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Across the enamelled sea : ancient Greek myth and philosophic thought in the poetry of W. B. Yeats

Thanassa, Maria

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Across the Enamelled Sea

Ancient Greek Myth and Philosophic Thought in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

by

Maria Thanassa

Thesis submitted to the University of London

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the Degree of PhD in English

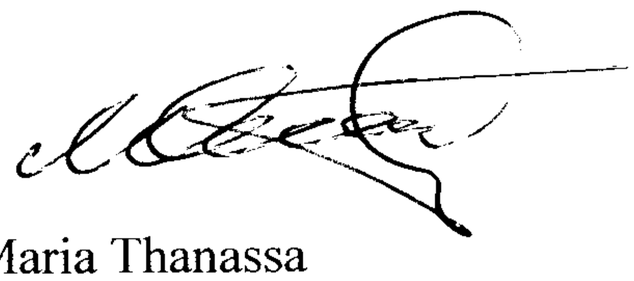
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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work.



Maria Thanassa

ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes a reading of the poetry of W.B. Yeats through an examination of a close correlation of myth, symbol and philosophy with specific reference to Yeats's poetic rendering of the ancient Greek tradition as filtered through Nietzsche's philosophic thought and read alongside Yeats's critical writings. The central argument rests on the proposal that Yeats's poetic work articulates meaning via the function of myth, which nonetheless engenders a discourse of tension implicit in the interplay of intellectual and textual strata. The Greek myths are discussed both as the locus of expression of philosophic notions, as these are informed by ancient Greek philosophic views, and as the means of constructing and patterning the conceptual topography of the poetic narrative. At the same time, they also disclose the dissonance existing between poetic vision and the process of artistic creation.

Chapters One, Two and Three consider Yeats's theory of art in terms of his employment of and the connotations acquired by the notions of philosophy, symbol and myth in the context of his literary essays. Chapter Four examines Yeats's engagement with the ancient Greek literary tradition, elaborating the poetic search for a mythic logos by which to reconcile antinomies and achieve comprehensibility and unity via the dialectic of the myths of Dionysus and Apollo as the transcendent and incarnate principles. Chapter Five discusses the quest for personal fulfilment and expression as it informs Yeats's treatment of the myth of Odysseus, which functions as the re-generative principle striving to impose coherence through the medium of the poetic word. Chapter Six discusses the ways in which the myth of Narcissus is employed to suggest notions of reflection and reflexivity, and traces their implications for the aesthetic and social function of art. Chapter Seven focuses upon Yeats's idea of poetic transformation explored through the myth of Proteus, which is read as both elucidating the illusory nature of beauty and of art, and as manifesting their formative power. The latter is examined through the myths of Helen of Troy and of Leda and the Swan as denoting the interplay of destructive and creative forces inherent in the historical and artistic process.

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I am especially indebted to my parents, to whom this work is dedicated, for their support and concern. Many thanks are also due to the rest of my family and to my friends for their understanding and for the stimulating literature discussions we have held.

ABBREVIATIONS

Aut	*Autobiographies* (London, 1980)
AVa	*A Vision* (1925) as repr. in *CEAV*
AVb	*A Vision* (1937; London, 1992)
Bibl	*A Bibliography of the Writings of W.B. Yeats*, Allan Wade, rev. and ed. Russell K. Alspach (London, 1968)
BIV	*A Book of Irish Verse* (London, 2002)
CEAV	*A Critical Edition of Yeats's 'A Vision' (1925)*, ed. George Mills Harper and Walter K. Hood (London, 1987)
CL	*The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, 3 vols, Vol. I: *1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford, 1986); Vol. II: *1896-1900*, ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deidre Toomey (Oxford, 1997); Vol. III: *1901-1904*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford, 1994)
CP	*The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1966)
CT	*The Celtic Twilight* (Gerrards Cross, 1994)
CWY	*The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats*, 8 vols, ed. Alan Wade (Stratford-on-Avon, 1908)
E&I	*Essays and Introductions* (London, 1989)
Ex	*Explorations* (London, 1962)
FFTIP	*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (New York, 1991)
L	*The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954)
LDW	*Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London, 1940)
LNI	*Letters to the New Island*, ed. George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer (London, 1989)
LTSM	*W.B. Yeats and T: Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937*, ed. Ursula Bridge (London, 1953)
Mem	*Memoirs: Autobiography-First Draft, Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London, 1972)
Myth	*Mythologies* (London, 1988)

P&I	*Prefaces and Introductions*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (London, 1988)
RIT	*Representative Irish Tales* (Gerrards Cross, 1991)
SS	*The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce (London, 1960)
UP	*Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats*, 2 vols, Vol. 1: *1886-1896*, ed. John P. Frayne (London, 1970); Vol. 2: *1897-1939*, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (London, 1975)
VP	*The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russel. K. Alspach (New York, 1957)
VPl	*The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russel. K. Alspach (London, 1966)
VSR	*The Secret Rose, Stories by W.B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca, 1981)
W&B	*Wheels and Butterflies* (London, 1934)
WB	*The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, 3 vols, ed. Edwin J. Ellis and William B. Yeats (London, 1893)
YP	*W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1992)
WIFLM	*W.B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. Robert Welch (London, 1993)

INTRODUCTION

Written at a turning point in his poetic career, Yeats's essay "Art and Ideas" (1913) contains an assertion that contests the author's claim to originality and presents poetic utterance as the interplay of forces operating within the body of writing: "works of art are always begotten by previous works of art" (*E&I*, p. 352). On one level, Yeats's essay represents a break from a purely aesthetic approach to poetry, which treated the latter as a canvas of the artist's impressions. On another level, it seeks to re-establish an intellectual link between present and past, a link allowing Yeats to situate his own poetry within a cultural context endorsed and validated by tradition. Despite the metaphysical undertones that such a conception of art assumes, Yeats's statement assigns to the author not the causal role of source but the subsidiary one of agent. The author is not a person acting as the text's single voice but a subject wherein different voices are intermixed. In this respect, writing engenders the construction of what Roland Barthes famously terms "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash", entering into "mutual relations of dialogue". In this multiplicity of writing, the subject "slips away" and the text is viewed as a tissue of intersecting and interwoven elements.[1]

This removal of authorial voice necessarily challenges the existence of a single meaning or message released by the work of art. Yeats would invariably insist on the connection between art and truth. But his acknowledgement that an artistic work is a composite of many writings, by virtue of drawing upon tradition, leads to considerations both about the author's identity and the nature of his work. With regard to the latter, my approach throughout this thesis has been to treat not only the poems, but also his critical essays, his autobiographical and mythological writings, together with the letters, as part of Yeats's work. The premise for such an approach is that each body of writing constitutes an act that invites a dialogic relation between texts as well as between text and reader. In this, I follow Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of text as "utterance" and therefore as being situational, contextual and dialogic. For Bakhtin, there can be no "pure texts". Meaning depends on the context in which utterance is placed and thus emerges out of the "dialogic relationships" existing within the text and among texts.[2]

In discussing Yeats's dialogue with tradition, I have focused on the function of the Greek element operative in the work via a texture of correlated mythic themes and philosophic concepts. The latter range from the philosophic thought of the pre-Socratics to that of Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus. The principal argument of the thesis is that the Greek tradition, as redistributed and recodified in Yeats's work, forms an intrinsic thread of its fabric by providing a context in which to situate the varying levels of communication and planes of existence of the artistic product. Thus, this reconstituted Greek tradition becomes a medium for rendering the conflicts of experience: aesthetic, philosophical, metaphysical, and political. In effect, it affords a perspective from which to examine and evaluate Yeats's poetic activity as it oscillates between two poles: one of unity and closeness, and another of diversity and openness, the positing of meaning and the exemption of meaning.

My central aim is to map the relations into which the components drawn from this tradition enter in order to examine the various ways that their interplay reveals the strains and tensions of the artistic process. In my analysis, I am primarily concerned with the poems, which I read as gestures of creation pointing to their internal practices: the struggle for articulation, the constraint of form, the anxiety of the multiple, the search for redemption, the flight to or beyond metaphysics and materiality. In this respect, Greek myth is treated not as narrative, as story containing "a canonical meaning", but as text, as a signifying process whereby "the paths of several possible meanings intersect"[3] and operate as dynamic, often conflicting, forces of creativity. Central to the development of my argument is to read the presence of the Greek element in Yeats's work in the light of Nietzsche's thought, especially in terms of his early dialectic of the Dionysian and Apollonian energies. As interdependent artistic impulses inhering both in nature and human creative activity, Nietzsche's principles, entering as they are into a dialogic relation, provide the philosophical framework within which to explore the poetic renderings of the Greek tradition in Yeats. These principles therefore serve as a comparative basis for illustrating the ways in which the process of creativity becomes manifest and is realised in the Yeatsian artistic product.

Such a treatment of the work does not rest upon tracing authorial intent or upon providing a biographical or historical study. Whilst I have acknowledged that Yeats's productions do not exist in a vacuum but operate in response to different codes, anterior or synchronic with them, I have looked into materials drawn from his non-literary work

and the cultural context in which they are placed not to establish the accuracy or authenticity of the poems' meanings. Rather, I have sought to present Yeats's theoretical considerations about art's nature and function in a dialogic relationship with the poetry. In this respect, I have treated Yeats's non-literary writings as productions in which a speaking subject, distinct from the empirical individual or the literary author, enters as part of the work and operates as a function.[4] In composing his autobiography, Yeats often makes claims to the truthfulness of his depictions and the genuineness of his intentions:

> I have changed nothing to my knowledge; and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge; for I am writing after many years and have consulted neither friend, nor letter, nor old newspaper, and describe what comes oftenest into my memory.
>
> (*Aut*, p. 3)

But the act of writing entails what Barthes calls the redistribution of language[5] and thereby the reconstitution of the group of elements present in it. Thus, Yeats's attempts at constructing a literary theory on which to base his art are seen as both a point of convergence and of departure for his artistic endeavours. As communicative utterances, the poems often deconstruct the language of the theory and reconstruct their own language. At the same time, the language of the theory or of the cultural milieu also passes into the poetry and configures its internal relationships.

As already stated, this thesis proposes a dialogic reading of Yeats's selected work from the viewpoint of Greek mythic and philosophic thought without recourse to the author's intentions. With regard to the latter, I have adopted Michel Foucault's view on writing as an unfolding that "inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind"; its concern being to create "an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears".[6] Arguably, with its emphasis on unity and personality, Yeats's poetic theory, as propounded in his critical writings, is far from advocating the author's effacement. Rather, it calls for the fusion of the personal into the collective, its transposition into what Foucault terms "a transcendental anonymity".[7] But at the same time, it premises artistic creation on the reconstruction of "the bundle of accident and incoherence" that sits down at the breakfast table (*E&I*, p. 509) into the unitary ideal of art's phantasmagoria.

What such a notion appears to intimate is both a death and a rebirth: the death of the biographical "self" and his rebirth into something other – the poetic "self", the

artefact itself. "A writer", Yeats remarks, "must die every day he lives, be reborn [...] an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named 'himself'" (*Aut*, p. 457). In this process of unmaking and remaking, the artist, far from acquiring any empirical characteristics, assumes a "mask". He becomes a fictive identity who, as Barthes affirms, is "no longer the illusion of a unity" but "the theatre of society in which we stage our plural".[8] Read in the light of Barthes's pronouncement, Yeats's work stages a contradiction. Whilst his theoretical writings promote an artistic model whose internal forces coalesce in unison of opposites and the single voice, located in a transcendent realm outside the work, the poems often, although not without vacillation or entirely abandoning their metaphysical orientation, tend to exfoliate in the dispersal of their multiple layers. At times, they may even seem to share in Nietzsche's Greek practice advocated in *The Gay Science*:

> Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity*. And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to [...]? Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore – *artists*?[9]

What predominantly characterises the Yeatsian artist is the tension between surface and profundity, exteriority and interiority, the permanence of the transitory and the evanescence of the permanent. At times, the tension is translated in terms of polarised opposition. At times, the seemingly conflicting poles merge allowing for no centre from which to view either end. It is this aspect of Yeats's poetry that my thesis proposes to illustrate via the employment of the Greek perspective.

In terms of structure, which is determined by the thematic treatment of the material, the thesis is divided into two sections. The first section, comprising the first three chapters, discusses the theoretical basis of Yeats's conception of art, as it emerges from his non-literary writings. In this sense, it provides a framework, the validity of which is examined in relation to the poetry analysis undertaken in the chapters of the second section. Thus, in the first section, I discuss Yeats's approach to art by way of philosophy, symbol and myth. My argument is that these three elements are interconnected and inform the development of Yeats's poetic theory. Whilst philosophy is construed as providing the structural basis of the poetry, the stylistic arrangement of

its material, myth, both as discursive text and a mode of consciousness, functions as a medium for poetic articulation, as the mode of communication via which the plurality of experience is rendered. Symbol, that is, the poetic work's body of metaphoric images, binds together mythic expression and philosophic thought via its power to evoke a multiplicity of associations.

The second part of the thesis, which comprises the last four chapters, moves towards a discussion of Yeats's poetry from the perspective afforded by the Greek tradition as filtered through Nietzsche's philosophic exposition of it. It treats the poems as instances of the artistic process, as interlinked episodes of actualisation in the course of the poetic quest, which it views in terms of the operation of the principles of incarnation and transcendence, and of reflexivity and transformation. Thus, the poems are seen as the articulation of the movement towards the imposition of limit via the image-form and the transgression of limit via the multiplicity of image. Furthermore, the poetic generation of image yields the tension between Narcissistic and Protean tendencies, which exist in a dialogic relation. In this respect, the discussion adopts the dialectic of Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian impulses, the interaction of which it regards as conditioning and elucidating the various facets of the artistic process.

Before proceeding with a brief description of each chapter, two points need clarification. The first point concerns the primary and secondary material I draw upon in this thesis. My reading of Yeats's literary productions is directed towards those poems which I believe best exemplify the Hellenic traces of the mythico-philosophical, creative process. This method of selection has also determined my choice of Yeats's non-literary writings that I utilise. In examining Yeats's work, my critical approach has been informed by structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical readings, where the discussion has invited me to do so.

The second point concerns the ordering of the material. The initial intention in writing the thesis was to offer a chronological study of Yeats's selected work for the purpose of illustrating artistic development and consistency of treatment of the Greek tradition. However, methodological considerations and scholarly aims have dictated a primary, thematic arrangement, within which I have sought to retain, where possible, a chronological order, since my concern is to illustrate the imagistic, mythological and philosophic connections among texts. I have therefore addressed the issues of development and consistency by widening the scope of selection in order to incorporate

material from the 1880s to the end of Yeats's poetic career.

Chapter One discusses Yeats's conception of philosophy as the intellectual basis for artistic creation and thereby as situating art within the sphere of traditional thought. Through an examination of the development of Yeats's poetic theory, it is proposed that philosophy, in its function as the pattern of experience, is viewed by Yeats as creating the mental, or imaginative, space where the poetic work can exist. It enables articulation in that it affords structural unity, by means of which the various elements entering into the work cohere.

Chapter Two outlines Yeats's views on symbol as an evocative, imagistic medium of artistic expression, inhabiting the space of intersection of two planes of reality, a physical and a metaphysical one. Through his notion of symbol and its association with tradition, Yeats moves towards the formulation of a spiritual art. The connections between Yeats's symbolist theory and the platonic and neo-platonic tradition are examined as informing Yeats's idea of symbolic art.

Chapter Three deals with Yeats's approach to myth as a mode of cognition which will enable the artist's escape from history by positing a cyclical conception of time and thus effecting artistic and cultural unity. The link between myth and symbol is examined in connection to tradition, as is myth's function with regard to issues of authorial voice. The mythic theories of Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade provide a parallel to Yeats's mythic thought and form the theoretical basis for a reading of his mythic conceptions.

