's cloak in
 the rain,
 As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked under
 a weir.

(p. 63, Book III, 217-220)

Here neither glory nor wisdom is attributed to the old man, but
 only the agony of age after three hundred years in the land
 of eternal youth.

Accompanying "The Wanderings of Oisín" in Yeats's
 first published book (1889) appear several other poems spoken
 through aged voices. "Ephemera" consists of a dialogue
 between two ageing Indian lovers; in "The Madness of King
 Goll," the strongest lyric in the collection, the king, like
 Fergus, abdicates his kingship and wanders through the woods
 tormented to madness by the whispering of old beech leaves;

¹Garab, p. 6, quoted from a letter to Olivia Shakespeare, June, 1932. The book about which he speaks would probably be The Winding Stair and Other Poems, published in 1933. The first poem contains the line: "The innocent and the beautiful/ Have no enemy but time," and the last section employs striking old figures such as Crazy Jane and Tom the Lunatic.

"The Ballad of the Foxhunter" involves both an old dying man and his ancient dog. In the poems grouped under the title of *The Rose*, also composed before 1900, Yeats has added to the voice of the lover, spokesman in most of the lyrics, two old men, an "Old Pensioner" and "Father Gilligan."

Similarly, Yeats's prose of the period, especially the stories in *The Secret Rose*, includes several memorable aged figures: the old knight in "Out of the Rose" who dies in the service of the intellectual rose, the strange old man-heron in "The Old Men of the Twilight." In these stories, the aged have gained something like a mantle of wisdom in exchange for their years, as has the understanding old monk in the story, "Where There is Nothing There is God." On the other hand, the old knight in the 1895 dramatic poem "The Seekers," weary with "threescore years of dream-led wandering," serves as a devastating representation of defeat when the voice he has followed to his death reveals itself to be a bearded witch called Infamy. One can find his counterpart much later in *At the Hawk's Well* in the figure of the old man who has spent fifty years desperately waiting to capture the moment when the well reveals its secret.

In the figure of Red Hanrahan, the wandering poet and scholar, Yeats also presents the poem as an old man. Like Oisín, Hanrahan rages against old age:

The poet, Owen Hanrahan, under a bush of may,
 Calls down a curse on his own head because it withers grey;
 Then on the speckled eagle-cock of Ballygawley Hill
 Because it is the oldest thing that knows of cark and ill;²

Yet his curse is more than Oisín's tirade; it carries with it "the power of the curse-making bards."³ Hanrahan has already been discussed as a figure in the *shanachie* tradition, and the *shanachie* increases in both skill and esteem with experience in his trade. Only the old story-tellers were allowed to voice the most ancient and sacred of the tales in Irish culture. True to this tradition, the master poets in both *On the King's Threshold* and *The Hour Glass* are the oldest of the bards. Something, then, of Yeats's interest in the figure of the old man may derive from the association of wise poets with age in Irish oral tradition.

Harold Bloom claims that two images which form the personae of Yeats in his early and final career as a poet are "the prematurely old young man seeking the secret wisdom, and the ageless old magus who has conquered age by long possessing such wisdom."⁴ Certainly Shelley's *Alastor* serves as a prototype for the former (Bloom comments at length upon this relationship). This second speaker, the ageless magus, first appears in Yeats's early stories, but appears

²Yeats, "Red Hanrahan's Curse," Collected Works, Vol. V, p. 238.

³Ibid., p. 236.

⁴Bloom, p. 58.

more frequently in later poems. He is visible not only in the guise of the poet, but also in figures such as Tom the Lunatic, Crazy Jane, and Ribh, wise ancients whose wisdom verges on madness. Both these figures become even more intriguing when they merge with the figuration of the poet--when Yeats projects himself as an experienced old artist who has for a lifetime sought the truth of the symbol.

My intention in this chapter is to consider several of the lyrics in light of their aged poet speaker. Even though, as I have indicated, the figure appears throughout Yeats's work in various forms, he is most fully developed--as one might expect--in his later work, especially the *Last Poems*. My concern, however, will not be a detailed biographical assessment of the effects the poet's advancing years exercised on his writing, although the autobiographical Yeats is nowhere more evident than in his last works, which are teeming with names of friends and places central to his life. As a complement to these poems, Yeats's non-literary records, such as letters and diaries, display an obsession with the effects of old age. Vivian Koch in *W. B. Yeats: The Tragic Phase* explores to some extent the relationship between Yeats's psychological, particularly sexual, response to old age and his last poems. Although she concentrates rather too heavily on the immediate effects of his 1934 Steinach operation in rejuvenating his verse, her commentary on the poetry is

highly perceptive. More recently, Arra Garab (*Beyond Byzantium*) has devoted much of his book to this biographical interrelationship. Biographers such as Ellmann and Hone have also added their comments. It is with this background in mind that I have selected certain poems to describe the figuration of the old poet as projected through the speaking voice in the verse.

"The Tower" sets forth the problem of age explicitly and is at least partially representative of the entire book which bears the same name.⁵ By the time of its composition in 1927, Yeats was sixty-two and had twice suffered illness which brought him very near death.⁶ This experience adds a sense of urgency to "The Tower" which is present neither in Oisín's nor Hanrahan's lamentations on old age. The poem opens with a powerful cry of the poet who, like the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium," is painfully cognizant that "That is no country for old men:"

What shall I do with this absurdity--
O heart, O troubled heart--this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? . . .

(p. 409, 1-4)

⁵The problem as set out in the first section of "The Tower" is much the same as that in "Sailing to Byzantium." I have chosen to consider the latter poem in the previous chapter because the two Byzantium poems comprise a unit and also because the speaker, once he has expressed the initial incongruity between the physical world of the young and the "tattered coat upon a stick," focuses on Byzantine images of the soul.