Chapter Four offers a discussion of Yeats's dialogue with ancient Greek tradition filtered through Nietzsche's dialectic of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The ways in which Yeats's critical and poetic works rewrite and are rewritten by modes of Greek mythic and philosophic thought are examined with regard to notions of transcendence and incarnation as interacting forces of the artistic process. The function of the Greek literary tradition as a model of artistic and cultural integration is considered in relation to Yeats's poetic ideal as well as to the Irish national and literary movement.

Chapter Five proposes a mirroring reading of Yeats's narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, and Homer's *Odyssey* by examining the network of textual and thematic allusions between them. The dialogue in which the two texts engage defines Yeats's poetic activity and informs the discourse of much of the later poetry. Through

the employment of the heroic tradition translated in the terms of the poetic quest, Yeats's early poem serves as the locus of poetic exploration of issues concerning art's relation with self-definition, history, illusion and truth, metaphysics, and the human condition. The interplay of the notions of strife and reconciliation as Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of art determine the progression of the quest.

Chapter Six is concerned with the treatment of the Narcissistic principle functioning as the image-generating and incarnating force of the artistic process. The principle is operative in art's reflective activity manifest in its relation to the imaginative faculty and to the outer world. Self-reflexivity engenders a solipsistic mode of artistic expression resulting in the collapse of meaning and the negation of art's expressivity. The poetic quest for the image generates the dialectics of self and anti-self but also the tension of desire. As a cultural activity, art is construed as a shaping force fashioning ideals and postulating values, which it seeks to impose in its attempt to rewrite history and improve upon life.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by examining the artistic process in terms of its metamorphic capacity as the articulation of the Protean principle of transcendence. The malleability of form shifts the boundaries of experience and shatters the illusion of image and ideal. Via the employment of the figures of Leda and Helen, art's relation to beauty is discussed in terms of the latter defining the function of the artistic product as a force effecting historical and social change. In its creative and destructive aspects beauty is linked with violence and violation, which inaugurate civilisation and have the capacity to transform society but they also engender artistic creation. As such art is viewed as the locus of the poetic struggle with the forces of chaos.

Notes to Introduction

1. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", trans. Stephen Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1990; first publ. 1988), pp. 170-171, 168.

2. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis", in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996; first publ. 1986), pp. 104-107. Also see "Discourse in the Novel", in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996; first publ. 1981), pp. 272-275.

3. Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 33, 37.

4. I have employed the terms "literary" and "non-literary" in order to distinguish between the body of writing comprising poetic, dramatic or fictional texts, on the one hand, and that containing critical essays, autobiographical works, explanatory notes or letters, on the other. Admittedly, not all of Yeats's productions fit neatly in either category. However, for the purposes of the classification proposed above, I have treated Yeats's own mythological tales as literary texts, whilst I have regarded such works as his Irish folk tale compilations or *A Vision* as non-literary, despite the presence of mythological or fictive elements in them, on the grounds that they constitute attempts at offering a rather systematic exposition of his artistic perspective.

5. Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", in *Untying the Text*, p. 39.

6. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author", in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 116.

7. Ibid. p. 120.

8. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 62.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 38.

CHAPTER ONE

The Poet-Thinker:
Philosophy as Structure

I

At the conclusion of the 1925 version of *A Vision*, W.B. Yeats discusses the need to unite philosophic thought with mythology. It is an idea he later expressed in his "Introduction" to Hone and Rossi's *Bishop Berkeley* (1931), when he affirmed that philosophy should originate in myth (*E&I*, p. 409). But in the visionary and esoteric context of the earlier book, the argument assumes a metaphysical aspect. In it, Yeats remarks that "the ancient philosopher", who sought confirmation of his thought in spiritual or mythic utterance,

> could assume, perhaps even prove, that every condition of mind discovered by analysis, even that which is timeless, spaceless, is present vivid experience to some being, and that we could in some degree communicate with this being while still alive, and after our death share in the experience.
>
> (*AVa*, pp. 251-252)

Yeats's statement summarises a fundamental postulate of his poetic and quasi-philosophical theory: a belief in the existence of the invisible, transcendent world and its correspondence with that of sense-perception, in whose material forms it becomes manifest. Such notions, Yeats maintains, were once felt belief at a time when matter – the external world – was not as yet divorced, by mechanism and scientific positivism, from the spiritual reality embodied in it; when a man, still in communion with the universe and the divine powers omnipresent in it, "beheld a natural object" and saw "the spiritual thing it expressed" (*WB* I, p. 291).

In Yeats's appraisal of history, the disjunction of the outer, physical form and the inner, spiritual meaning, which arose with the birth of self-consciousness, has concluded in a separation of the self from the spirit of the Divine body.[1] This fissure of belief has, in consequence, generated a process of cultural and artistic dissolution

which, as Yeats pronounces in his essay "The Autumn of the Body" (1898), has exhausted man's creative energies. It has thereby brought a sense of "weariness that will not end until the last autumn" (*E&I*, pp. 192-193). Despite the palpable mood of dejection in the essay, there is a pervading sense of renewal and regeneration, which lies at the root of Yeats's cyclical view of life and history and largely informs his 1893 commentary on Blake's Symbolic System. In it, Yeats anticipates that when the era of "mere matter" or "dogma", which is divided from its spiritual meaning, comes to an end, another era, in which form and meaning are again united, begins "'in endless circle'" (*WB* I, pp. 293-294). Read in the cultural context of late nineteenth century Ireland, the promotion of such a romantic ideal is intrinsically connected with the Irish Revival movement, aiming to re-appropriate Ireland's imaginative tradition and, on this basis, to re-define and re-construct the role of contemporary literature as a revitalising, social force.

For a revivalist such as Yeats, in order for the dramatic change prophesied in his 1898 essay to be effected, art must reject the deductions of scientific reasoning. The activity of the mind must cease to centre on observation of the external world as an entity complete in itself and the artist must look beyond the laws of nature and necessity to "a spontaneous expression of an interior life" (*E&I*, p. 192). Only when he regards all intellectual and material forms as the embodiment of a spiritual truth, and seeks wisdom in what is permanent in them, will the arts and philosophy attain their highest goal, that of restoring to us the "essences of things" (*E&I*, p. 193). In this sense, Yeats views art in the context of a transcendental poetic theory as a form of revelation of an unchangeable, ideal reality and reserves for the artist the unique role of intermediary between this higher realm and the world of experience.[2] Thus, in order that we may believe in the presence of "the supernatural faculties" in all men, Yeats "would restore to the philosopher his mythology" (*AVa*, p. 252). This chapter proposes to examine the significance that Yeats's approach to philosophy obtains in his artistic theory.

That Yeats associated art with both philosophy and religious belief bordering on mythic conception is apparent throughout his theoretical texts and essays. His search for a philosophical system, an "intellectual superstructure", to borrow Robert Snukal's term,[3] upon which he would found his art, became a serious preoccupation of his early poetic career:

> For ten years to come[4] my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy [...]. I had an unshakable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set [...] an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols.
>
> (*Aut*, p. 254)

These retrospective thoughts, published in 1922, although advocating the revival of an Irish literature, echo Yeats's views on the validity of philosophy as an intellectual force of organic, structural unity and cohesion as expressed in an article of 1900. In it, Yeats establishes a link between art – the imagination – and philosophy, observing that "most of us who are writing books in Ireland to-day have some kind of a spiritual philosophy", but that the latter serves to "sweep the pathway before [the arts]".[5] Evidently, philosophy was associated in Yeats's mind with inspiration, a form of divine revelation, by virtue of which its doctrines would acquire an almost religious stature and find their appropriate place in all poetry. In his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), Yeats once again asserts the necessity of "all philosophy" to a poet. Although he partially disagrees with Goethe, whom he quotes, that it must be kept "'out of [the poet's] work'", he uses the term to refer to that system of "criticism of [one's] art", the arrangement and explaining of the artist's ideas. Opposing himself to the popular, journalistic belief that

> no one who has had a philosophy of his art, or a theory of how he should write, has ever made a work of art, that people have no imagination who do not write without forethought and afterthought,

Yeats maintains that philosophy is essential for artistic creation because it functions as "its herald or its interpreter and protector" (*E&I*, pp. 153-154).

For Yeats the poet, then, philosophy, construed as the body of his intellectually wrought convictions and ideals, is a necessary prerequisite for art in that it provides the groundwork for the poetic articulation of the imagination. In this respect, philosophy, although not present as such in the artistic product itself, offers the artist a sense of orientation. It enables him to strengthen his work by functioning as a safeguard against the dissolution of art amidst the clutter of observational and rhetorical detail or the imprecision and indefiniteness of abstraction. In Yeats's view, artistic expression is

possible only when the artist "constantly turn[s] away to think, constantly analyse[s] what [he has] done" (*Aut*, p. 318). Thinking and analysis are the intellectual functions whereby the poet can learn the forming process by which he articulates his poetic vision.

The notion of philosophy as an ordered and ordering system of belief, which evokes the fundamental spiritual realities of life, underlies another of Yeats's essays of the same year, namely, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900). In it, Yeats significantly – for he was to return to this issue some years later – speaks of a poetry of ideas, which, once admitted into art, acquire permanence as "parts of the convictions of antiquity" but need to be arranged "in some regular order" (*E&I*, pp. 65, 74). Lack of definite arrangement and the abandoning of ideas, Yeats would later deplore in his 1913 essay "Art and Ideas", have resulted, in modern poetry, in a solipsistic "absorption in fragmentary sensuous beauty". This fragmentariness he regards as responsible for art's loss of "architectural unity" so that poems seem "accidental" compositions of verses "arranged in any order, like shot poured out of a bag" (*E&I*, pp. 353-354).

Yeats's conception of philosophy as an aesthetic principle, whereby the different parts of the poem cohere in a unifying structure that places the poem in the line of traditional thought, fulfils an important function: it establishes a strong link between personal belief and artistic representation, the individual and the culture that sustains him, past and present. However, philosophy, no matter how ordered a system of ideas, could not alone effect the organic unity which Yeats sought to bring into his art and which he admired in the old great masters. If allowed to be given poetic vent as philosophic speculation, ideas could render poetry doctrinal and passionless, a mere allegorical exposition of intellectual abstractions. Yeats warned against such dangers in his later essays "Edmund Spenser" (1902) and "The Holy Mountain" (1934). While functioning as the ideological substratum of poetry, philosophy, as Yeats understood it, could be transposed onto the level of poetic composition by translating into symbolic images that derive their associations from myth.

In an earlier essay of 1898, "John Eglinton and Spiritual Art", Yeats defends the use of philosophical and mythological material in poetry by invoking Homer. Like Dante or Shakespeare, the Greek epic poet "may have used all knowledge – whether of *philosophy*, or of *mythology* or of history" (my italics) for the purpose of shaping "to a familiar or intelligible body something he had seen or experienced in the exaltation of

his senses". Written in response to John Eglinton's rejection of old legends and myths as the subject matter of modern Irish literature,[6] the article is revealing of Yeats's developing conception of poetry at that period, given also his growing discontent with the vagueness of his earlier thought. To the pragmatic or naturalistic "poetry of the utilitarian" and of "the popular journalist", he opposes the visionary or symbolic "poetry of 'the seer'". The latter expresses "great passions" or "'ideas' that are intrinsically bound to the supernatural, for they 'lie burningly on the divine hand'" and, although not of the natural world, are awakened by it. By becoming the means of ordering experience, philosophy as well as mythology will, as Yeats maintains, free art from the materialism and sentimentality that have reduced it to a mere "'criticism of life'" in the Arnoldean manner. They will thus enable it to reveal to us the "hidden life" reflected in nature (*UP* 2, pp. 130-132).

Read in the context of a symbolic theory of art, which Yeats was formulating in the 1880s and 1890s, these critical pronouncements acquire aesthetic as well as metaphysical dimensions. That a necessary quality of art is "the intensity of its passion for beauty" and that the artist's experience should be rooted in "his senses" hints at a move in Yeats's mind towards a poetry of "'sensation'" rather than of speculation (*UP* 2, p. 132). Such a Romantic notion is an affirmation of Yeats's belief in a poetry of "primary emotions" springing, nonetheless, from "the common experiences and duties of life" (*L*, p. 315). Clearly, Yeats never intended art to reflect contemporary concerns but is rather conveying the idea that the artist should write out of a direct apprehension of the world through his senses.

II

Yeats's search for philosophy was, in effect, an attempt to provide a concrete yet sensuous pattern as the basis and necessary condition of artistic expression. This pattern would be, on a mental plane, a scheme of thought-arrangement that would serve as the framework, the "outline",[7] of his poetic compositions, with which, however, it would be intrinsically related rather than superimposed afterwards. Yeats's wish, as he later explained in the "Dedication to Vestigia" in the first (1925) version of *A Vision*, was for

> a system of thought that would leave [his] imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or would create, part of the one

> history, and that the soul's.
>
> (*AVa*, p. xi)

Evidently, it was essential for Yeats as a poet that such a system ensured the freedom of the imagination to form a new creation whose fundamental principles of existence would partake of the imagination of the world. As R.P. Blackmur suggests, Yeats the poet knew that philosophy must be "*of* something", which should be present in it, and, moreover, that the purpose of this philosophy or system of thought should be to "liberate, to animate, to elucidate" that something.[8]

Yet, as it emerges from Yeats's writings around the turn of the twentieth century, there is at the same time, if not primarily, a visual basis to this pattern, a geometrical ordering of experience which is essentially sensorial. In a 1906 essay from *Discoveries*, entitled "In the Serpent's Mouth", Yeats perceives the perpetual struggle of the unchanging and the fleeting, of the permanent and the recurring, in terms of the geometrical pattern of a circle: "God is a circle whose centre is everywhere" and, while the saint "goes to the centre", the artist moves to the "ring where everything comes round again". Similarly, in another article of the same year from *Discoveries*, "The Black and the White Arrows", the antithesis between instinct and reason, between the impassioned self and abstract thought, is again conceived of in geometrical terms: "Instinct creates [...] the winding of the serpent; but reason [...] is a drawer of the straight line" (*E&I*, pp. 287-288). Previously, he referred in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" to the "signs" that Shelley's Cyntha marked out on the sand to reveal all human wisdom as

> "clear elemental shapes, whose smallest change" made "a subtler language within language," and were "the key of truths which once were dimly taught in old Crotona."
>
> (*E&I*, p. 78)

Yeats is alluding here to one of his favourite metaphors, "the pattern of the carpet or of a tapestry" (*E&I*, p. 86), which obtains broader signification in that it connotes, by means of its imagery, the totality of his poetic vision. The gyre and the circle, the arrow and the line, the recurring tide, winding and unwinding motions, the dancer who traces diagrams on the sand,[9] the pattern on the carpet, all dominate Yeats's poetry and, in his system of interconnected parts, become metaphors for his cyclical vision of life. Giorgio Melchiori sees the visual pattern underlying Yeats's thought as

an arrangement of geometrical shapes, which acquire symbolic significance and evoke visionary images. As such, they are the basis of artistic expression. Operating through the senses, the pattern impresses itself on the poet's mind and is transformed there into "a philosophical or metaphysical system".[10] However, in Yeats's poetry, this connection between geometrical figure and philosophic notion also accounts reciprocally for the formation of the figure. The idea that surges in the poet's mind is actualised, or rather extracted, in the physical shape, which attains symbolic status. It is there transmuted into emotion, which is evocative of the invisible life of spirit. Donald Stauffer remarks that Yeats's

> natural instincts were toward pattern, toward revelation through visual evocation. He is a descendant of the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painters, who wrote pictures and painted sonnets. Art for Yeats is a vision; at times it is almost geometry. To such a mind, [...] the image is everything, "the image of his secret life."[11]

The idea that experience is transferred from "the sensory to the mental plane"[12] and back through visual evocation was present in Yeats's mind throughout his poetic career. Although at times, particularly after the turn of the century, he seemed to abandon it in favour of a more physical approach to poetry, he would return to it time and again. In his "Introduction" to the 1937 version of *A Vision*, Yeats acknowledges his intricate cosmological system, with its concepts of the Great Wheel, the gyre and the double cone, as a "stylistic arrangement of experience", which enabled him to attain artistic synthesis of all antinomies of life by holding "in a single thought reality and justice" (*AVb*, p. 25). Still, in the late 1890s and early 1900s his search for a "coherent" structure in art was taking him in another direction, towards the formulation of his doctrine of the "thinking body".

A letter of 1903 to George Russell marks a significant shift in Yeats's poetics. It evinces a change away from the disembodiment, the purity, and the "faint outline" of art, amounting almost to abstract thought, which he advocated in "The Autumn of the Body", and towards artistic representation in forms apprehended by the senses:

> The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form, to get to some kind of disembodied beauty, and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come. I feel about me and in me the impulse to create form, to carry the realisation of beauty as far as possible.[13]
>
> (*CL* III, p. 369)

He restated this development in his aims towards a more concrete but sensuous art in another letter of the same year written to John Quinn:

> I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily, one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche [...] calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively. I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place.
>
> (*CL* III, p. 372)

The dialectic of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, with its Nietzschean echoes and its equation with the need for form and for breaking away from any definite shape, occupies a central position both in Yeats's aesthetic and in his poetry.[14] On one level, it leads to the proposition of "the mingling of contraries", functioning as a reconciliatory agent in the tension between opposing tendencies in his art. On another level, it serves as the frame of reference for the poetic articulation of his vision of art and life. Ultimately, the dualism of Dionysus and Apollo, both as philosophic conception and as symbolic actualisation, yields the point of fusion for the mythic threads of Yeats's poetic universe. But it also contains the forces of dissolution that threaten to break apart any formal unity.[15] The dream of the Irish Revival is shattered amidst the violence of the Civil War of 1922-1923; Yeats's ideal of cultural harmony increasingly borders on the fascistic.

The change in Yeats's attitude that we observed above towards the nature of poetry emerges equally strongly in his critical writings of the same period. In *The Cutting of an Agate* collection of essays, written at the turn of the century, he rejects the filling of poems with shadows, hollow images and vague ideas so that they become too turbid and infirm because "too full of aspirations after remote things, too full of desires" (*CL* III, p. 372). At the same time, he announces his intent to write a kind of art in whose "words or forms" (*L*, p. 583) to incorporate his personal faith, the personality as a complete entity.[16] He writes in *Discoveries* in 1906:

> I was interested in nothing but states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences. [...] I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty. I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into poetry, and had understood this as a representation of my own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but [...] my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life. I thought of myself as something unmoving and silent [...]. Then one day I understood [...] that I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always

> outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand.

Concluding, Yeats states more emphatically:

> We should ascend out of common interests, [...] but only so far as we carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole.[17]
> (*E&I*, pp. 271-272)

Rather than being perceived as a purely reflective activity and the pursuit of something "seen from afar" (*VP*, p. 842), art now becomes for Yeats the embodiment of some personal, inner truth. But the articulation of this truth must still operate within an ideological scheme, allowing the artist to reconcile intensity of passion and scope of suggestiveness. It must be an art at once personal and universal, possessed of what in 1903 Yeats calls the "emotion of multitude" (*Ex*, p. 215). In Yeats's view, what stirs our imagination is the work "in which there is the greatest abundance of life itself, of the reality that is in our minds". It is a subjective art, which "delights in the soul expressing itself according to its own laws and arranging the world about it in its own pattern". If literature of this kind is to be rediscovered, then the artist must look within and seek the creative power "coming out of the personality, the soul's image" (*Ex*, pp. 167-170).[18] What is implicit in such a conception of art is its power to shape rather than be shaped by the world. What matters is the perception of the individual although, admittedly, Yeats would seek ways of safeguarding against literature folding back unto itself by becoming too private. Symbolism and mythology were to provide such checks.

By 1905, Yeats had distinguished between great art "founded upon personal vision" and "bad" art "founded upon impersonal types and images". The former is advocated as the creation of intense emotion and conveys a sense of the richness and totality of life, whereas the latter is a "'soulless'" reflection of the surface of life, which it reduces to mere generalisations, thus destroying its creative energy (*Ex*, pp. 194-195, 152).[19] For Yeats at the turn of the century, art discovers its true nature not in the tepid invocation of an abstracted concept but in the expression of the artist's own perception of reality as imprinted on his mind through sensuous experience. In Yeats's theory of art of this period there emerge three distinguishing features as a measure of its strength: (i) personality as the distinctive yet integrating quality in the artist; (ii) extravagant passion embodied in and evoked by a system of interrelated symbolic images; and (iii) sincerity in its ability to move the heart of the people by stirring in them the impulse of life.

Yeats's critique of most of contemporary literature is grounded on his perception that it lacks these principles. Yeats detects in the modern arts, as in life and thought, an increasing preoccupation with externality, which, coupled with the dissociation of body from soul, has broken up the "old marching rhythms" (*E&I*, p. 378). This has resulted in mechanical forms, in the prevalence of discursive reasoning over creative imagination, and in the loss of unity (*AVa*, pp. 210-211). Thinking in the bipolar terms of his system of material idealism, Yeats views the conflict between imagination and intellect as a movement "away from life itself". For him, it is a movement that has substituted scientific knowledge for religious feeling, for it has renounced the belief that "the root of reality is not in the centre but somewhere in that whirling circumference" (*Ex*, pp. 149-150). It is of little wonder that his artistic speculations lead him to associate art's divorce from personality with vagueness, abstraction and ultimately fragmentation of experience:

> When a man puts only his contemplative nature and his more vague desires into his art, the sensuous images through which it speaks become broken, fleeting, uncertain, or are chosen for their distance from general experience, and all grows unsubstantial and fantastic. […] Emotion must be related to emotion by a system of ordered images […]. It must grow to be symbolic, that is, for the soul can only achieve a distinct separated life where many related objects at once distinguish and arouse its energies in their fullness.[20]
>
> (*E&I*, p. 293)

Yeats's search was for unity in man and nation, a state of perfect harmony in which "all the nature murmurs in response if but a single note be touched" (*Aut*, p. 355). In such a search, the artist, as he wrote to his father in 1914, seeks "not abstract truth, but a kind of vision of reality which satisfies the whole being […], his most profound desires", and "should reject a philosophy that does not satisfy them" (*L*, p. 588). Here philosophy is construed as a principle of unity that validates, if not privileges, the artist's "vision of reality" by ensuring that it remains rooted in personal experience and that it encompasses all expressions of life, material and spiritual alike. It is on such a premise that he asserted a year earlier that art is "but the putting our faith and the evidence of our faith into words or forms" (*L*, p. 583). To this end, Yeats would direct his efforts at fashioning a system, half-philosophical, half-mythological, which, serving as pattern, would enable him to articulate poetically his personal faith, his vision of truth.

Returning to the period in which the *Discoveries* essays were written, Yeats, faced with the threat of abstraction and division posed to his art by "detachable ideas", increasingly felt that for unity to be sustained, it must be found not "intellectually, critically" but "emotionally, instinctively" (*Aut*, pp. 354-355).[21] Hence the postulate of "sensuous" art. Derived from personal experience, from "one man's vision of the world" (*Ex*, p. 115), and embedded in sensuous feeling, such art attains unity because, although personal, it evokes "old emotions" augmented by the experiences of the past (*E&I*, p. 284). For Yeats, revelation comes from "the self", but "from that age-long memoried self" that shapes all life and unites all men to a common origin (*Aut*, p. 272). By claiming for literature the kind of coherence achieved by merging the artist's personal utterance into the vast spectrum of human experience, Yeats elevates art into "the principal voice of the conscience"[22]. As such, it communicates the unity of the soul with what is permanent and universal in the world, "eternal beauty and truth" (*CL* III, pp. 119, 131-132). Furthermore, it expresses life in that it reveals the spiritual in the material and renders common places holy, as did all ancient art:

> When all art was struck out of personality, [...] there was little separation between holy and common things, and just as the arts themselves passed quickly from passion to divine contemplation, from the conversation of peasants to that of princes, [...] so did a man feel himself near sacred presences when he turned his plough from the slope of Cruachmaa or of Olympus.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 295)

Art's capacity to move people thus lies in its effective integration into cultural life, as one of its forms of expression. But the power of its appeal is also commensurate with the artist's ability to convey not states of mind but the energy of some inner vision, thought drawn from and sustained by the whole body as "the flame feeds upon the candle" (*Aut*, p. 292). Yeats would have agreed with T.S. Eliot that thought is experience and must therefore be apprehended directly through the senses, recreated into feeling, felt "as immediately as the odour of a rose".[23] He expresses a similar notion in his 1907 *Discoveries* essay "The Thinking of the Body". In it, he affirms that, in order for good art to be produced, thought must have its roots in physical experience, in the body:

> Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the

> entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body.
>
> (*E&I*, pp. 292-293)

For Yeats, artistic expression of this kind, although individual in that it springs from the artist's personality, dissolves the barriers between different cultural forms. As the previous excerpt from his essay "The Holy Places" (1907) more clearly indicates, art becomes inseparable from religion and the life of daily activity. It displays what Yeats in 1930 terms "the transition from individualism to universal plasticity" (*L*, p. 776), a personal art capable of accommodating the experience of the community via a shared ideology.

III

For all his emphasis on sensuousness and "intensity of passion", Yeats would never quite repudiate the intellect in favour of the physical. Rather, given the special emphasis he placed on what he called "Unity of Being", he is advocating a harmony between all planes of existence – physical, intellectual and spiritual. In the years following the period of his intense involvement with the Abbey movement, Yeats noted a change in his attitude to poetry.[24] Arthur Hallam's dictum, whose aesthetic principles the younger Yeats had avowed for his own, that poetry is the "impression on [the artist's] senses"[25] and that subject is unimportant, left him "discontented". Having striven to rid his poetry of all intellectual and philosophic content so that he might create the "pure work" (*Aut*, pp. 490, 167), Yeats felt "alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses" (*E&I*, p. 349). He now realised that, by refusing to allow intellect "any share" in his poetry (*Aut*, p. 188), he was renouncing art's allegiance to the past, its roots in the received tradition of "antiquity" – its "passions and symbols" (*E&I*, p. 353). He was risking becoming too individual, and therefore isolated, an artist. Although he acknowledged the validity of turning away from abstractions and "detachable ideas", and emphasised sensuousness that came with the "flow of flesh under the impulse of passionate thought" (*E&I*, p. 354), he recognised that ideas provided the much-desired link with the unifying images of the past: "We [...] turned away from all ideas", he admitted in 1913 in "Art and Ideas":

> We would not even permit ideas, so greatly had we come to distrust them, to leave their impressions upon our senses. Yet works of art are always begotten by previous works of art, and every masterpiece

> becomes the Abraham of a chosen people. [...] The old images, the old emotions, awakened again to some overwhelming life [...] by the belief and passion of some new soul, are the only masterpieces.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 352)

The assertion of art originating in belief is not new. Asked by the *Chicago Daily News* to address the issue of "What Ireland Needs" in March 1903, Yeats called for a "vigorous movement of ideas" whose admittance into literature would be justified not on the grounds of their subservience to some external cause but for their own sake.[26] In order for such a movement to be established and to encompass in its literary framework "the best thought of the world", while retaining its national character, history or rather tradition would need to be its very foundation (*CL* III, pp. 327-328). In the ensuing years, Yeats reiterated the need to integrate ideas into art. If they come out of personality and are embedded in tradition instead of being generalised opinions or moral maxims, ideas are true "images" of the artist's creative power (*Ex*, p. 237), for they enable him to sustain his art on a common cultural basis. At the same time, however, there still persists the emphasis on the union of intellect with emotion – mind and body as one.[27]

Yeats's defence of the past lies primarily in a belief that it contained an integrated culture in which all forms of life were in harmony. Literature, arising out of the artist's immediate apprehension of the world, which provided him with "symbols of expression" (*Ex*, p. 149), was part of a communal experience both sensuous and intellectual. Such was the culture of ancient Greece, of Byzantium, and of the period before the Renaissance, which in the Yeatsian scheme of history figures as the point of departure from Unity of Being and Culture. This is an idealised and romanticised perception of the past, which Yeats imbues with his own spiritual beliefs. He discerns in it an "extravagant" and "fantastic" art which not only delighted in the expression of the intensity and fullness of life but also revealed what was permanent and "immortal" in it (*Ex*, pp. 150, 151). It thus served as the model on which Yeats sought to establish his own and contemporary Anglo-Irish literature.

The same approach to tradition, as a source of inspiration, to which the artist "look[s] backward" (*E&I*, p. 251), also informs Yeats's essays "Ireland and the Arts" (1901) and "Poetry and Tradition" (1907). In them, Yeats's endorsement of the past is grounded on the notion of art's union with all aspects of life. Art is perceived as sharing

with religion a common metaphysical foundation, according to which the natural world is apprehended not solely in corporeal but in spiritual terms. Both art and life are viewed as being steeped in those "disembodied powers" Yeats calls passions at one time or emotions at another (*E&I*, p. 204), a term signifying images of the unchangeable forms of human nature and functioning as an instrument of a transcendental revelation.[28] The writers of the past could thus create out of these imaginative passions a symbolic yet public art, which, as the "Edmund Spenser" essay argues, celebrated the "heroical, passionate will" of the soul "going by its own path to immortal and invisible things" (*E&I*, p. 370). Furthermore, the intrinsic values of the old tradition –sublimation of emotion and cultural integration – are contrasted with the influence of a "type of mind" which, having discarded memories and old passions (*E&I*, p. 250), has produced a culturally fragmented nation.

Heralding the beginning of a new age, which will bring an end to fragmentation and "the revolt of individualism", Yeats pronounces that literature will "restate the traditional morality" and that the rediscovery of this "ideal" will unite all arts together as well as to the whole life. In this respect, supreme art is perceived as "a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned" (*Aut*, pp. 490-491). Written as a diary entry in 1909, the passage links ideas to tradition. The former, while rooted in the senses and bearing the hallmark of the artist's personality, are viewed as uniting art to its intellectual history, to an "inherited subject-matter known to the whole people" (*Aut*, p. 190). Therefore, they are as much required in literature as form. For Yeats, then, tradition, as Engelberg points out, fulfils the function of "continuing revelation" through "aesthetic means"[29] and is thus allied to philosophy as a structured system of belief underlying poetic composition. It also enables the artist to achieve a sense of universality while maintaining personal poetic utterance.

In the pursuit of multitude, tradition is meant to provide the means of attaining scope and intensity, and of regaining the power of "dealing with great and complicated events" (*E&I*, p. 380). And for this, Yeats, as ever, found support in the old masters. Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare had used "all knowledge" to shape experience. They had "so heighten[ed] the expression of life" to evoke the most profound common passions that their work never seemed the product of deliberate, conscious effort but the "creation of intense feeling, of pure life" (*Ex*, pp. 196, 152). Yeats was later to modify

his view on art as non-deliberate creation.[30] But poetic composition that seems "a moment's thought", as the poem "Adam's Curse" (1902) intimates, is the principle Yeats wished to apply in his own art. Thus, his works could convey the impression not of being the product of labour but of flowing from the poet's excess of emotion.