Sarah Youngblood in her reading of "The Tower" quotes from Yeats's diary an entry made shortly before Yeats started work on the poem which makes the phallic nature of the imagery obvious:

What shall I do with this absurd toy which they have given me, this grotesque rattle, O heart O nerves, you are as vigorous as ever, you still hunger for the whole world, and they have given you this toy. 7

By the final draft, sexual implications have become more subtle, but the poet's sexual desires become explicit in his descriptions of Red Hanrahan later in the poem. At war with this "battered kettle" are not only the poet's physical desire, but more important, his poetic imagination--"excited, passionate, fantastical." Yeats comments in his *Autobiography* that when he was young, his Muse was old, but that as he ages, his Muse grows younger.⁸ It is the young, passionate, sensual Muse he fears he must trade in for abstract Plato and Plotinus.

⁶Garab, p. 46.

⁷Sarah Youngblood, "A Reading of 'The Tower,'" Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 5, pp. 76-77.

⁸Yeats, Autobiography, p. 365. The comment occurs as Yeats looks at the medal given him by the king of Sweden: "It shows a young man listening to a Muse . . . 'I was good-looking once like that young man, but my unpracticed verse was full of infirmity, my Muse old as it were; and now I am old and rheumatic, and nothing to look at, but my Muse is young. I am even persuaded that she is like those Angels in Swedenborg's vision, and moves perpetually "towards the day-spring of her youth.'" One should also note the resemblance to the relationship in Blake's poem, "The Mental Traveller."

From the outset, "The Tower" projects not just the old man with mind and body at odds, but the old poet at odds with his imagination. Rather like the sensual music in the first stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium," the passion of his art is not meant for the old. The poet's response, however, is not the spiritual journey to Byzantium, although the tower which he climbs might be considered a "monument to unageing intellect." Rooted in the physical world like the tower and the tree, the poet "sends imagination forth" and, again emphasizing his poetic function, calls up images. His technique bears some resemblance to that in "All Souls' Night," although the setting upon the tower's battlement contrasts sharply with the table set with wine, ready for the poet's meditation. A primary theme of "The Tower," as one finds time and again in Yeats's poetry, is the dynamic interaction between poet and images. No actual events occur in the poem; yet in the first stanza the poet claims that he must choose Plato and Plotinus for friends, and section III finds him mocking Plotinus's thought and crying in Plato's teeth. What takes place in the interim to change the poet is a dialectic between poet and symbol, for he has deliberately called: "Images and memories/ From ruin or from ancient trees,/ For I would ask a question of them all" (p. 410, 22-24).

In "All Souls' Night" the ghosts which the poet summons are former acquaintances; the ghosts in "The Tower" are not. The tale of Mrs. French and her serving man who

cut off a neighbour's ear was local history, as was the Irish poet Raftery. But each of the characters involved is gifted, like the poet, with excited, passionate imagination.⁹ Mrs. French becomes a symbol of the pride and beauty of a former aristocracy associated with the tower. Yeats comments in "Estrangement" that a great lady is as simple as a good poet: "Neither possesses anything that is not ancient and their own . . ." ¹⁰

Everyday I notice some new analogy between the long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our heads always that form of society aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino and Versailles. ¹¹

Raftery, one of the last *shanachies*, becomes in "The Tower" an ideal figure wielding the power of the poet. His art dispels the rational sense; so caught up with the beauty of the rhymes and of the woman which the rhymes celebrate, Raftery's listeners ". . . mistook the brightness of the moon/ For the prosaic light of day--/ Music had driven their wits astray--" (p. 411, 45-47). The moon here carries its traditional associations in Yeats's poetry with imagination

⁹Youngblood, p. 77.

¹⁰Yeats, Autobiography, p. 312.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 320-321.

and poetry and is contrasted with the *prosaic* sun. Raftery is not the victim of the illusion he creates, for he seeks self-expression, but the passive listener is incapable of comprehending the poet's vision. The poet retains enough humour to suggest that the cause of their momentary lapse in sanity might well be "toasting her [Mary Hines] a score of times." Yet the power of Raftery's song is indisputable, and the speaker pleads for such potency in his own song:

O may the moon and sunlight seem
 One inextricable beam,
 For if I triumph I must make men mad.

(p. 411, 54-56)

But the most vital of the images called forth in "The Tower" is Hanrahan, neither an historical figure nor an old acquaintance, but an image from the poet's own creative mind: "I thought it all out twenty years ago." By calling forth Hanrahan from the *anima mundi* and placing him in the poem as an image, the artist is transforming his poetry--and himself, its creator--into images. Further, because Hanrahan shares something of the *shanachie*, the initiated occultist, and particularly in this poem, the old poet, he incorporates three of the essential voices of the figuration of the artist.

To Mrs. French, Raftery, Hanrahan, and to the rough men-at-arms formerly part of the tower's legend, whose images are all stored in the Great Memory (line 85), the poet levels his question:

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,
 Who trod upon those rocks or passed this door,
 Whether in public or in secret rage
 As I do now against old age?

(p. 413, 97-100)

The impatient eyes offer him an implied "yes" to his question, and the speaker dismisses his images--except the symbol of his own poetry. Hanrahan is recalled for another question:

Does the imagination dwell the most
 Upon a woman won or woman lost?
 If on the lost, admit you turned aside
 From a great labyrinth out of pride,
 Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
 Or anything called conscience once;
 And that if memory recur, the sun's
 Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

(pp. 413-414, 113-120)

At first the question seems out of place, unrelated to the rest of the poem except in connection with a vague longing on the part of the poet. In Yeats's story of Red Hanrahan, the young man is lured away from his beloved by an old man with magical cards which transform into a hare and pack of hounds, and Hanrahan follows their chase to mystery. The artist, too, forsakes full involvement with the labyrinth of life for the mystery of the symbol (as Yeats was divided between the "woman lost," Maud Gonne, and his devotion to art). In understanding the significance of the question, Miss Youngblood's reading again proves helpful, for as she points out, the loss of the desired woman is intimately related to the activity of imagination and memory:

. . . the memory retains the ideal image never measured by reality, and it assumes in proportion of the imagination a brilliance (as the moon eclipses the sun, the ideal the real) which makes the known, actual reality unimportant: the day is blotted out. ¹²

Thus the "woman lost" remains in the poet's imagination as fit meat for poetic symbols. This is the assurance which the poet gains by calling Hanrahan back. While the question emphasizes the speaker's loss of the physical, it reinforces the importance of the imaginative act of poetry with the power to eclipse the prosaic sun.