What Yeats ultimately sought in terms of ideas was a way of integrating intellect into tradition as a means of attaining unity, the "architectural unity" of the old masterpieces. "Drama that has no intellectual tradition behind it", he affirms in 1903, is "demoralising" (*Ex*, p. 113) because, lacking any symbolic importance or at best delimited in its symbolic associations, it fails to awaken old emotions, old passions, and therefore it lacks sincerity. Yeats's conception of poetry, then, rests on the premise that, if a work of art is to be evocative and have a shaping effect on people via its intimations of "vast material" moulded into "a single image" (*E&I*, p. 354), it must be deeply embedded in the past.[31] This it can achieve by expressing personal emotion and visionary thought through a "symbolism handled by the generations" and through a "style that remembers many masters" (*UP* 2, p. 388).

Tradition thus fulfils another need for Yeats, the need for "old forms",[32] for a pattern that would contain and give substance to the conceptions of the imagination. Mention has already been made of how important the visual character of the pattern underlying Yeats's thought and poetry was. Yet, his conception of art was not pictorial but, as I will attempt to show in the following chapters, visionary and mythical.[33] It had as its basis the axiom that beauty, likened to "the body as it can be imagined as existing in ideal conditions" (*LTSM*, p. 144), should be transposed from a physical onto an intellectual and visionary plane, and find embodiment in an ideal pattern. In a letter of 1898 written to the editor of the Dublin *Daily Express*, Yeats asserts that the poet expresses the subject of his art "by combining the images and things he has seen with his mind's eye or his body's eye, into an ideal harmony. He combines images and things into patterns" (*CL* II, p. 296).[34] If tradition and the past as forms of cultural expression, filtered through the spectrum of the artist's personal vision, lend support to and even furnish the ideological content of his poetic work, philosophy as pattern, sanctioned by tradition, engenders the formulation and structural organisation of the materials of poetry.

Yeats's early training in pre-Raphaelite art as well as the teachings of Walter Pater sensitised him to the importance of pattern, of the precision of outline, in

specifying what his imagination saw. Yeats recorded the influence that both Rossetti and Pater exercised on him and on the rest of the Rhymers in Book IV of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922): "If Rossetti was a subconscious influence, and perhaps the most powerful of all, we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy" (*Aut*, p. 302).[35] In the first of his three essays on Greek sculpture, Pater praised its works for expressing "thought in outward form". Although he regarded such objects as "*intellectualised*" in that they seemed to "conceive thoughts" (an idea which brings to mind Yeats's "thinking body"), they were "still sensuous and material, addressing themselves [...] not to the purely reflective faculty, but to the eye".[36] Eight years later, in 1903, Yeats argues in a similar vein that a work of art, being the expression of emotion in union with thought, must be "masculine and intellectual, in its sound as in its form" (*Ex*, p. 109). But it should, nevertheless, stem from the senses and the personal experience of the artist. This idea, that art requires for its expression, that is, for the ordering of its heterogeneous materials into a single textual unit, the presence of a pattern both visual and mental, underlies a significant passage containing Yeats's comment on Blake's conception of art:

> This process of the separation of a portion of matter by "circumcizing" away the indefinite is Blake's definition of drawing. We make an outline upon paper and so give a portion of the paper a mental existence, and by means of this mental existence we forget the paper. It is then "cast out," and a last judgement "has passed over it." [...] All experience is obtained in the same way, and all arts, whether they be painting, poetry, music, architecture, or merely one of the arts of life, are contained within this definition.
>
> (*WB* I, pp. 306-307)

Although written at an early stage of his poetic development, Yeats throughout his career adhered to the Blakean principle of form as a mental process of defining artistic and imaginative space. It is only in the "circumcized" outline, in the pattern, that art can have any coherent existence and that the truth it embodies, translated both in terms of emotions and ideas, can be evoked. Yeats emphasises this significance of the form in the oriental tale he devised at the beginning of Book I of the first version of *A Vision*, of the four dancers who trace with their feet on the desert sand mysterious marks interwoven in a pattern within whose arrangement all knowledge is contained (*AVa*, pp. 9-10).[37] I have already discussed how, for Yeats, philosophy was this concrete, sensuous pattern by which the visionary images would be ordered.

Furthermore, if we consider the fact that Yeats vested art with the power of "bring[ing] us near to the archetypal ideas themselves, and away from nature, which is but their looking-glass" (*E&I*, p. 102), it is no surprise that philosophy becomes for him an instrument of inspiration and enlightenment. It serves as a means not only to acquire wisdom – that all life is one and all belief springs from a common origin – but also to gain access to the transcendent or divine world;[38] hence its association with visionary experience, of which it becomes a "stylistic arrangement":

> All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, [...] have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life or of the buried reality.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 154)

The passage quoted above is revealing not only of Yeats's conviction regarding the existence of a "divine reality" but also of the place that philosophy holds in the poet's oeuvre as a unifying and harmonising force that would ultimately lead to the creation of the "single image". It is an intellectual structure that, in Blackmur's words, "if it worked", must "put those myths – the received forms, the symbolic versions of human wisdom – which were its object concretely into his system. A philosophy for poetry cannot be a rationale of meaning, but [...] a myth for the experience of it."[39]

IV

Yeats was not so much interested in the exposition of philosophical belief in its own right as in the religion of art – the product of imagination – and the revelation of the transcendent, eternal "realities" delivered through it by the artist (*CL* II, p. 130). It is a revelation brought forth via the mediating powers of the pattern that was philosophy. Nor was he, on the other hand, a believer of the "art-for-art's-sake" doctrine. To Oscar Wilde's claim that "art never expresses anything but itself",[40] Yeats counterposed in 1892 that "literature must be the expression of conviction, and be the garment of noble emotion and not an end in itself" (*UP* 1, p. 249). Contending that the poets "come from the permanent things and create them" (*Aut*, p. 474), Yeats rejected all art which either renounced thought and was solely preoccupied with technical detail or, seeking to satisfy popular tastes, supported conventional moral interests or political causes. In

either case, the result, as Yeats perceived it, is a limited art which not only denies its past, its traditions, but also surrenders its "imaginative freedom" (*Ex*, p. 192). In effect, the kind of art that Yeats champions highly subscribes to a dualistic perspective on reality. It axiomatically posits, as Nietzsche argues, the antithesis between a true world, which is unalterable, and an apparent world, subject to vicissitudes, and thereby privileges the former over the latter.[41]

Aligning himself with such a position despite his gradual acceptance of corporeality, Yeats held the conviction that literature should be "a reverie about the adventures of the soul, or of the personality". It should affirm its morality and find justification in the creation of "beauty and truth" (*Ex*, pp. 141, 107). Presumably, the employment of the term "beauty" does imply the admission on Yeats's part of aesthetic values applied for the purpose of validating artistic creation.[42] Art's alliance, however, with "truth", which Yeats sought in the universals of human experience, lends a metaphysical dimension to his poetics. Art, then, and the divinity it reveals were, to paraphrase Yeats, the most important pursuits of his life and the centre of all that he thought and wrote.[43] Referring to the period between 1887 and 1891, he declared in 1922:

> Deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I would discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and in poems only.
>
> (*Aut*, pp. 115-116)

Clearly, in the old days philosophy and religion fulfilled the task of preserving for the artist the "essences of things", which Yeats now undertook to reveal through the medium of his poetry via the patterning of its visionary images. And although, as Melchiori observes, Yeats's "search was always a search not for thought but for art",[44] the latter, with its emphasis on unity and order, unmistakably supports a spiritual interpretation of life. Implicit in this is a romantic belief in the permanence and verity of art as a revelatory force, as "that which is eternal in man crying out against that which is temporal and perishing" (*CL* II, pp. 349-350). Ultimately, Yeats's search was for a unified and unifying system of thought, by whose postulates to define and

order his art.

Yeats did not commit himself too firmly to any one creed or philosophic theory; from his reading he took the elements he required to build a system that would verify the truth of his own affirmations. Yeats's statement, written in 1930, that "we do not seek truth in argument or in books but clarification of what we already believe" (*Ex*, p. 310), is an apt description of the interpretative dialogue between the poet and his precursors. The philosophical pattern underlying Yeats's poetry is a synthesis of the different traditions or conventions he drew upon and which, in Francis Wilson's words, "would enable him [...] to concur with Blake's maxim that 'all religions are one'". Wilson, however, sees in Yeats a preference for "some aspects of what will seem the universal religion above others", namely, for a "broader complex of the alchemical, the Jewish and the Greek",[45] the latter being the focus of interest throughout this thesis.

Yeats often fathered on other writers principles he had found in his own experience. As he later admitted in a letter of 1931, he "wanted to feel that any poet" he "cared for [...] saw more than he told of, had in some sense seen into the mystery. I read more into certain poems than they contained, to satisfy my interest" (*L*, p. 781).[46] Such an act of almost deliberate misreading is also true of Yeats's approach to the philosophic and mythological systems of thought which he utilised. His was a mind which, in its search for synthesis and for totality, exemplified, as Roy Foster affirms, a readiness to "find assonances in all he read" and to "create universal patterns" by incorporating poetic and philosophic principles "into his personal pantheon".[47] It is clear that what Yeats sought in the traditions he drew upon was a means to express and consolidate his own convictions.

The need to hammer these convictions, to shape his life's work, into unity was all-important for Yeats. "Unity", he pronounces in a letter of 1921 to George Russell, "has become a cardinal principle in all exposition of the future in my system" (*L*, p. 667). Unity became even more important in view of Yeats's perception of contemporary Irish society as one whose crisis of national identity under colonial rule, and the ensuing abandonment of tradition, led to cultural fragmentation and estrangement. This was a divide reflecting the tension between the forces of the past, glorified in the revival of Ireland's mythological tradition, and those of modernity, imprinting themselves in economic, political and social changes, which often rendered mythic thought, as propounded by Yeats, archaic and even reactionary.[48] Yeats's

hostility to the modern civilisation, with its "commercialism, and the vulgarity founded upon it",[49] and with its scientific rationalism, all seen as agents of corruption, helps explain his insistence on the unitary ideal of the past offered as an alternative to the modern dissociation of sensibility. It also fostered his dream of the arts becoming again an expression of life and of the whole community sharing in the experience.

The process of disengagement, which effected the separation of the arts, their divorce from the old images and the old passions, and the artist's displacement, Yeats traces back to the Renaissance. His critique of it stems from his suspicion of individualism, which to him threatened the "symbolical" and "mythological coherence" of the arts. "Had not", Yeats asks, "Europe shared one mind and heart, until both mind and heart began to break into fragments a little before Shakespeare's birth?" (*Aut*, pp. 193, 191). In his essay on Spenser, Yeats attributes the enfeeblement of modern art, its loss of evocative power, and its reduction to a mere interpretation of appearances to the movement towards "elaboration" and "mechanism", which started with the Renaissance. For Yeats, individualism has accentuated cultural alienation and forced the artist to retreat to the confines of his inner self. He is no longer able to share his personal vision with the world (*E&I*, pp. 379-380). He no longer creates with the assurance of an "inherited subject-matter" appealing to the whole people.

In his essay "Art and Ideas", Yeats surveys this fragmentation of modern art and acknowledges again the importance of creating a unified body of work linked to the past:

> [In painting] we were interested in the fall of drapery and the play of light without concerning ourselves with the meaning, the emotion of the figure itself. [...] In our poems an absorption in fragmentary sensuous beauty or detachable ideas had deprived us of the power to mould vast material into a single image. What long modern poem equals the old poems in architectural unity, in symbolic importance?
>
> (*E&I*, pp. 353-354)

Yeats here is criticising modern poetry for what he sees as accidental, almost mechanical, arrangements of lyric passages that lack the structural cohesion offered by tradition. Even the great works of the nineteenth century are remembered only for "some moment which gains little from the context" (*E&I*, p. 354). To the absence of symbolic coherence, Yeats counterposes what Anca Vlasopolos calls "the metaphor of the work as architectural structure",[50] organic unity created through the use of a

concrete pattern. Yeats attempts to bridge the multiplicity of image, idea and form with the doctrine of "Unity of Being". If attained, it would enable him to restore passion to the imaginative arts and effect a reconciliation of contraries: between circumstance (fate) and desire (choice), thought and emotion, primary (objectivity) and antithetical (subjectivity), Image and Mask, individuality and universality. As Yeats maintains, in Heraclitean fashion, the "nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries" (*E&I*, p. 255), which, as he came to realise, must contain but not negate or obliterate each other.[51] A significant passage from Part I of *A Vision* (1925), appearing under the general heading "The Great Wheel", in which Yeats refers to the ruling principles of his theory of thought, is in itself revealing:

> He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest. For him fate and freedom are not to be distinguished; he is no longer bitter, he may even love tragedy like those "who love the gods and withstand them"; such men are able to bring all that happens, as well as all that they desire, into an emotional or intellectual synthesis and so to possess not the Vision of Good only but that of Evil. They are described as coming after death into dark and into light, whereas *primary* men, who do not receive revelation by conflict, are in dark or in light.
>
> (*AVa*, pp. 28-29)

This passage seems to epitomise not only Yeats's notion of "Unity of Being", as an on-going process, but also the essence of the poet's struggle for a principle by which to correlate all the separate strands of thought into the organic synthesis of art. The latter is perceived as a tradition-based art revelatory of the totality of life in its physical and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, it is an art capable of engaging in a process of emotional and ideological evocation, for poet and reader alike, by the vehicle of its intellectual framework. A few years earlier, in 1919, Yeats had likened his "Unity of Being" to Dante's concept of beauty as a "perfectly proportioned human body". For Yeats, this meant unity within art, the correlation and "subordination" of all elements to an ordered whole, rather than the "unity of things in the world" (*Ex*, p. 250).[52] The association of unity, construed as the realisation of harmony between physical, intellectual and spiritual states,[53] with beauty, yoked together in the metaphor of the body, recurs in a letter of 1929 to Sturge Moore:

> Your definition of beauty was "the body as it can be imagined as existing in ideal conditions" or some such phrase. I understand it as

> including all the natural expressions of such a body, its instincts, emotions, etc.
>
> (*LTSM*, p. 144)

Yeats here re-affirms his preference for a unified art that would be wrought out of the poet's intellect, the totality of his ideas and ideological alliances, but would have its roots in the whole body, in physical experience, thus balancing thought with feeling.

Yeats's vision of a civilisation made whole and "holy" by virtue of its embodying the ideal of perfect order and harmonising unity found expression in the early city of Byzantium, chosen because in it,

> maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers – though not [...] poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could [...] weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one.
>
> (*AVb*, pp. 279-280)

Byzantium, then, encapsulates Yeats's aesthetic of proportion and synthesis between personal utterance and anonymity, the individual and the culturally sustained, the physical and the spiritual. Helen Regueiro remarks that the art of the early Byzantine period displayed, for Yeats, a "unified perspective on reality". The artist, being at one with the external world, shared his "vision of things" with the community in which he participated. As a result, he created not "in isolation from reality but in an act of reality itself".[54] Because it maintained its public reference by retaining its associations with the religious and spiritual dimensions of life, such art functioned as a cultural institution that reflected society's values.

With the artistic achievement of early Byzantium serving as a model for his concept of unity, Yeats wished to create an art in which the personal element would be submerged into the impersonal perfection of the artefact; into the half-anonymity he discerned in Greek sculpture[55] or the Byzantine mosaics. He also wished for this art to appeal to the many and to the few alike by evoking "simple emotions which resemble the more, the more powerful they are, everybody's emotion". For unity to be achieved, such emotions, although wrought out of personal experience, would need to be "woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol" (*Aut*, pp. 150-152), which would once more

ally art to its traditional heritage. By the end of the 1920s, as both the prose and the poetry of the period evince, Yeats would feel compelled to re-evaluate art's social role and the scope of its appeal but he, nonetheless, adhered to the principle of unity and the value of tradition.

For Yeats, artistic creation engenders the articulation of the poet's vision, the expression of his personal life. But he also acknowledges that "all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt" (*E&I*, p. 522). With the poetic process being a dialogic one, whereby meaning and identity are constantly negotiated and the barriers between creator and artefact are continually shifting, Yeats's ice and salt are the forms of tradition. In Yeats's work, tradition encompasses both philosophic thought and mythic conception. It functions to provide the intellectual structure for the act of creation, the ideological framework within which the artistic work exists. Because it aligns the poet with his literary precursors, it endorses and validates poetic utterance by endowing individual experience with an element of universality.

Notes to Chapter One

1. In expounding Blake's cyclical system of the history of human experience, in the chapter of *The Symbolic System* entitled "The Covering Cherub" in *The Works of William Blake*, Yeats discusses at length the different stages of man's pilgrimage. This is viewed as a passage from the state of unity of mind and matter, intellect and emotion, significance and representation, to that of division of body and spirit with its subsequent observation of law only, of "mere dogma" (*WB* I, pp. 290-294).

2. The notion that, through the imaginative arts, we can reach the transcendent reality, which "cannot be discovered but may be revealed" (*AVa*, p. x), is a familiar theme informing both Yeats's artistic theory and poetry. In one of the early essays, "The Moods" (1895), Yeats asserts that the imaginative artist "belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation", his task being "to discover immortal moods in mortal desires". And in the later essay "The Holy Mountain" (1934), Yeats, positing the dialectic of Nature and Spirit, re-affirms art's alliance with religious belief that refuses "to confine Nature to claw, paw, and hoof" (*E&I*, pp. 195, 467).

3. Robert Snukal, *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 39.

4. This ten-year-period commenced in 1895. Yeats was at the same time making plans for the founding of "a mystical Order" and was to embark on an equally "vain" attempt to create a ritual for it. According to Yeats, the "mystical rites" of this Order would aim at reuniting "the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty" and would somehow restore "pagan nature-worship", which had been robbed of its "inviolable sanctity" by commerce (*Aut*, pp. 253-254; *Mem*, pp. 123-124). For a detailed account of Yeats's dream of this new cult see Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1948), pp. 123-125.

5. "The Pathway", in *CWY*, Vol. VIII, pp. 191, 194. The essay first appeared as "The Way of Wisdom" in *The Speaker* (*Bibl*, p. 92).

6. In 1898 Yeats and his friend A.E. became involved in a public controversy on the future of Irish literature and the nature of poetry in general through the pages of the Dublin *Daily Express*. The exchange of essays started with John Eglinton raising the issue of whether ancient legends have a legitimate place in a modern poetic context. The main points around which the discussion revolved were Eglinton's support of a poetry that reflects contemporary life and its problems, with Wordsworth as its main exemplar, and Yeats's affirmation of a spiritual view of poetry, the models of which are Keats, Tennyson and the French Symbolists. The essay by Yeats under discussion was prompted by Eglinton's "National Drama and Contemporary Life". All articles were published in 1899 under the title *Literary Ideals in Ireland* (see *UP* 2, p. 128; also Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 39-41).

7. In tracing Yeats's artistic theory through an examination of the poet's response to painting between 1896 and 1913, Engelberg distinguishes pattern from outline. By the former, he refers to the "'arrangement' of forms" and sees it as a way of giving art order and unity as well as ensuring freedom of imagination. Outline is perceived as "circumscribing pattern, so long as pattern still yielded separable objects". It serves as a "safeguard" against vagueness both in painting and literature (*The Vast Design*, pp. 98-100). Although such a distinction seems valid, I have used both terms interchangeably in a broader sense to refer to Yeats's conception of "form" as a means of ordering experience since my primary interest in this chapter is to establish a link between this and philosophy.

8. R.P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935; repr. 1952), p. 106.

9. In the later poem "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid" (1923), the wife of Kusta ben Luka, the Arab sage, runs in her sleep to "the first ridge of the desert/ And there marked out those emblems on the sand" which revealed the ancient truths of the world. The poem was placed at the beginning of Book II, "What the Caliph Refused to Learn", of the 1925 version of *A Vision* and bore the title "Desert Geometry or the Gift of Harun Al-Raschid". In a note, Yeats, conceding the limitations of verbal utterance in the expression of what lies beyond mental conception, remarks that "as I write I find myself looking for words that do not exist to express what can be expressed accurately in geometrical lines" (George Mills Harper, *The Making of Yeats's 'A Vision': A Study of the Automatic Script*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 408).

10. Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W.B. Yeats* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 3, 7.

11. Donald Stauffer, *The Golden Nightingale: Essays on Some Principles of Poetry in the Lyrics of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 57.

12. Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery*, p. 3.

13. Three years earlier, in another letter to Russell, Yeats rejected "vague forms, pictures, scenes, etc", as being a "modern idea of the poetic", in favour of a more "definite and precise vision" (*CL* II, p. 522).

14. In the 1903 letter to Russell, Yeats perceives the Dionysian element as "sad and desirous" and the Apollonian as "joyful and self sufficient" (*CL* III, p. 369). Frances Oppel treats such description as an instance of Yeats's misreading of Nietzsche (*Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902-10* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), p. 80). Admittedly, whilst Apollo is presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* as affording "the delightful vision, the pleasurable illusion", whereby the suffering of existence is redeemed, such a vision is necessitated by the "desire for illusion". Dionysus, on the other hand, epitomises a tragic perception and acceptance of life, which is essentially joyous. However, the associations Yeats ascribes to Apollo and Dionysus, the creation and overcoming of form, retain parallels to those made in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this early work, Nietzsche views both deities as creative impulses in nature and art. Apollo is associated with the "visual art" and its "immediate apprehension of form". He incorporates the realm of dream and illusion as well as awareness of their limitation. He is thus regarded as the principle of individuation which, by its emphasis on the perfected beauty of form, fragments rather than sustains the continuity of life. On the other hand, Dionysus is the god of intoxication and "the non-visual" art of music, whose invasion of the mortal sphere shatters the individuated forms and restores a sense of universal harmony with "the mysterious primal Oneness". For Nietzsche, these tendencies operate side by side in constant opposition but can be reconciled in certain forms of art (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 24-26, 14-18). In subsequent works, Nietzsche departed from the Apollonian-Dionysian duality and came to view Dionysus, whom he associated with his notion of the "will to power", as opposed to the Crucified. In this sense, Dionysian art encompasses both creative energy and perfection of form. It is mainly with the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* in mind that I discuss the Dionysian-Apollonian dialectic in Yeats in this thesis, as I believe it elucidates best Yeats's own treatment of these two principles.

As the letters to John Quinn indicate, Yeats read Nietzsche in 1902 and 1903. In 1902 Quinn sent Yeats his copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the 1899 translation by

Alexander Tille. The following year Yeats acquired, also through Quinn, the three volumes of *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* in Tille's 1899 edition, as well as Common's *Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet and Prophet* (*CL* III, pp. 239, 313; also see Thomas L. Dume, *William Butler Yeats: A Survey of his Reading* (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1950), p. 208). But Yeats's acquaintance with Nietzsche may have taken place earlier, in 1896, when parts of Havelock Ellis's article "Friedrich Nietzsche" appeared in the *Savoy* along with Yeats's story "Rosa Alchemica" and his Blake essay. Between 1900 and 1902 Yeats also bought Thomas Common's 1900 translation of selected parts from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. (*CL* III, p. 313, note 2; also see Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 1-4).

15. Nick Land remarks that, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "Nietzche indicates that the issue at the core of the tragic is *community*". But "the sense of community at work in it is only superficially commensurable with a thought of ethnic, political, or social unity. Tragic community is not the affirmation of a collective identity but rather the dissolution of all identifiable traits", which takes the form of "regicide and eruption in the streets" (*The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 82-83).

16. In a letter of 1910 written to his father, Yeats defines "personality", which he wished to re-instate into literature, as "the individual form of our passions", the core of one's being which shares in the passions of mankind. This he distinguishes from "character", the individualising qualities in a person, which, although a "different [form] of the same thing", belongs to comedy (*L*, p. 548). The distinction between personality and character is elaborated in an essay of the same year, "The Tragic Theatre" (*UP* 2, pp. 384-392), first published in the October issue of *The Mask*. The essay was later revised to constitute the "Preface" to *Plays for an Irish Theatre* (1911) and was also included in *The Cutting of an Agate*.

17. The quotation is from the essay "The Tree of Life", which Ellmann erroneously dates 1908 (*Yeats*, p. 166), probably having in mind the 1908 edition of *The Collected Works of Yeats*, in the eighth volume of which the essay appeared. The correct date is likely to be 1906, when the essay was first published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (*Bibl*, p. 83).

18. In 1897, in his dedication to A.E. of *The Secret Rose*, Yeats, emphasising subjectivity, had already expressed the belief that poetry can only be made if the artist looks "into that little, infinite, faltering, eternal flame that one calls one's self" (*VSR*, p. 233).

19. The essay containing these remarks was first published as "Notes and Opinions" in *Samhain* in 1905. Between 1900 and 1908 Yeats, who embarked on his literary career as a dramatist, wrote a series of essays which appeared in *Beltaine*, *Samhain* and *The Arrow,* the occasional publications edited by him and connected with the Irish National Theatre. The essays advocate a poetry of personal vision and of emotion. They were later revised to form the collection entitled "The Irish Dramatic Movement", published in *CWY,* Vol. IV.

20. The quotation is from the essay "Religious Belief Necessary to Religious Art" (1907).

21. In 1895 Yeats prophesied the advance of an "age of imagination, of emotion", of "revelation", which would inevitably replace an age dominated by reason and "criticism" (*E&I*, p. 197). Almost forty years later, in 1934, he still held the same conviction about the return of a "myth-haunted", visionary age, which would experience the wholeness and the "intensity of personal life" (*E&I*, p. 265) he had advocated earlier: "Perhaps now that the abstract intellect has split the mind into categories, the body into cubes, we may be about to turn back towards the unconscious, the whole, the miraculous" (*Ex*, p. 404).

22. This idea is echoed in two of the essays Yeats contributed to *Samhain*, "Moral and Immoral Plays" (1903) and "First Principles" (1904), in which he asserts that art, having for its subject the "praise of life", forms an integral part of the collective experience of mankind, of whose conscience it is a "portion", illuminating for our understanding the passion and wisdom of life (*Ex*, pp. 111, 161-162).

23. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 63, 64. The essay was first published in 1921.

24. Yeats's dream for an Irish theatre took shape in August 1899. Through the pages of the *Daily Express*, he announced the foundation of the "Irish Literary Theatre" that he, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn had been planning, although under the name of "Celtic Literary Theatre", since the summer of 1897. At the end of the three-year programme of the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats collaborated with Frank J. Fay and his brother William George, both leaders of the amateur "Ormond Dramatic Society", formed in 1891. The collaboration, which officially began in January 1902, led to the establishment of the "Irish National Theatre Society" in early 1903 with Yeats as President. In April 1904 the Company became known as the Abbey Theatre, under the patronage of Annie Horniman, who subsidised it until 1910.

Yeats's aim in creating an Irish national theatre was the production of plays whose character would be literary as well as national, although not propagandist. But as the Abbey Theatre diverged, more so from 1905 onwards, from the original "ancient ideals" of passion, beauty, and heroic expression of the realities of life he had envisaged for it toward popular realism and comedy, Yeats became increasingly disenchanted and gradually disengaged himself from it. By 1919, Yeats would seek "an unpopular theatre" and an initiated audience that could understand the ritual of drama and the expression of interior life (*Ex*, pp. 254-257).

25. In "Art and Ideas", Yeats tells of his admiration for Keats and Shelley, for they "intermixed into their poetry no elements from the general thought, but wrote out of the impression made by the world upon their delicate senses" (*E&I*, pp. 347-348).

26. The period between 1899 and 1911, during which Yeats was actively involved in the Irish theatrical movement, was one of controversy over the nature of national drama. Yeats argued repeatedly that art should be independent of any political, social or commercial considerations. He also defended the artist's right to reveal in his work his personal vision of life instead of "the desire which every political party would substitute for life" (Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neil, *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journal "Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer"* (1967), p. 27, cited in Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I: *The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; first publ. 1997), p. 297).

27. In his 1919 essay "A People's Theatre", Yeats extols Shakespeare for writing plays whose strength rested not only in that they retained a strong link with tradition but also revealed "emotion and intellect at a moment of union and at their greatest intensity" (*Ex*, p. 245). It is again this principle of "accord between intellect and blood" that Yeats regards as a unifying force in Balzac in the 1934 essay "Louis Lambert" (*E&I*, p. 446).

28. Yeats often, especially in his critical work of the 1890s, employed the concept of passions or emotions in association with his doctrine of the moods as the medium whereby we gain access to the divine realm of absolute reality. Thus, the metaphysical principle of the moods, as "the creative powers" inherent in the natural world, forms the basis of Yeats's perception of poetry as symbolic expression (*UP* 1, pp. 367, 374, 380; also *WB* I, pp. 239-244).

29. Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design*, p. 47.

30. In a letter of 1916 to his father, Yeats expressed his admiration for a book of Japanese

paintings. What impressed him was their sense of "conscious" and "deliberate" arrangement of the outer world. But, despite this element of consciousness, Yeats felt that they had escaped the dangers of abstraction or rhetoric because they were full of passionate energy and capable of arousing deep, human emotions (*L*, p. 608).

31. Yeats distinguishes between evocative or symbolic and purely conceptual or merely declarative art. The latter, he wrote in *Discoveries* in 1906, lacks the intensity and wholeness of symbolic art, in which "emotion" is bound to "emotion" by a "system of ordered images", and consequently leads to abstraction and fragmentation (*E&I*, p. 293). He repeated his preference for a symbolic art of allusion in "A People's Theatre", expressing his desire for "a mysterious art, always reminding and half-reminding [...] of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement" (*Ex*, p. 255).

32. From an unpublished journal entry of January 1929 by Yeats, cited in Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1954), p. 240.

Yeats's concept of "form" must not be confused with either the over-faithful imitation of naturalistic painting, to which Yeats objected (*E&I*, p. 100), or the shadowy fluidity that he despised in Impressionist art (*Aut*, p. 436). Both styles Yeats saw as inadequate means for the expression of the powers of the imagination because they either resulted in non-creative imitation or sank into confusion and vagueness. At the same time, Yeats could not accept the mathematical abstraction of Cubism because, for all its conscious arrangement, it lacked expression of feeling by leaving out the natural world (*L*, p. 608). In a letter to his father written in 1916, at around the same time as his attack on the philosophy of the Impressionists and the Cubists, Yeats stated that art "uses the outer world as a symbolism to express subjective moods" (*L*, p. 607). This entails the arrangement of physical experience in ways which do nor betray art's alliance with either symbolism or emotion. Form, then, in Yeats must be understood as the conscious and deliberate ordering of experience contained in a frame of reference that would give the poem "mental existence" and create the necessary space for the artist to treat his subject as an expression of some inner revelation.

33. Yeats sought to escape pictorialism in his own poetry. In an essay of 1904, he maintains that art turns to "picture-making" when it ceases to express the fullness of life and its link to the imagination of popular tradition is severed. What, then, it portrays is "life in the mirror" (*Ex*, p. 163), social or political concerns, rather than the creative energy and passionate spirit of life itself.