The final section of "The Tower" expresses definite and positive action: "It is time I wrote my will" (line 121); "And I declare my faith (line 145); "Now I shall make my soul" (line 181). Each of these acts befits an old man. The weakness I find in Section III is that, even with the affirmation resulting from the question to Hanrahan, the dialogue between poet and symbol does not seem to build fully in the first two sections to warrant these major declarations at the end, particularly the patriotic will in lines 121 through 145. Through the imagery, however, one is prepared for the fisherman, Plato and Plotinus, the sun and moon, and the dream.

¹²Youngblood, p. 83.

The beneficiaries of the poet's will, ". . . upstanding men/ That climb the streams until/ The fountain leap, and at dawn/ Drop their cast at the side/ Of dripping stone; . . ." (lines 122-126), echo his description of his own boyhood in the first stanza of the poem (lines 8-10). They also prove consistent with the audience Yeats chooses in "The Fisherman," the Irish peasant for whom he longs to write. Fishermen are also, of course, traditional symbols of fertility. It is to young virile men, aristocratic Irishmen with the pride of Mrs. French, that the poet leaves his will. The swan, singing his last song under "a fading gleam" parallels the poet upon the tower "Under the day's declining beam."

The faith declared in this final section indicates how influential his dialogue with the images has been; Plato and Plotinus are scorned in favour of the foul rag and bone shop of the heart where "lock, stock, and barrel" are made up. In order to be fair to Plato and Plotinus, Yeats added a note to qualify his association of them with pure abstraction:

When I wrote the lines about Plato and Plotinus I forgot that it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence. Has not Plotinus written: 'Let every soul recall, then at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed the life into them all . . . it is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion-- and it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life . . .' 13

In both the poem and the note, Yeats again celebrates the creative imagination, the images and memories of the artist, "All those things whereof/ Man makes a superhuman/ Mirror-resembling dream" (lines 163-165).

Despite what appears to be a triumph of sensuous imagination and of man, creator of everything, the poet concludes with a resolve which echoes that in "Sailing to Byzantium;" he will send his soul to "study/ In a learned school" (lines 182-183). The artist has found both defeat and triumph in his age. Daws build their nest in the crumbling tower top, creating life from its ruin; the poet, too, creates from his own decaying body a theme for his art, as the poem itself illustrates. The poem *is* will, faith, "Poet's imaginings/ And memories of love," and the super-human dream. The reader watches these affirmations grow from the initial theme of "Slow decay of blood,/ Testy delerium/ Or dull decrepitude" (lines 185-187). The artist has made of himself and his old age symbols, like the tower itself, and he becomes a participant in the imaginative world which eclipses the sun.

Themes of old age and madness so predominant in "The Tower" reappear in various forms in the *Last Poems*. In one of this group of lyrics Yeats asks the poetic question,

¹³Yeats, Notes to "The Tower," Variorum of Poetry, p. 826.

"Why Should not Old Men be Mad?" The aged have, he argues, observed a lifetime of discrepancy between potentiality and actuality:

Some have known a likely lad
That had a sound fly-fisher's wrist
Turn to a drunken journalist;
A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce;
A Helen of social welfare dream,
Climb on a wagonette to scream.

(pp. 625-626, 2-8)

The 'accused' here can, of course, be identified in Yeats's circle of acquaintances.¹⁴ One need only read "The Tragic Generation" in Yeats's *Autobiography* to find innumerable further examples of talented young writers defeated by chance (Arthur Symons, for example, sustained an injury in an accident in 1908 which partially crippled his mind¹⁵) or by weakness (Lionel Johnson's alcoholism is perhaps the most obvious example). It is as though the fisherman to whom the poet leaves his will in "The Tower" is accused of neglecting that trust. The bitterness expressed in "Why Should not Old

¹⁴ Jeffares (Commentary, p. 503) speculates that the journalist may be R. M. Smylie, editor of the Irish Times, but no clear identification has been offered. The girl, although the description fits Maud Gonne in her marriage with Macbride, is identified by Jeffares as Iseult Gonne. The Helen can be associated with Con Markievicz, but is almost certainly Maud Gonne, whose parallels with Helen of Troy are consistent in the lyrics.

¹⁵ John M. Munroe, "Arthur Symons and W. B. Yeats: The Quest for Compromise," Dalhousie Review, XLV, ii (Summer, 1965), p. 137.

"Men be Mad" is not selective: should we try, the speaker asserts, we could find: "No single story . . . / Of an unbroken happy mind, / A finish worthy of the start" (lines 13-15). He implies that old men possess the knowledge that failure is both universal and irrevocable:

Young men know nothing of this sort,
 Observant old men know it well;
 And when they know what old books tell,
 And that no better can be had,
 Know why an old man should be mad.

(p. 626, 16-20)

The lament is bitter and leaves no hint of assuagement. It is the awareness of the old man in *Purgatory* who knowingly repeats the bitter cycle by murdering his son.

Although Yeats does not attempt to negate or soften the harsh realizations which old age bring that experience falls far short of expectation, he does offer an alternative perspective in other of the *Last Poems*. He offers us the point of view achieved solely by the artist, and in particular, the artist whose insight is sharpened by old age.

"Lapis Lazuli" presents one of the most powerful of these artistic voices. Far from mad, the poet forms a positive contrast to hysterical women of the first stanza. Although the various segments of "Lapis Lazuli" may appear disjointed the poem really presents a unified structure constructed around a central concern of art. The opening stanza sets up a dichotomy, visible throughout Yeats's poetry, between the

artist and the "activist." As if to contrast the language of these two poles of humanity, the poem opens with highly colloquial style:

I have heard that hysterical women say
 They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
 Of poets that are always gay,
 For everybody knows or else should know
 That if nothing drastic is done
 Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
 Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
 Until the town lie beaten flat. 16

(p. 565, 1-8)

The poet's answer to the women who demand immediate political action to stay the impending disaster is not to "take up the cause," but instead to shift perspective in the second stanza. He distances the potential tragedy of aeroplane and zeppelin with the Shakespearian viewpoint of the world as a stage:

All perform their tragic play,
 Their 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.