34. The letter, which was not published, in anticipation of the appearance of A.E.'s "Literary Ideals in Ireland" on 12 November, was intended as Yeats's response to John Eglinton's essay "Mr. Yeats and Popular Poetry", which appeared on 5 November 1898. Yeats's belated reply came in "The Autumn of the Flesh" (3 December 1898), later reprinted as "The Autumn of the Body" in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. Part of the letter was incorporated into the second section of Yeats's essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" (*CL* II, p. 294, note 1; *UP* 2, p. 128).

35. Yeats became acquainted with Pater's poetics and his aesthetic theory through his own reading of a number of Pater's prose works – a reading spanning a period of almost thirty years from 1889 to 1916 – as well as through the Rhymers' Club. Yeats founded the club in 1890 and Pater exercised considerable influence on it until at least 1896, when it was dissolved. For Yeats's reading of Pater see Thomas L. Dume, *Yeats: A Survey*, p. 278. For an account of the history of the Rhymers' club see Joann Gardner, *Yeats and the Rhymers' Club: A Nineties' Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

36. Walter Pater, *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1928; first publ. 1895), pp. 197, 168-169.

37. The tale, which was later suppressed in the second edition of *A Vision* except for a brief mention of the dance (*AVb*, pp. 80-81), bore the title "The Dance of the Four Royal Persons" and had Owen Aherne as its narrator. According to Melchiori, the expression "Royal Persons" is associated in occult treatises with alchemical symbols (*Whole Mystery*, p. 4, note 2).

38. In the autobiographical *Hodos Chameliontos*, Yeats recorded his early interest in philosophy, linked to poetic imagination and religious belief, as part of his endeavour to render his art catholic by recovering a single system of faith that would account for all human experience:

> I ceased to read modern books that were not books of imagination, and if some philosophic idea interested me, I tried to trace it back to its earliest use, believing that there must be a tradition of belief older than any European Church, and founded upon the experience of the world before the modern bias. (*Aut*, p. 265)

39. R.P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture*, pp. 106-107.

40. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying", in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994; first publ. 1948), p. 1091.

41. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first publ. 1967), pp. 313-314, 320-321.

42. In a letter of 1900 to George Russell, Yeats argues that 'beauty is the end & law of poetry" (*CL* II, p. 522). Yeats's apparent aestheticism reflects his views on art after the turn of the century, but by 1908 he sufficiently modified them to allow for the admittance of ideas into literature without, however, giving thought ascendancy over emotions.

43. In a letter of 1892 to John O'Leary, Yeats stated that magic and the mystical life were "the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write" (*CL* I, p. 303).

44. Giorgio Melchiori, *Whole Mystery*, p. 28.

45. F.A.C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Methuen, 1968; first publ. 1958), p. 16.

46. Discussing the relation between writers, Ellmann notes that they "move upon other writers not as genial successors but as violent expropriators, knocking down established boundaries to seize by the force of youth, or of age, what they require. They do not borrow, they override." (*Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967; first publ. 1965), p. 7). The same idea is also behind Harold Bloom's analysis of a literary text as "the deliberate misinterpretation" or "misprision" of other texts that precede it. Bloom sees this as an act of offensive/defensive reaction against precursor texts so that the author can "clear imaginative space" for himself (*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. xxiii, 5, 43).

47. Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I, p. 99.

48. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari detect in civilised modern societies the operation of "the processes of decoding and deterritorialization", of breaking apart and overturning existing structures, codes and orders. But, they observe, what these societies "*deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other*". These "neoterritorialities", these reconstructions, "are often artificial, residual, archaic". Yet, they have a "current function", that of "reintroducing code fragments" or "resuscitating old codes" and can be folkloric or revolutionary, as in the case of the Irish Catholics (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and*

Schizophrenia, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London; New York: Continuun, 2004; first publ. 1984), p. 279).

49. W.B. Yeats, "A Postscript", in *Ideals in Ireland*, ed. Lady Gregory (London: at the Unicorn, 1901), p. 105.

50. Anca Vlasopolos, *The Symbolic Method of Coleridge, Baudelaire and Yeats* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), p. 173. According to the same critic, the metaphor was a favourite Romantic one.

51. Jonathan Barnes remarks that, for Heraclitus, "change is between opposites; and the logic of change seemed to draw Heraclitus irresistibly to the Unity of Opposites: opposites are coinstantiated" (*The Presocratic Philosophers*, rev. edn (London; New York: Routledge, 1996; first publ. in 2 vols 1979), pp. 75-76). G.S. Kirk also reads the Heraclitean "unity" as "a single, coherent, determinable complex" formed of "the total plurality of things" (G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; first publ. 1957), p. 191).

52. In their critical edition of Yeats's *A Vision*, George M. Harper and Walter Hood suggest that there are two passages from Dante's *Convito* which may have served as possible sources for Yeats (*CEAV*, Notes, p. 12). Dume traces the first occurrence of Yeats's references to the *Convito* and its analogy of a "perfectly proportioned human body" in his essay "A People's Theatre" (*Yeats: A Survey*, p. 345). The reference was subsequently repeated by Yeats to elucidate his concept of Unity of Being (see *Aut*, pp. 190, 291; *AVb*, pp. 82, 258; *E&I*, p. 518).

53. In the Automatic Script of 3 September 1918, Yeats's Instructor, prompted by the question "What is Unity of Being?", provided the definition: "Complete harmony between physical body, intellect & spiritual desire – *all may be imperfect* but if harmony is perfect it is unity" (George M. Harper, *The Making of Yeats's 'A Vision'*, Vol. 2, pp. 116-117).

54. Helen Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats and Stevens* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 95.

55. Discussing Greek art, and in particular Greek sculpture, in his essay "Luca della Robbia", Walter Pater points out that it always sought to express the permanent rather than the individual and the accidental. Because he detached himself from "the conditions of a particular place or people" or time, the Greek artist, who lived an "outward life" in a unified society, expressed in his work the "breadth" and universality of humanity (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 43).

CHAPTER TWO

Between Eternities:
The Symbolic Imagination

I

In Yeats's poetics, especially during the 1880s and 1890s, artistic creation acquires religious stature. Largely informed by a metaphysical position on art, Yeats's conception of poetic activity is formulated on the basis that it aims towards revelation of a transcendent reality, that which "exists really and unchangeably" (*E&I*, p. 116) and of which the physical world is an embodiment. That Yeats should invest art with such power is closely linked to his increasing preoccupation with magic, mysticism and symbolism. On one level, his interest in the occult typified, as Roy Foster remarks, the "Irish Protestant sense of displacement, their loss of social and psychological integration" before the end of the nineteenth century. It thus served as "a strategy for coping with contemporary threats".[1] At the same time, however, Yeats's mystical explorations were a search for a tradition that would sanction his own belief in a symbolic interpretation of the world. The latter related to his perception of art as mediating force between the spiritual and material realm. But more importantly, symbolism provided the organic link that Yeats sought between art's philosophical foundation and its mythological content. The present chapter proposes to examine Yeats's approach to symbol and its literary function in the context of his critical essays.

From the early stages of his poetic career, Yeats was committed to producing a symbolic art that, as he later termed, would "describe the relation of the soul and the heart to the facts of life [...] as it is, not as we would have it be" (*Ex*, p. 117).[2] What form this relation was meant to take becomes apparent considering his views on poetry as a reflection of "immortal moods" and the creator of values. His growing hostility to rationalism and the scientific apprehension of the phenomenal world as the only valid world found early expression in the three-volume edition of Blake's writings, a project on which he and Edwin Ellis embarked between 1889 and 1893. In the imaginative arts

of his time, Yeats now discerned a gradual dissociation of the language of divine analogy from any religious meaning and emphasised the need for a spiritual art:

> As the language of spiritual utterance ceases to be theological and becomes literary and poetical, the great truths have to be spoken afresh; and Blake came into the world to speak them, and to announce the new epoch in which poets and poetic thinkers should be once more, as they were in the days of the Hebrew Prophets, the Spiritual leaders of the race.
>
> (*WB* I, p. xi)

As spiritual leader, the artist is perceived as undertaking the task of awakening the minds of men to the mystic qualities inherent in the created world. Through the medium of his art, he endeavours to rekindle our interest in the eternal, "spiritual realities" of life, which Yeats sees as once having formed the "foundation of the arts" (*CL* II, p. 350), and to communicate the presence of a unifying principle of existents. Adele Dalsimer notes that, for Yeats, the importance of the poet is that he indicates "the sacred function, meaning, and significance of present conditions and objects".[3] In this line, Yeats sees the poet as the successor of the priests and the prophets, and thereby as the possessor of wisdom and power.[4] His is the power to shape the nation's future by creating ideals that could inspire action, and so "make and unmake mankind". But it is also a power of mystical origin, conferred upon him by virtue of his stature as advocate of the "almost forgotten faith" (*E&I*, pp. 159, 203) of the union of body, intellect and soul via the transforming and symbolising power of the imagination. Viewed as the voice of what is eternal in man, the imagination apprehends the divine ideas, which are symbolically manifest in nature, and constructs a poetic world in which it attempts to restore a metaphysical, if not mystical, relation of matter to spirit.

Already at the age of twenty, Yeats asserted the supremacy of the artist's social function, intermixed with a sense of spiritual vocation. He proposed that "whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology" was "but literal truth" (*Aut*, p. 90). This idea of total art, which in Yeats's mind marries poetry to philosophy and religion via the employment of symbol and myth, is a recurring theme in most of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. Thus, in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900), Yeats concurs with Shelley that in the past the poets were called "'legislators'" and conveyed, as did the lawgivers, their "vision of the divine order" (*E&I*, p. 67). For Yeats, such a vision

acquires validity because not only is it metaphysically qualified but it also found political and social implementation as law and behaviour codes. Similarly, in "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897), Yeats subscribes to the Blakean notion of the arts being supreme among "Divine revelations". Opposing with Blake the imagination to reason, construed as observation derived from the senses, Yeats rejects the latter as a divisive agent, whereas, for him, the former ascertains "the immortality of beauty" (*E&I*, pp. 112-113) and effects a communion of emotion between men.

Such assertions reveal Yeats's conviction that art is the expression of a transcendent reality, whose affinity with the material world it should evoke by the vehicle of symbol. Yeats's preoccupation with symbolism in art started as early as that with magic and the two are often linked in his critical essays, especially those of the earlier period. In his 1901 essay "Magic", Yeats sees magic as the foundation of art, contending that the latter arose out of "the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers-by". Furthermore, by affirming the power of the imagination to reveal the presence of a single mind functioning as repository of archetypal images, which can be tapped by individual minds via symbols, he attributes mystical qualities to the latter. Symbols are termed "the greatest of all powers" (*E&I*, pp. 43, 49) and, in their employment as well as the revelatory purpose they serve, Yeats associates the practitioner of magic and the artist.

One principal characteristic of Yeats's conception of symbolism that emerges in his writings of the time is an unmistakable emphasis on the "inherent power in symbols" (*E&I*, p. 48). This suggests that their evocative power is determined by occult association between symbol and its correspondent. In "Symbolism in Painting" (1898), Yeats approvingly quoted the unidentified German painter's distinction between symbols whose meaning comes by "a natural right" and those of traditional association but defended "the rose, and the lily, and the poppy" on the latter premise (*E&I*, pp. 146-147).[5] The same idea is expounded in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry". Here, it is via symbols which have acquired a multiplicity of meaning by having been placed in a received tradition that subjective art can escape the dangers of individualism and gain profundity in the expression of the mystery and "abundance" of life (*E&I*, p. 87). In the same essay, the investment of symbol with the power to evoke the breadth of human experience allows Yeats to align the idealist poet with the epic and dramatic poets of

the past, who sought to convey a sense of spirituality in the world of circumstance. But in "Magic", symbols are produced occultly according to "the impulses and the patterns" in the Great Memory, wherein they acquire their associations. Dissolving the boundaries between what he terms "inherent" and "arbitrary" symbols, Yeats claims that whatever "the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory" (*E&I*, pp. 52, 50) and can be used to call up this supernatural realm.[6]

Yeats sought to classify symbols in his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900). In it, he distinguishes, as Edward Engelberg also remarks,[7] between three types of symbol – those evoking emotions alone, those evoking ideas alone, and those evoking ideas mingled with emotions. The first are called "emotional" symbols depending for their evocativeness mainly on personal associations. Because they only stimulate the life of emotions and are mainly employed to arouse sympathy, they awaken their reader to the spectrum of human experience. The last two types of symbol, which Yeats calls "intellectual", are the preferable kind. Outside "the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets", these are known as symbols. By virtue of their depending upon a received intellectual tradition, they unite both the poet and the reader to the "procession of the symbols" or the Great Memory.[8] Yeats is careful to emphasise, however, that the ideas with which these symbols are associated should not dominate but rather be "fragments" cast back to the intellect by the emotions evoked (*E&I*, pp. 160-161).

Eventually, by the time he wrote his essay on magic, the distinction came to be of little consequence as what matters is that ultimately symbols acquire their emblematic associations once they take their place in the Great Memory. More than arising out of the poet's individual imagination, then, the symbol obtains its power by being part of a tradition and evoking an ideal world which contains all expressions of archetypal emotions, events and persons, and transcends the limitations of time and space. For Yeats, symbols are free from all bonds of ordinary experience and it is by virtue of this freedom that they become "a part of the Divine Essence" (*E&I*, pp. 148-149). That the symbol serves as mediator between this divine realm and the physical world points back to an idea he expressed in his essay "William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*" (1896).[9] "A symbol", he wrote, "is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame"; it belongs to imagination and is a revelation (*E&I*, p. 116). For Yeats, the artist

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uses symbols to convey an idea of the ineffable, spiritual principles that he perceives through inspiration and revelation. During this period Yeats also equates the spiritual with beauty, the kind of "impossible beauty" which is imperceptible to the senses and can only be apprehended in analogical terms (*UP* 2, p. 135). Thus, Yeats not only aesthetisises but also sublimates beauty as both art's metaphysical end and as the principle governing its construction.

II

There is considerable difference of scholarly opinion as to whether Yeats derived his symbolism from the French Symbolist movement[10] or from his studies in the occult and his exposure to Blake, Shelley and Rossetti. In the latter case, it would be more appropriate to speak of symbolist tendencies rather than pure Symbolism in his work.[11] My argument, however, does not rest upon confirming or denying either point but upon delineating Yeats's symbolist aesthetic in connection with his views on mythology without addressing the issue of "sources". Insofar as this aesthetic gains in understanding through an examination of the literary background against which his symbolic thought developed, I will make use of all available traditions.

Arguably, Yeats's conception of symbolism already began developing in the early 1890s as a result of his occult studies and his reading of Blake, Shelley, Hallam, and Pater. But it was in the French Symbolists, made readily available to him through Arthur Symons's translations, articles and lectures, that Yeats found the means to express in a more defined manner his hitherto vague thoughts. Yeats acknowledged Symons's contribution to bringing him into closer contact with the Symbolist poets when he wrote retrospectively that "my thoughts gained in richness and in clearness from his sympathy, nor shall I ever know how much I owe to the passages that he read me". Under Symons's influence, Yeats not only perceived his association with the French Symbolists but their poetry "may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the latter poems" and to certain of his prose writings (*Aut*, pp. 319-321).