(p. 565, 9-17)

An awareness of tragedy seems to work on at least two levels here, for both the character within the drama and the actor who performs the role transform their dread into gaiety.

¹⁶The poem's date of publication in 1938 may well forecast the disaster of World War II.

Yeats claims consistently in his prose that tragedy is the highest form of art; in his *Autobiography* he remarks: "A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men. It has not joy, as we understand that word, but ecstasy . . ." ¹⁷ In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, he reminds us that the Greek chorus danced for joy during tragic performances, ¹⁸ and in *On the Boiler*, the great McCoy contends that: ". . . the arts are all the bridal chambers of joy. No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy." ¹⁹ Further, Yeats does not restrict the value of tragedy to the stage: "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy." ²⁰

The poet speaking in "Lapis Lazuli," then, does not posit a dichotomy between "art" and "life;" rather, art provides perspective for the universal reality of death:

All men have aimed at, found and lost;
Black out; Heaven blazing into the head;
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.

(p. 566, 18-20)

The third stanza of "Lapis Lazuli" again focuses on art, the artwork of past civilizations. As in the second section, the poet begins with a procession--this time not of

¹⁷Yeats, Autobiography, p. 319.

¹⁸Yeats, Introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935 (London, 1936), p. xxxiv.

¹⁹Yeats, On the Boiler, p. 35.

²⁰Yeats, Autobiography, p. 128.

Shakespearian characters, but of civilizations "put to the sword." However, the effect of marching them before the reader's imaginative eye in long slow cadences (e.g. "Camelback, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back") is to place them on a kind of stage, to render them part of the universal drama. The poet does not claim here that the artist's creations are eternal, for they are also destroyed:

No handiwork of Callimachus,
 Who handled marble as it it were bronze,
 Made draperies that seemed to rise
 When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;

(p. 566, 29-32)

Yet the positive response lies with the artist and creator who, recognizing the tragic cycle, can begin again:

All things fall and are built again,
 And those that build them again are gay.

(p. 566, 35-36)

The only escape from the temporality of life is the Eastern concept of rebirth. The individual cycles come to an end,

²¹A comment in "The Tragic Generation" becomes especially interesting in light of these lines in "Lapis Lazuli." Yeats remarks that Donne did not try to linger "between spirit and sense:" "How often had I heard men of my time talk of the meeting between spirit and sense, yet there is no meeting but only change upon the instant, and it is by the perception of a change, like the sudden "black-ing out" of the lights of the stage, that passion creates its most violent sensation" (p. 218). The awareness of tragedy would seem to be a sudden passionate spiritual vision.

but the series of cycles is never-ending.²² Thus, as in "The Gyres," "all things run/ On that unfashionable gyre again" (p. 565, 23-24). For a more carefully worked out concept of the gyres, one need only study Yeats's philosophy in *A Vision*.

In view of the oriental flavour of the cycles, it seems appropriate to select three Chinamen as the final procession of figures on the poet's stage in "Lapis Lazuli." The speaker stares at a work of art--a carving in lapis lazuli. The stonework connects imagistically with the fashioned stone of Callimachus in the preceding stanza. Each mark of time on the stone figures in the poet's imagination, and he transforms the Chinamen through his imagination from their limited boundaries of stone to three figures climbing a mountain slope:

²²The gyres or cycles which so fascinated Yeats are echoed in another Eastern poem, "Mohini Chaterjee" (pp. 495-496):

'Old lovers yet may have
 All that time denied--
 Grave is heaped on grave
 That they be satisfied--
 Over the blackened earth
 The old troops parade,
 Birth is heaped on birth
 That such cannonade
 May thunder time away,

In the last three lines of the poem, however, there is at least the suggestion of escape in what may parallel Yeats's concept of the Thirteenth Cone in *A Vision*, for the Indian sage speaks of a time when "Birth-hour and death-hour meet,/ Or, as great sages say,/ Men dance on deathless feet."

. and I
 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.

(p. 567, 49-56)

At the conclusion of "Lapis Lazuli" both poet and work of art stand apart from the world. The musical instrument balances the fiddle-bow in the first stanza which went unappreciated by hysterical women. The gaiety, echoed in each stanza, has a far different connotation from that given it by the women, who understand the artist's gaiety as obliviousness to, rather than acceptance of, impending tragedy, and who have no comprehension of the "gaiety" of creation. For Yeats, tragic gaiety belongs to the artist; and for Nietzsche, whom he read,²³ to the superman:

Ye look aloft when ye long for exaltation; and I
 look downward because I am exalted.

Who among you can at the same time laugh and be
 exalted?

He who climbeth on the highest mountains,
 laugheth at all tragic plays and tragic realities.²⁴

²³ Nietzsche is quoted both in the Autobiography and in Yeats's letters. Yeats credits John Quinn with introducing him to Nietzsche (Hone, p. 187). Joseph Hone tells us that Yeats called Nietzsche "that strong enchanter" and read him so much that his eyes were bad," and [Yeats] had found a thought that 'runs but even in a more violent current in the bed Blake's thought has worn'" (p. 187).

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, trans. Thomas Common (New York, 1964), p. 44. The version Yeats probably read is the 1908 translation by Tille, but I was unable to obtain a copy.

As in "The Tower," the movement of "Lapis Lazuli" is upward, and the mountain-top, more successfully than the crumbling tower, becomes the final vantage point. That in itself is the break in the otherwise circular movement of the poem which reflects the flux of history. The poet, by virtue of his age and experience, understands that the only way to counteract tragedy is transcendence through art. His age and wisdom are reflected in the gay, glittering eyes of the Chinamen.

The final unity of the intricate levels of meaning in art, as well as of the numerous figures in the poem, finally in the mind of the poet speaker. He is the one who sees the potentially destructive elements in nature, such as the water-marks on the stone, as constructive: they become a part of his artistic vision. Yeats makes extraordinary claims for the artist in "Lapis Lazuli:" he is equated with the builders of civilizations. Presumably, the poem affects its reader in the same way that the lapis lazuli carving affects the poet and, within the poet's imagination, the same way that the music transforms the world for the Chinamen. The artist is a symbol in the poem as are the Chinamen; as a symbol, he potentially offers us a vision through art which intersects both physical and spiritual worlds in a moment of tragic gaiety.

Both "High Talk" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion," very closely related thematically and imagistically, epitomize

the aged poet speaker in Yeats's lyrics. They, along with "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" and "Beautiful Lofty Things," also demonstrate especially dominant elements of autobiography. G. T. Wright remarks that Yeats in his many roles as poet shows such traits as "his impatience, his anger, his dependence on his friends, his advancing age . . . his ungovernable pride."²⁵ He concludes that in honestly presenting these qualities, "the persona is something more than their sum."²⁶ In projecting the old poet as part of his total figuration of the artist, then, Yeats does not cover up the biographical person, but rather reveals himself more fully. We are hearing the stylized voice of the poet and seeing the imaginative world of the poet, larger than life.

The subject of both these late poems is poetry, and more specifically, the image. "High Talk" moves upward on stilts to the pinnacle of the image; "The Circus Animals' Desertion" moves downward (or inward) to its source. John Unterecker claims that the artist in "High Talk" uses his metaphors to attack naturalistic literature: "He himself, he explains is not capable of the extravagant fantasy of better ages."²⁷ While Unterecker's limitations of a short volume to cover the entirety of Yeats's poetic cannon do not allow any full analysis of the poem, he has certainly touched

²⁵Wright, The Poet in the Poem, p. 107.

²⁶Idem.

²⁷Unterecker, Reader's Guide, p. 285.

upon a major theme. Unlike "The Circus Animals' Desertion," it is not one of Yeats's better known works, so I quote it here in full:

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that
 catches the eye.
 What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty
 foot high,
 And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon
 higher,
 Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a
 fence or a fire.
 Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make
 but poor shows, 5
 Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his
 timber toes,
 Because women in the upper storeys demand a face at
 the pane,
 That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to
 chisel and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run
 wild,
 From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from
 father to child.
 All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle 10
 goose
 Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and
 the dawn breaks loose;
 I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on,
 stalk on;
 Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at
 the dawn.

(pp. 622-623)

The "modern," in attempting to adhere to realism, has ignored a fundamental element in literature; neglecting the stilts which "catch the eye," he is left with a "poor show." The argument is one Yeats carried on continually with modern literature, and not only in his tirades against popular poetry in Ireland as discussed earlier. Even T. S. Eliot, who

elicited Yeats's admiration, did not escape the charge. In "Modern Poetry" Yeats comments about the precepts of Eliot's poetry:

No romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent
 . . . Poetry must resemble prose, and both accept
 the vocabulary of their time; nor must there be
 any special subject-matter. Tristram and Iseult
 were not a more suitable theme than Paddington
 Railway Station. The poet had deceived us: let
 us accept the worthless present. 28

Regardless of whether one agrees with Yeats's assessment of Eliot's subject concerns, he clearly sees the elevated past (metaphorically raised on stilts) as true subject-matter for poetry: "What if my great granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,/ And mine were but fifteen foot . . ."

The images in "High Talk" are wielded in a manner so unusual for Yeats that one is tempted to allegorize them, to find a direct "meaning" outside the poem for the stilts, just as critics attempt to find one-to-one relationships for the obscure centaur and the "horrible green birds" in "On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac." The attempt simply cannot do justice to the images, and in the final analysis, the barnacle goose *is* a barnacle goose, just as the centaur *is* finally a centaur and not specifically Irish

²⁸Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 499.

culture or Yeats's muse or "an idealized antithetical self."²⁹ We might identify the stilts as mythology or tradition (the poet in an earlier poem speaks of a coat embroidered out of old mythologies--also stolen by rogues of the world), or any of Yeats's esteemed foundations for beautiful art. Each of these suggestions is analogous to the stilts, but the poet tells us simply that all is metaphor, and we are left with that answer.

Certainly the stilts do not fit in the modern practical world which must find a useful purpose for everything, whether to patch up a fence or a fire. At the same time, the imaginative children demand "Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes," and the women, "patching old heels," demand more excitement than their own drab reality offers them. For this reason, the author "takes to chisel and plane" to construct new stilts.

Yet the poet goes further than this reading of the poem indicates. He is elucidating the nature of the metaphor in his own work. One can readily discern how much that nature differs from the "poor show;" for having once created the metaphor, "whatever I learned has run wild." It forms a unmistakable contrast to "caged lions" and "led bears."

²⁹Unterecker sees the centaur as Irish culture and Ellmann visualizes it as Yeats's muse. Bloom (p. 366) summarizes these two theories before he goes on to offer his own of "idealized antithetical self."

While the stilts may have been formed to appease the woman and child, they take the poet much farther once he has mounted them and thus entered into the world of the metaphor. The cry, "Malachi Stilt-Jack am I," seems both forceful and spontaneous, and ends with the poet's identification of everything within the context of his art: "All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all." As the music in "Lapis Lazuli" transforms the scene for the Chinamen, the stilts serve to transform the world through the poet's vision in "High Talk:" ". . . A barnacle goose/ Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks loose." No better metaphor exists for the poet's vision than the breaking of light through darkness. Bernard Levine is accurate in his assessment of the lyric as one of Yeats's most visionary poems:

Realization of the Self is a momentary vision,
not the actualization, of ultimate reality .
. . . but the imaginative process which culminates
periodically in the moment of vision, makes for
a continual refinement of imaginative
sensitivity. 30

We can see "terrible novelty" as descriptive of the poet's vision. The barnacle goose may have been selected because of the extraordinary legend surrounding him. Hatched in Arctic waters, the bird occasionally flies as far south as Ireland and England; but because his place of birth was long

³⁰Bernard Levine, "'High Talk:' A Concentrative Analysis of a Poem by Yeats," James Joyce Quarterly, Vol. III, p. 125

unknown, for many years it was believed that he hatched mysteriously from certain trees or that he grew from the trees, attached by his beak.³¹ The sea horses, part of the vision and all metaphor, add another Nietzschean laugh at the scene. They may have been selected as images because of their translucence, but they also balance and imaginatively outshine the "piebald ponies" of the earlier procession in the poem.