Symons, editor of the English, symbolist-orientated periodical *The Savoy*, introduced French Symbolism to England and to Yeats with the publication of his influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). He dedicated his book to Yeats, whom he proclaimed to be the "chief representative of that [the symbolist]

movement in our country". In his book, Symons describes Symbolism as "a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream". With it, he announces, comes a new epoch of change in thought, of revolt against the "materialistic" tradition, which sees art as a mimetic representation of the outer, physical world as this is perceived by the bodily senses. Through the use of symbol, which is a "representation of idea by form", the Infinite is revealed and the Symbolist artist, who performs the "sacred ritual" of leading us to "the eternal beauty", is seen as mediator between the natural world and a higher reality embodied in the symbol. Thus, Symons asserts, literature, liberated by Symbolism from the bonds of rhetoric and realism, brings us closer to the spiritual forces inherent in nature and becomes itself a "kind of religion".[12]

Yet, despite Yeats's affinity with the French artists, in terms of their perception of an analogy or "correspondence" between the material and the spiritual world, there is a significant difference between them in their treatment of the symbol. For the Symbolists, the suggestive images or metaphors that the poet uses to convey his vision of a higher reality are also expressive of his inner life.[13] According to Engelberg, a major distinction between Yeats and the Symbolists is that the former is less interested in the symbol than in what it evokes, whereas for the latter the symbol is the "end product" and not "the starting point". Engelberg argues that "while *symbolisme* moved towards a coalescing symbol, Yeats moved away from an exfoliating one".[14] In agreement with Engelberg, P.Th.M.G. Liebregts also points out that, for Yeats, the symbol is "a means to ascend from the material world to the ineffable source of the universe", which it evokes. But for the Symbolists, the world is used to evoke the symbol, which is also regarded as a reflection of their own emotions.[15]

Drawing upon these differences, Yeats was later to claim that he acquired his knowledge of symbolism mainly from his occult practices and from his study of Blake, Boehme and Swedenborg. They, as he wrote to Ernest Boyd in 1915, were his "chief mystical authorities", whereas "of the French symbolists I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge" (*L*, p. 592). When he did learn about them, mainly through Symons's translations, he maintained that what their movement offered him was merely corroboration of what he had already discovered for himself. He wrote to Maurice Bowra in 1934:

> I don't think I was really much influenced by French Symbolists. My development was different, but that development was of such a nature that I felt I could not explain it [...]. When Symons talked to me about the Symbolistes, or read me passages from his translations from Mallarmé, I seized upon everything that at all resembled my own thought; here at last was something I could talk about. My symbolism came from actual experiments in vision, made by my friends or myself, in the society which called itself "The Hermetic Students", and continually talked over by myself and my friends. I felt [...], and indeed still feel, that one can only explain oneself if one draws one's illustrations from accepted schools of thought. [...] Unaccepted schools, however profound, are incomplete because isolated from the rest of knowledge.[16]

Despite these claims, the Symbolists provided Yeats – if only for a period, as he was to depart from their doctrines – with the means to express his symbolic thought more articulately. However, the assertion that he derived his symbolism from his mystical studies is not to be entirely dismissed. One of the early formative influences on Yeats's developing conception of symbolism was Arthur Hallam's essay on Tennyson, "On some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry" (1831), considered by some as anticipating symbolist thought.[17] Relying largely on Hallam's aesthetic pronouncements of a poetry of sensation rather than of reflection, Yeats calls for an art of the "seer". He perceives such art as expressive of emotion and as a "revelation of a hidden life". It thus evokes the vision of a transcendent reality, to which the symbolic imagination points as the ultimate truth (*UP* 2, pp. 130-131). Although, in the ensuing years, Yeats would challenge certain principles of Hallam's "aesthetic movement", he would still acknowledge the importance of the essay in shaping his symbolic thought.[18]

III

Yeats's theory of symbolism gains significantly in understanding if we read it in the context of Platonism, with which he would have been made familiar through his involvement with the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn.[19] The Theosophical system, with its belief that all religions have a common ancestry, is a synthesis of doctrines drawn partly from the section of the Platonic tradition known as Neoplatonism. In the 1890s the Theosophical Society, under the editorship of G.R.S. Mead and others of its members and associates, reprinted several Platonic and Neoplatonic texts in the translations of Thomas Taylor. Among them were *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1891), Plato's *Republic* (1894), *Select Works of*

Plotinus (1895), Plotinus' *Essay on the Beautiful* (1895) and Porhyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* (1895).[20] A number of these were in the Westcott Hermetic Library, founded in 1891, and were thus available to Yeats, as was also the library of the Theosophical Society in Dublin.[21]

Fundamental to Theosophical teaching is the notion of divine analogy or correspondence whereby the experiential world is seen as the material incarnation or symbol of a supreme reality, which can only be mystically apprehended.[22] This dualistic view of the universe is traced back to the words of the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, "As above, so below", which intimates that the physical and the divine world are governed by the same law. In the Theosophical world-view, all that exists is derived from the First Principle, perceived as eternal, immutable and without limit. In this ineffable principle, which remains unknowable except through negative designations, all oppositions are resolved. From it the human soul also is generated but has fallen into the physical world and can only attain union with its divine origin if it purges itself from its material substance after death. However, it is possible for man to glimpse the eternal reality in life through the acquisition of secret knowledge.[23]

Yeats's belief in a transcendent reality, participated in by the world of creation, together with his belief in the immortality of the soul and in reincarnation, attracted him to Theosophy and the whole Platonic tradition, upon which the Theosophical system drew. Much of Yeats's knowledge of this tradition, especially in the early years, was derived from the teachings of Theosophy but there were also other sources. Although Yeats's systematic study of Greek philosophy, and especially of Plato, Plotinus and the Presocratic philosophers, began in the late 1910s and reached its culmination in the 1920s,[24] his acquaintance with them started much earlier. While still at school, he "stood with Plato and with Socrates" (*Mem*, p. 65). But it was Lionel Johnson, his friend from the Rhymers' Club and a disciple of Walter Pater, who, as Brian Arkins remarks, directed Yeats towards Platonism and in 1893 presented him with a copy of Plato's dialogues.[25]

Roy Foster notes that in the late 1880s Yeats's knowledge of Theosophy and its underpinning Platonic philosophical system was also steered by his reading of "Thomas Taylor's translations of Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists", which John O'Leary had lent "the young aspirants". Yeats's esoteric studies, Foster points out, bound as they were with philosophic considerations and artistic concerns, fall within the wider context of "a

particular tradition of Irish Protestant interest in the occult",[26] which elucidates his approach to mysticism and magic. At the same time, Pater's influence on the Rhymers played a significant part in shaping their attitude to classical scholarship. His works *Greek Studies*, *Plato and Platonism*, and *Marius the Epicurean*, which Yeats possessed,[27] furnished the latter with a wide spectrum of Greek themes. Furthermore, Yeats's inability to read Greek steered him to the writings of the Cambridge Platonists Henry More, Joseph Glanvil and Ralph Cudworth as well as the essays of G.R.S. Mead. As Yeats asserts in *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places* (1914), "these writers quote from Plotinus and Porphyry and Plato and from later writers, especially Synesius and John Philoponus in whom the school of Plato came to an end in the seventh century" (*Ex*, pp. 60-61).

Still, Yeats would contend that his knowledge of Greek philosophy in 1918, when the automatic writing culminating in *A Vision* began, was scanty consisting only of "two or three of the principal Platonic Dialogues" (*AVb*, p. 12). Evidence from his essays suggests that by that time he was already familiar with Thomas Taylor's translation of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs.* Taylor's text offers a Platonic interpretation of much of the symbolism of the *Odyssey* and Yeats quotes from it both in his essay on Shelley (*E&I*, pp. 80-86) and the 1902 edition of *The Celtic Twilight* (p. 128). But in much of the poetry of the period, we can detect unmistakable Platonic echoes. We may therefore surmise that in those early years Yeats had a certain degree of familiarity with Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines as well as texts. It was not, however, until after the completion of the 1925 version of *A Vision* that Yeats undertook, as he wrote to T. Sturge Moore in 1926, the major task of reading "for months every day Plato and Plotinus" (*LTSM*, p. 83). Yeats elaborated further on this in the "Introduction" to the second version of *A Vision*, explaining that he read Plotinus not only in Thomas Taylor's but also "MacKenna's incomparable translation" and that he "went from Plotinus to his predecessors and successors" (*AVb*, pp. 19-20).[28]

An examination of the basic principles of the philosophical system of these Platonic figures will elucidate Yeats's affinity to their thought although, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, his dialogic relation with them did not always remain unequivocal. Starting with Plato, his perception of reality is premised on the positing of two worlds: a material, which is subject to change, and an immaterial, which is permanent and eternal. What defines their relation is the dictum that the former exists

only as a reflection, a shadow of the latter, of whose nature it partakes. The fundamental postulate in Plato's thought is the existence of eternal and immutable entities known as Forms or Ideas. Their function in the Platonic ontology is to explain the diversity and interconnection of the phenomena of the material world; they are, according to G.M.A. Grube, the "eternal models" manifesting themselves as instances in the "particular sensible things".[29] Plato's supreme cause is a principle of unity, which is associated with the Good and the Beautiful and is thus the ultimate goal of desire.

For Plato, it is only through the soul, which is itself immortal and mediates between the physical and the Ideal, that any knowledge of the Forms is possible. Two doctrines are linked with Plato's conception of the human soul, both of which are of relevance to Yeats's poetics. One is that of knowledge as recollection of the Forms beheld by the soul before its descent into the world of sense. The other is that of rebirth, of the soul's double journey from a disembodied to an incarnate state and back.[30] For Plato, man's aim in life is to attain wisdom by controlling his passions and rising to the contemplation of eternal truth so that he can realise his true nature.[31]

As already mentioned, Yeats also read Plato in the translations of Thomas Taylor. In his commentaries on Plato's dialogues, which accompanied the translated text, Taylor discerns a triadic structure of the world in the Greek philosopher's dialectic. As Plato's First Principle or Cause, Taylor posits the Pythagorean One, which is a principle of unity from which all intellectual and material orders proceed or are generated. In his exposition of Plato's ideas, Taylor sees a continuity of thought from the Pythagoreans and Plato to Plotinus and Proclus, and much of his analysis bears out an affinity especially between Plato and Proclus.[32] Taylor's interpretation of Plato, with its underlying Neoplatonic and esoteric orientation, informs Yeats's discussion of Blake's symbolic system, in which the latter's concept of the divine nature and its correspondence with the material world are treated in similar terms.

Another important figure who played a central part in the development of Yeats's symbolic thought was Plotinus, whom Yeats read in earnest after 1918. Kathleen Raine explains that Plotinus held special significance for Yeats because in him the latter "discovered a cosmology, a metaphysics, consistent with the nature of man as he had come to understand it".[33] Plotinus also adopts the Platonic doctrine of two worlds but postulates a process of emanation extending from the One to the lowest level of creation, namely, formless Matter. As the ultimate, transcendent reality, the

One is viewed as perfect unity and the cause of being, that upon which all things depend for their existence. In Plotinus' metaphysical system, it is the Soul that performs the role of mediator between the higher realm and the world of sense. For Plotinus, the goal of life is the attainment of a kind of mystical communion with the One through the acquisition of self-knowledge. As it becomes increasingly aware of its divine origin, the human soul seeks to transcend the material self and bodily passions and is led on the path of uniting with divine intellect and ultimately with the One. This union, however, does not entail obliteration but, as J.M. Rist remarks, "rapture in the divine" so that the soul, having surrendered its finite self, is filled with God.[34]

Apart from his metaphysics, Plotinus' theory of art also provides an interesting parallel to Yeats's notion of art as mediating between the two realms. It is notably contrasted to that of Plato, who, in Book X of his *Republic*, dismisses art on the grounds of it being purely imitative in that its creations are simply copies of objects existing in the phenomenal world rather than of the Ideal Form (597b-598c). Plotinus suggests that the arts should not be "slighted" for imitating nature since "natural objects are themselves imitations" or images of the immaterial Idea behind them. Furthermore, he recognises that the artist, via his imagination, has the ability to "go back to the Idea from which Nature itself derives" and express in his work the intelligible essence of his model, and therefore the beauty of the Intelligible world itself.[35] What he creates is not a mere image of an image but a representation of Ideal reality as close to truth as any natural object. Thus, Plotinus not only links imagination to the Ideal world but also views art as a symbol of this realm and a guide to the recollection of truth and Intelligible Beauty. Significantly, Plotinus grants art an autonomous existence independent of the model that gave rise to the representation on the basis that the artistic work is the product of a conscious process, a particular arrangement of material effected by the artist.[36]

Yeats, too, sees the artist as having access to a higher realm, for he calls "into outer life some portion of the divine life, or of the buried reality". In Yeats's poetics, art is perceived not as a mirror of the material world but as the symbolic expression of some invisible essence. The artist thus creates from a timeless imagination which, having dispensed with temporality, contemplates "some reality, some beauty" (*E&I*, pp. 154, 163); and it is this metaphysically qualified reality, linked to beauty, that he calls forth via the act of artistic creation. In this respect, the poet is presented in Plotinian

terms as "a vessel of the creative power of God", re-enacting in his "little ritual" of verse "the great ritual of Nature", which itself is the embodiment of the ideal. For Yeats, art, far from imitating nature, stands on the same level of reality as it does since they are both derived from "the same eternal model" (*E&I*, p. 202), revealed by way of symbolism.

Through the translations of Taylor, Yeats became familiar with the work of other Neoplatonists and appears to have read, among other texts, *Life of Pythagoras* by Iamblichus as well as *The Elements of Theology* by Proclus.[37] The latter is of special interest here since his doctrine of the First Cause and belief in the supernatural ring familiar tones in Yeats. In Proclus' metaphysics, the One is the First Principle or Cause, from which all that exists proceeds. It is identified with the Good and it is that to which all things aspire. Linked with the One is an order of divine entities which Proclus calls "henads" and via which the divine character extends to all things from the highest to the lowest.[38] For Proclus, the creative principle is essentially Intelligence. Its activity is contemplation involving always self-consciousness, and its existence is creation through the intellective act. Liebregts, following E.R. Dodds,[39] reads Proclus' "henads" as abstract, metaphysical reductions of the traditional mythological gods, who, in the system of the Hellenic religion, embodied absolute principles such as Beauty, Justice or Wisdom. Consequently, he draws an analogy between the "henads" and Yeats's depiction of the Greek gods in "Rosa Alchemica" (1896) as divine mediators effecting man's attainment of communion with the Intelligible realm.[40]

Yeats's knowledge of the Platonic tradition remains for the most part intertwined with his study in Theosophy, magic and the occult, and he does not always clearly differentiate between their diverse elements. However, these systems of thought provided Yeats with an intellectual framework that allowed him to place his personal utterance within a received tradition and thus establish the much-desired link between art and its historical heritage. At the same time, they furnished him, as F.A.C. Wilson notes, with "the materials for a theory of symbolism".[41] They endorsed not only his notion of dualism, which consisted in the interplay or conflict of opposing forces, but also his mystical belief in the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. According to this belief, apprehension of a higher reality, of which the phenomenal world is a reflection or symbol, is realised through the mediation of the divine and immortal part in man. Yeats identified this part not only with soul but also

with imagination, functioning as a means of arriving at truth and attaining wisdom.

IV

To return to the French Symbolist movement, Yeats voices his main objection to it on the grounds that it lacked a "sufficient philosophy and criticism", that is, a closely woven pattern or system of interrelated parts. But he retorted that "if it cared it might find enough of both philosophy and criticism in the writings of William Blake to protect it from its opponents, and [...] from its own mistakes".[42] His preference for Blake rests partly on the special function Yeats required form to fulfil, that of clearing space in order for the artist to create, and partly on the evocative power with which he endowed symbolic art. According to Yeats, Blake was an advocate of both precepts.[43] Yeats does admit that his scanty knowledge of French was an impediment to a fuller understanding of the French Symbolist theory.[44] But it seems, as Engelberg also supports, rather simplistic to conclude that his criticism of their doctrines was out of ignorance.[45] His differentiation from their views stems from recognition of what he saw in them as a limitation to art, namely, their failure to place the symbol in a received intellectual tradition, in the "great procession" (*E&I*, pp. 149-150).