The figure of Malachi himself seems to bear little resemblance to the Biblical Malachi, the last of the minor prophets who warns Israel that disaster would come of her disobedience of the laws of God. Unterecker suggests an analogue in the twelfth-century saint who assisted Yeats's favourite Irish saint, Cellach.³² Neither of these personages seems to illuminate the figure in the poem. The speaking voice is, however, the artist, and he is explicit about the nature of his relationship to images. With chisel and plane, he consciously erects the metaphor. It is as though that creation suddenly gives him identity: "Malachi Stilt-Jack am I." Once created, the metaphor has an energy of its own and, as has proven the case throughout the poet's interaction with the symbol, elevates him, prepares him for the vision. In mounting the stilts, the poet enters a world of symbol.

³¹Oxford English Dictionary.

³²Unterecker, p. 286.

The final images combine earth, air (the barnacle geese), water (sea horses), and fire (the light which splits night), again a consistent pattern for Yeats's poet, who is both at one with and outside nature. The fantastical animals further reinforce the imaginative quality of the landscape.

The speaking voice in 'High Talk' more than in any previous poem of Yeats, comes closest to actually divesting itself of self-conscious awareness and, along with it, awareness of external reality; the speaking voice seems to have been magnified by a force deriving wholly from within, yet larger than any personal emotion or feeling. 33

The most overwhelming sense conveyed by the last seven lines of "High Talk" is that of freedom. If one recalls the poet's assurance at the opening of "The Tower" that in old age his imagination is more fantastical than ever, "High Talk" shows that imagination has liberated him both from restrictions of age and from the mundane reality of the physical world. What he has learned has "run wild;" dawn "breaks loose" as though it had been constrained by night; and the movement of the poet as he "stalks on" suggests freedom far beyond normal physical limitations.

"High Talk" may imply a circular condition: some "rogue of the world" is again likely to rob the poet of his stilts; he will then "take to chisel and plane" once more. Levine's very perceptive analysis of the poem perhaps best

³³Levine, p. 126.

summarizes the concept of the poet which Yeats so forcefully projects in the poem:

More than any other figure in Yeats's poetry, Malachi comes closest to being a projection of the poet's creative sensibility. For Malachi and Yeats, both, the word, the image, the artistic form constitutes but a vehicle, the scaffolding for some final--disembodied--awareness. The scaffolding is always in the making--never complete. 34

"The Circus Animals' Desertion" expresses another response to the same situation: the poet is old and his stilts and show are gone; the fanatistical animals at the conclusion of "High Talk" have deserted him. In this poem, Yeats is more apparently autobiographical and the speaker more obviously the old poet. The situation which the poet faces is far more devastating than that in "The Tower," where poetic imagination has ultimately to rise above a decaying body. Here the artist encounters the greater dread of imaginative degeneration:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

(p. 629, 1-8)

³⁴Ibid., p. 127.

This frame of mind was not altogether unknown to Yeats, who had suffered an excruciating period of non-productivity and self-doubt. By 1934 he felt that old age had left him artistically sterile. Unterecker quotes some of the poet's misgivings:

I had nothing in my head . . . Perhaps Coole Park where I had escaped from politics, from all that Dublin talked of, when it was shut, shut me out from my theme; or did the subconscious drama that was my imaginative life end with its owner? but it was more likely that I had grown too old for poetry. 35

This statement of failure in finding a theme, expressed in the first stanza, ironically provides a compelling theme for poetry, as does the seemingly despairing comment, "I must be satisfied with my heart."

"Those stilted boys" seem directly from "High Talk," although here the syntax renders the meaning of "stilted" ambivalent. Viewing himself metaphorically as a ringmaster, the speaker has from the outset entered his poem as a central image. He and all his former works have become the stuff of poetry, and in view of what we have seen of Yeats's criteria for poetic images, this in itself comprises a prestigious position for the poet. A pattern established in "The Tower" and elaborated in "The Municipal Gallery

³⁵Unterecker, p. 241.

Revisited" and "All Souls' Night" of calling up former acquaintances and characters is brought to fruition in "The Circus Animals' Desertion." With the question, "What can I but enumerate old themes," the poet parades his former themes in a reassessment of the value of his art.

Oisín, the Irish hero of Yeats's first major published work, is the first recalled:

First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
 Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
 Vain, gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
 Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,

. . .

But what cared I that set him on to ride,
 I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

(p. 629, 10-16)

The "faery bride," Niamh, was one of the immortal Danaans. In professing his desire for her, the poet suggests not only his sexual frustration, but also his longing to transcend mortal limitations--to accept the choice, which Oisín refuses, of eternal life in the enchanted Dannaan lands.

The second stanza of Part II summons The Countess Cathleen, main character in a play Yeats had written expressly for Maud Gonne. The speaker interjects in these few lines his concept of the relationship between events and artistic response:

She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
 But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
 I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
 So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
 And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
 This dream itself had all my thought and love.

(pp. 629-630, 19-24)

In *The Countess Cathleen*, the Countess and her poet-companion Aleel return to her old home in Ireland to find dreadful famine throughout the land. Satan, with appropriate expedience, is trading food and money for peasants' souls. Despite Aleel's arguments and offer of self-sacrifice, Cathleen barter her own soul in her people's stead, but, as Yeats's line recounts, her soul is ultimately saved by heavenly intervention. The poet in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" parallels his play and the real event (Maud Gonne's sacrifices for the Irish cause), but with a marked difference: his beloved would have destroyed her soul through hate--not offered it out of love. The dream which his beloved brought forth as propounded in *The Countess Cathleen* seems vastly superior to the reality which sparked it; it is little wonder that the dream received his thought and love.

Lines 25 through 32 introduce *On Baile's Strand* and its three major characters, who were to remain essential to Yeats's canon: Cuchulain, the fool, and the blind man. They, too, have taken their place in the Great Memory from which they can be summoned as symbols. Again the word "heart" is repeated in a description of events in the play as

"heart-mysteries," perhaps alluding to mysterious supernatural intervention of druids in the drama.

Besides indirectly reminding the reader of his role in re-telling Irish legends, the poet manages to insert some literary theory: "It was the dream itself enchanted me:/ Character isolated by a deed/ To engross the present and dominate memory" (lines 28-30). Yeats espoused this theory frequently: preferably, the artist's emphasis is not on psychological character portrayal, but rather on catching and freezing a character at his most impassioned moment, an exalted, trance-like instant when he confronts tragedy. The character isolated by deed is what Yeats admired in Greek tragedy;³⁶ it delighted him in the Japanese Noh Theatre; it brought forth his praise for Synge's *Dierdre*.³⁷ Yeats's own use of the mask in drama served to erase the nuances of personality in both actor and his role, and to distill the characters in action. In his *Autobiography* he contends that: "Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion."³⁸

³⁶The theory is not unorthodox; after all, Aristotle was adamant that in tragedy action supercedes character: "Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life . . . In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action" (*Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Pocket Aristotle*, ed. Justin Kaplin, New York, 1961, pp. 349-350).

³⁷See Yeats's comments in "The Death of Synge," *Autobiography*, pp. 354-356 and his "Preface to the First Edition of John M. Synge's *Poems and Translations*," reprinted in *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 306-310.

In "The Tragic Theatre," he adds:

Suddenly it strikes us that character is continuously present in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy, that of Corneille, that of Racine, that of Greece and Rome, where its place is taken by passions . . . nor when the tragic reverie is at its height do we say, 'How well that man is realized! . . . for it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage. 39

A bit further on in the essay, Yeats applies this theory of character defined through passion to the lover's perception of his beloved. Juxtaposed to his passage about *The Countess Cathleen* in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," this prose passage is most revealing:

And when we love . . . do we not also, that the flood may find no stone to convulse, no wall to narrow it, exclude character or the signs of it by choosing that beauty which seems unearthly because the individual woman is lost amid the labyrinth of its lines as though life were trembling into stillness and silence, or at last folding itself away? . . . Nor have we chosen illusion in choosing the outward sign of that moral genius that lives among the subtlety of the passions, and can for her moment make her of the one mind with great artists and poets. 40

Thus, in true tragedy, true art, or true passion, "the dream itself" dominates all else. It is proof of the poet's passion for the real woman that his thoughts turn to the dream; she is transfigured into symbol. Similarly, the "woman lost" rather than the labyrinth of "woman won" in "The Tower" wins

³⁸Yeats, Autobiography, p. 318.

³⁹Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 240.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 243.

the poet's imagination. Further, Yeats is a poet of Phase 17, the *Daimonic* man; his mask is "simplification through intensity," and his body of fate is "loss." Yeats's comment about the man of this phase could serve almost as a gloss to the idea of "woman lost:" "The being, through the intellect, selects some object of desire for a representation of the *Mask as Image*, some woman perhaps, and the *Body of Fate* snatches away the object."⁴¹ So in turning to "the dream itself," Yeats is not only true to his poetic theory, but also true to his phase. In terms of his poetics, the old artist in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" has been imminently successful, for as he looks back on his work, it is the character isolated by deed--Cuchulain battling the ungovernable tide, the Fool and Blind Man stealing the bread--which serves "To engross the mind and dominate memory."

Still another consideration of "the dream itself" which enchants the poet grows from a 1914 letter to Yeats from his father:

The chief thing to know and never forget is that art is dreamland . . . Shakespeare never quitted his dreams . . . The poet is a magician--his vocation to incessantly evoke dreams and do his work well, because of natural gifts and acquired skill, that his dreams shall have a potency to defeat the actual at every point. 42

⁴¹Yeats, A Vision, p. 142.

⁴²J. B. Yeats, Letters to W. B. Yeats, December 21, 1914, ed. Wade, p. 198.

The kind of dream which J. B. Yeats describes cannot be equated with fantasies of escape from the actual world. It is rather a result of the poet's selections, distillation, and creation. The dream results from the artist's receptivity to images, as Yeats so carefully formulated in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*.⁴³

The final stanza in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" expresses a powerful mixture of emotions in the old speaker. Despite the sense of resignation, the final statements are strongly positive. Looking back on the "circus animals" of his art, the aged poet feels justified in calling the images both "masterful" and "complete." The pure mind in which his symbols grew may either be his own mind or the Great Mind or Memory. His phraseology lends an unmistakable organic quality to the image: it "grew" once generated by the imagination of the poet. Yet the raw material for the image forms a striking contrast with "pure mind:"

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till

(p. 630, 35-38)

This revelation of the origins of the image does not serve to lessen the image; rather, it renders the work of the

⁴³See discussion in Chapter II above.

the artist more awesome than ever. His achievement is transforming a mound of refuse into order and beauty--into lion and woman and the Lord knows what--the dream which "defeats the actual at every point." The poet is not expressing failure here, but triumph. Even as we read the list of foul beginnings of images in the poem, the language is shaped, rhythmical, part of one of Yeats's most formally constructed lyrics. The kettles and bottles are contained within the beauty of the finished work.

Like the poet in "High Talk," the speaker in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is missing his stilts: ". . . Now that my ladder's gone,/ I must lie down where all the ladders start,/ In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (lines 38-40). But here all motion seems stopped. If he "takes to chisel and plane" to rebuild his ladder, he does not say as much; but the heart as "shop" suggests that the creative potential is still present. By the end of the lyric, the meaning of "heart" had been carefully developed. The poet has found his theme. Age and experience allow him to understand the process of artistic creation, the relationship between his heart, his dream and the images of his poetry. He has learned and embodied Samson's riddle; he can create sweetness out of decay.

"The Circus Animals' Desertion" realizes, perhaps more than any other poem, the speaking poet's position within

the poem. The artist has gathered his work around him so that both art and artist are projected in the phantasmagoria. The figuration is the fully projected Poet, and he, like the other images which dominate the poem, is the dream, generated in the fecund ditch, grown in pure mind, masterful because complete. Only insofar as he is effective *as a symbol* can the reader participate in the imaginative world of the poem. The poet also *as a symbol* becomes the bridge between "old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can" and the dream which enchants us and transcends mortal limitations.

The old man in Yeats's poetry is a marvelously complex figure. At times, as in "The Tower" and its predecessor, "Sailing to Byzantium," he draws upon the Western tradition of the old man whose decaying body and impending death force him to eschew fleeting physical concerns and set his sights on eternity.⁴⁴ He is continually reminded that he is in "no country for old men." The physical old man then serves as a symbol of human mortality. At other times, the figure incorporates something of madness (best portrayed in Shakespeare's *King Lear*); in Yeats this is enhanced by his role as poet, in which sanity is tenuous anyway. In "An acre of Grass," the poet asks specifically for such an "old man's frenzy," for it is a stepping-stone to truth. In his

⁴⁴Such a concept of the old man is strongly Biblical. Part of the process in formal meditation (as Martz emphasizes) consisted in concentrating on images of decay and death so that one's mind would be led to God.

Crazy Jane verses, "The Wild Old Wicked Man," and "Tom the Lunatic," Yeats chooses aged voices who convey truth through what the world sees as madness; in "The Tower," the poet acknowledges that a successful poet must drive other men mad. In still other poems, the old man incorporates the Eastern (and ancient Irish) tradition of the old man as sage who has completed his stages of meditation and is ready for yet another life; "Mohini Chatterjee" is the most obvious example. This configuration of the old man understands and accepts the cycles of life and death, as do the Chinamen in "Lapis Lazuli."

Above all, by announcing himself to be an old poet, the speaker in Yeats's poetry proclaims his experience. He knows life because he has lived it. As poet, he is a Tiresias; he has been both man and woman; he has spoken with the gods; he is our guide to other worlds, the summoner of shades. Like Yeats's own Tiredias in his translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, he can answer Oedipus's question, "How do you hope to escape punishment?" with: "I have escaped; my strength is in my truth."⁴⁵ As a symbol, the old poet realizes Yeats's philosophy that man cannot know truth, but he can embody it.

⁴⁵W. B. Yeats, Sophocles' King Oedipus, Collected Plays (New York, 1953), p. 309.

CONCLUSION

Yeats's artist is an overwhelmingly complex figure. In selecting only three of his "poses," I have necessarily omitted far more than three. The poet as lover, as patriot, as aristocrat, as madman--all find expression within the course of Yeats's lyrics. The artist has innumerable possibilities, as is evidenced by Yeats's placement of an artist as example in almost every phase on the Great Wheel, from Whitman in Phase Six to George Herbert and George Russell in Phase 25.

The reasons for electing traditional poses have been clarified by Yeats himself: they open to him a whole new range of expression and, since the figures adopted have been used by poets for centuries, they have no trace of the passing and trivial. Yeats is free to borrow from the world centuries of beautiful associations and images, and they become the stilts for the artist's elevation.

As *shanachie*, he borrows the swans linked with a golden chain, the hound with one red ear, dhoulis and faeries, and the position of spokesman in his society for workman and noble alike. He borrows stories and songs kept alive and powerful for centuries and an entire set of beliefs in heroic men and beautiful women and Celtic gods. He is free

to empty heaven, hell, and purgatory to express his poetic moods.

As magus, the poet borrows the realm of dreams and pre-vision, alchemical images of the distillation of matter into pure spirit, the pictures in the Tarot, the gyres, the moon, and Byzantium. He claims the position of sooth-sayer, priest, and enchanter. He, too, borrows from many systems of belief in visions, ghosts, trance, and most of all, in the symbol to reveal reality which the corporeal world reflects only dimly. To him, "other worlds" are accessible through meditation and participation in "fire-born moods."

As old man, the poet borrows the crumbling tower, a tattered coat, and the right to rage against mortality. He assumes the position of father and sage. Above all, the tradition of the aged lends the poet perspective and authority and, because of his awareness of impending death, tragic gaiety.

It should now be more readily understandable that these and other poses function as symbols--as *yantras* which come from the Great Memory and offer the poet new ways of seeing. Further, as the figuration of the artist incorporates these poses and becomes more complete, he, too, is transformed into a symbol, and intersects for the reader the temporal world and the artifice of eternity. He enters the timeless fifteenth phase to become one with the symbol he contemplates in Unity of Being. While this cannot happen to the artist

as human being, it can and does happen to the artist as figuration.

The end result of these traditional poses is not a nostalgically vague and "pretty" poetry, for in Yeats's own words: "No people hate as we do in whom that past [Ireland's past] is always alive, there are moments when hatred poisons my life and I accuse myself of effeminacy because I have not given it adequate expression. It is not enough to have put it into the mouth of a rambling peasant poet."¹ In his discussion of Blake and Rabelais as beings of Phase 16 in *A Vision*, Yeats says of them that ". . . they are full of hate . . . and their hate is always close to madness . . ."² So the picture we see of the artist, while it is traditional, allows the poet to express the gamut of his emotions.

This study has incidentally tried to dispel two critical attitudes which are, I think, exaggerated in Yeats studies. The first is the notion of division between "early," "middle" and "late" Yeats. Although such lines of demarcation may prove useful for studying stylistic development, Yeats is amazingly consistent in his view of art and the vital role of the symbol, and the three voices considered

¹Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 519.

²Yeats, A Vision, p. 138.

in this paper are used throughout his career. The figuration becomes more sophisticated and complete, but his function is still to express passions of all people in passionate syntax. The symbols may change from the rose on the cross to Byzantium or a Chinese carving, but their power to unite remains the same.

The second popular notion, one perpetuated by the poet himself, is that Yeats's art continually opposes the two worlds of action and contemplation, life and art. Certainly there is support for this reading in such verses as "Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillations." It is true that the poet must choose allegiances between the temporal and eternal causes; but Yeats did this when he wrote in defense of the rose of beauty while his friends encouraged more obvious patriotism. Yeats indisputably shows art to be the prime act of creation--most clearly stated in "Lapis Lazuli"--and the artist is "active" in the most profound sense.

If there appears to be a contradiction in the artist's dependence on tradition and traditional poses and his originality in the creative act, it is best resolved by Yeats in a magnificent passage which perhaps best concludes the study at hand:

If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. 3

³Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 522.

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