In this sense, we can understand Yeats's assertion that Blake was the "first great *symboliste* of modern times, and the first of any time to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol". What is of particular significance here is the emphasis on the artistic value of the symbol, its employment as a means of revelatory, artistic expression. Through the mouthpiece of Blake, Yeats proceeds to associate symbol with imagination and vision as a vehicle for the perception of what is permanent in material or intellectual forms.[46] For Yeats, vision has not only emblematic but also aesthetic undertones. It is the "intense realisation" of the transmutation of experience into art (*L*, p. 583) and, by allying it with the symbolic imagination, he assigns to it the same "eternal" and "infinite" nature as well as power to evoke the permanent realities reflected in the natural realm. "Visionary thought," Yeats contends in his "Symbolism in Painting" essay, "is thought about perfection and the way to perfection" (*E&I*, p. 149), and it is to this a-temporal world that symbolic imagination belongs. Because Yeats perceives art in metaphysical terms, symbolism becomes the only adequate expression of the transcendental truth he intends it to reveal.

Five years before the first essay on symbolism, Yeats and Ellis had published their three-volume commentary on Blake. The second half of the first volume contained "The Symbolic System", the greatest part of which is generally acknowledged to be Yeats's own writing.[47] In it, Yeats undertook to offer a reading of Blake's major symbols as well as an exposition of the basic doctrines of his system, often fathering on his predecessor his own conceptions. The "System" began by way of introduction with an essay written earlier, in 1891, and deemed by Yeats himself as "very important" (*CL* I, p. 252), namely, "The Necessity of Symbolism", in which Yeats expounded his defence of symbolist thought. With the exception of this essay, which Harold Bloom considers one of the "two redeeming areas" in the whole edition, the other being Yeats's understanding of Blake's "dialectic of Nature and Imagination", the critic dismisses the greatest part of the section as "gorgeous nonsense".[48] Despite the uncertain results of Yeats's struggles to penetrate Blake's poetics, "The Symbolic System" offers valuable insight into Yeats's poetic imagination and above all into his conception of symbolism.[49]

In "The Necessity of Symbolism", Yeats employs a metaphysical perspective to distinguish between the materialist and symbolist thinker. The former sees no essential difference between "spiritual" and "natural" things, between the mind and the outer physical form, both of which he treats as one. For him, knowledge is acquired through observation of external events and analysis of impressions derived from the bodily senses. The symbolist, on the other hand, posits the existence of two separate orders. He regards the external world as the symbolic expression of a spiritual reality, what Yeats calls the "unmanifest eternal" or the "universal mood", which is the permeating "essence of all". To him, "'correspondence'", that is, the symbolic relation of the "outer" to the "inner", of the material and temporal to the spiritual and eternal, is the only key to truth. Observation and sensation, the universe itself, become merely the means by which "the universal mood we name God" can be apocalyptically revealed (*WB* I, pp. 235-236, 243, 239). They are regarded, as Robert O'Driscoll remarks, as "the shadow, not the substance, the distorted mirror of reality, not the reality itself".[50]

Yeats sees three principles as operating in the universe: the emotional, the intellectual, and the natural, each corresponding to the previous by "discrete degrees", that is, by a process of emanation according to which one state proceeds from the immediately higher one. The natural degree or principle possesses physical form and

functions as a symbol by means of which the intellectual degree, whose form is mental, manifests and realises itself. The emotional principle possesses no form or substance and its existence is not spatial but "in time only". It is from this principle, identified by Yeats with Blake's all-pervading "poetic genius" or with "central mood" (Yeats's term), that the eternal element inherent in all things and that all forms, intellectual and physical, are derived. Thus, Yeats, in Platonic fashion, traces all life and art in a single, ultimate source under the mystical name of "the unmanifest eternal", which he locates at "the centre of the universe" and regards as truth itself. The created world, or "the manifest temporal", acquires significance by virtue of being the embodiment of this invisible, emotional principle (*WB* I, pp. 238-242).

Mircea Eliade contends that to a mind inclined to a symbolic mode of thinking, and even more so in archaic cultures, the external world acquires validity through participation in "a transcendent reality" perceived as a celestial "archetypal model" in imitation of which all existents are fashioned. Furthermore, human acts are conferred meaning and reality only to the extent that they repeat or reproduce a "primordial act". As the seat of "the sacred", of this "absolute reality", Eliade identifies the centre, from which Creation took place. Participation in the symbolism of the centre not only confers reality on the world but also transforms "profane space into a transcendent space" and "concrete time into mythical time", what he terms "*in illo tempore*".[51]

Similarly, for Yeats, the material world, when viewed symbolically, provides, as O'Driscoll remarks, the metaphors for the "inspired intuitions of the mind".[52] Yeats's argument runs along familiar lines. By allowing his imagination to expand beyond limited individual experience until it becomes one with the universal mood, the poet whose work is woven around such metaphors discovers, beyond the laws of necessity and the world of "physical effects", the "'spiritual causes'" reflected in them. Because he has entered into the universality of the one great imagination, into which all minds merge, he is able to perceive things in their totality. Death, then, ceases to be the end of all and becomes a passage towards union with the body of God (*WB* I, pp. 244-245). Yeats here is anticipating, through the use of the "expansion" and "contraction" metaphor, his concept of the Great Memory, which he expounded in greater detail in "Magic" eight years later.

The basic tenet in both essays is essentially the same. When man regards the outer world not as the ultimate reality and an entity complete in itself but as a

representation of a higher spiritual order and passes into a state of communion with the divine, he realises that all minds and memories are one. He sees that he contains within himself the thoughts of nature, perceived as distinct from their symbolic forms:

> We enter into this Divine body by the symbolism of things, as we enter into the world about us by perception of things, apart from their symbols, and by association of ideas in the memory [...]. The perception of the senses apart from symbol, limits us down to the narrow circle of personal experience, while association of ideas is essentially "spectral," coming [...] not from perception of something apart from ourselves, but from the memory of sensations which get their peculiar value from being connected with our personal and "spectral" life. By symbolism we enter the universality of God, by sensation and the memory of sensation, we enter the world of Satan, which is "all nothing."
>
> (*WB* I, pp. 327-328)

For Yeats, then, symbolism is the only way that an invisible, spiritual essence manifests itself in intellectual or material forms. Whereas materialism, claims Yeats, with its emphasis on external nature as the only reality, contracts the imagination and limits it to personal experience, symbolism bursts the boundaries of man's consciousness and points to an everlasting truth.

In terms of incarnation and transcendence, Yeats's concept of symbol bears an affinity to the Nietzschean dialectic of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, although in Nietzsche these principles lack any metaphysical signification. They are construed as nature's artistic impulses, also manifesting themselves in the individual, and, as Ofelia Schutte notes, they are "grounded in the natural process of creativity".[53] In contrast, perception of the eternal symbols, around which the world is wrought, lies at the core of Yeats's visionary thought. Accordingly, the imaginative artist who directs his creative energies towards symbolic expression, apart from serving as a medium for the universal mood, also ensures a form of spiritual redemption from nature's "death and destruction" (*WB* I, pp. 307, xiii). Furthermore, in view of the fragmentation he detects in all aspects of modern civilisation, he becomes a voice of a "greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect" (*CL* I, p. 303), whose oncoming Yeats anticipates.

To Blake's dialectic, Yeats applies the Hermetic doctrine of "as above, so below" as one of its governing principles. Thus, the triad of principles or "degrees", which operate in the human microcosm, corresponds by analogy to a similar division in

the divine macrocosm under the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the section entitled "The Three Persons and the Mirror", Yeats informs us that, besides the Trinity, Blake postulates a fourth principle emanating from the Father, "a universal matrix [...], from which, and in which all have life". This is the principle that makes possible the manifestation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in "life and action". This principle Yeats calls the "imagination of God", for which Blake, according to Yeats, adopts the term ""looking-glass"" in the same sense as Boehme had applied it. Thus, Blake's ""Enitharmon's looking-glass"" is equated with Yeats's "Divine Imagination" (*WB* I, pp. 246-247).

In a later essay of 1899, "High Crosses of Ireland", Yeats traces the symbol of the mirror, as representing the ultimate reality, back to the medieval mystics, whose beliefs had been preserved by Boehme. He also marks its presence in Irish religious thought, thus drawing together mysticism and folk belief (*UP* 2, p. 144). As Yeats explains in both essays, when God looks into this mirror, He is no longer mere will but becomes conscious of Himself and His unity and beholds Himself as the Son, as Divine Love. He then enters into eternal contemplation of Himself, which is called the Holy Spirit.

In the Blake commentary, Yeats describes the Spirit as the "energy" that calls into being the "thought-forms" of the universal imagination, Plato's Ideas. Initially, they subsist in the imagination without being conscious of their separate individuality. Consciousness comes with the "longing of the shapes", the desire for the forms to become manifest to themselves and to each other. As the seat of divine manifestation, Yeats identifies the mirror. The fall into corporeal life is caused by desire when divorced from imagination by reason. The latter breaks the unity of thoughts and binds them within the limits of their separate existence, now recognised as the only reality. The mirror changes into what Blake calls ""the delusive goddess Nature""; simplicity gives way to multiplicity. Redemption, Yeats suggests, can be effected if we acknowledge that the world of creation holds in its essence the divine image of God and that the ultimate goal of all life is the attainment of union with the divinity (*WB* I, pp. 247-249).

It seems rather surprising that Yeats should associate Plato's Ideas with the mirror as representing Blake's notion of the "Divine Imagination" and as reflecting God's self-consciousness (a Proclean notion). This especially since, for Plato, images in

mirrors or mirror-like surfaces, such as water, are illusory and therefore belong to a realm inferior to that of the objects whose reflections they constitute. They are mere copies or imitations not to be confused with the realities themselves and thereby have no place in the world of Ideas.[54] Furthermore, in his poetry, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, Yeats commonly attributes a distorting quality to mirror images and water reflections, whose unreality and delusive nature signifies the ambivalence of the poet's strife for the reconciliation of the antinomies of life.

Yeats sees art as a battle taking place "in the depths of the soul" between not only the self and the Anti-Self – the opposing aspects of the artist's personality – but also between the natural and spiritual order.[55] It is in the act of creation that the artist can attain unity through the mediating force of the imagination and gain insight into the transcendent reality by elevating himself above the flux and temporality of the phenomenal world. Thus, the "mingling of contraries" can be effected and "mortal and immortal, time and eternity" are brought together (*E&I*, p. 255). Yet, in order to retain creativity, the artist, who, unlike the saint, has made his home in "the serpent's mouth" of conflict and mutability, must perpetually engage in the battle. He must necessarily be content with what is passing away, "the beauty of woman, [...] the fragile flowers of spring, [...] momentary heroic passion" (*E&I*, pp. 287-288). Hence the connection of the mirror with the idea of the transience and elusiveness of the images generated by the mind's reflection in it. As a symbol of the desire to encounter the truth of one's being, the mirror, then, can become a dangerous instrument and lead to admittance of one's own unreality and even to the dissolution of the self.

There is, however, another aspect to the treatment of the mirror and the dynamism of its symbolic implications, which reach far beneath appearances. In its capacity to enable contemplation that can lead to knowledge, the mirror, as Louis Forestier contends, reveals the secret of a higher reality that is not immediately apprehensible to the senses but lies "hidden behind the *medium* through which it is barely glimpsed". Viewed in the context of correspondences and analogies, the belief in which underlies both Symbolist poetry and the poetry of Yeats, the mirror intercedes between the material and spiritual world and allows us to "'read the reflexion of eternal Forms'". Thus, the images that the poet recovers in the act of contemplation through the medium of the mirror are "secret, sacred signs of the Cosmos".[56] Similarly, Shelley in his essay *A Defence of Poetry*, perceiving the latter as the expression of the eternal in

life, compares poetry to a mirror which perfects and beautifies "that which is distorted" by the temporal process.[57]

In Yeats, the notion of the mirror as the seat of the archetypal images that comprise the Divine Imagination is linked to his conception of art as a revelation of some spiritual truth. It also informs his association between the creative power of the mind and the images from the collective memory of the world, what he later termed "Anima Mundi". These images, evoked through symbols in a moment of trance or reverie, are manifestations of "immortal moods" – the divine instruments of creation that afford the poetic imagination access to the supreme reality (*E&I*, p. 195). In this sense, Yeats's notion of the moods is akin to the Platonic Forms, for they are the "essences of things" (*E&I*, p. 193) fashioning the physical world in their own image.[58] In an article which appeared in the Boston *Pilot* in 1891, "The Celt in Ireland", Yeats, referring to Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, wrote of Plato's "spiritual beings" who reside "in all things without and within us" and unite everything "with God himself" (*LNI*, p. 53). These divine entities are Blake's permanent realities, which are reflected in the "vegetable glass of Nature". Upon them, the imaginative artist Yeats privileges, who perceives them as images arising out of the Great Memory and cast on the mirror of his mind, models his own creation.

Yeats's concept of the moods, which he developed in the 1890s, informs his reading of Blake and, as Bloom observes, the essay "The Necessity of Symbolism" centres its argument on them, thus misinterpreting Blake in favour of Pater,[59] and implicitly of Plato. Beyond all individual moods, Yeats sees a "central mood" identified with the "poetic genius", which creates all "by affinity" and in which we participate through the faculty of the imagination (*WB* I, p. 241). Clearly, Yeats regards the imagination as the mediating force between nature and spirit, and connects its formative function to the metaphor of reflection, both in the sense of contemplation leading to self-consciousness and of the impressions imprinted on it by the Ideas. On the basis of this, we can argue that he has by analogy elevated this relation to a principle abiding on the highest plane of reality.

V

From what has been discussed so far, we can conclude that what characterises

Yeats's conception of symbolic art is a sense of unity and richness, depth and "vastness of conception". These are qualities which Yeats sought to integrate in his own poetry and which he discerned in all the great writers of the past before the advent of naturalism and realism that came with the Renaissance (*E&I*, p. 396). For Yeats, symbolism, operating in a mythological framework, is the only possible mode of artistic expression because it transcends the limitations of individuals and the world of circumstance. It infuses spiritual meaning into material forms, which it regards as the incarnation of a divine essence. The symbolic artist, who sees himself as a vehicle of "immortal moods", acknowledges that all life is sacred. By employing the suggestive language of symbols, he seeks to reinstate mystery in all that is temporal and impermanent. For him literature, being wrought about "a community of moods" (*E&I*, p. 195), the flux of impressions of eternal reality, is itself a symbol of the divine imagination. Such a notion persists even when Yeats moves towards postulating a subjective art. As the essay "The Two Kinds of Asceticism" (1906) indicates, poetry is conceived of as expressive of passions that have gathered in the "soul of the world". The end of such art is not to offer a criticism of life but to induce a state of ecstasy (*E&I*, pp. 286-287) by awakening the mind and heart to the presence of the divine powers of the universe.

Yeats outlines the basic tenets of his symbolic thought in "Magic", which Liebregts considers "the crucial essay of [Yeats's] early career"[60] because his theory of symbolic art reaches in it its climactic point:

> I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are: –
>
> (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
>
> (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
>
> (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 28)

This "great mind" and "great memory" Yeats would call "Anima Mundi", borrowing the term from the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who used it to explain the birds' instinctive migration in winter or nest-making, as well as from Platonic

philosophers. He describes it as having "a memory independent of embodied individual memories, although they constantly enrich it with their images and their thoughts" (*Aut*, pp. 262, 265). Liebregts links this precept of innate wisdom to the Platonic dialogue *Meno*, and we may add to the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*. In them, Plato expounds the notion that the soul, being immortal and having passed through different states of incarnation, possesses knowledge of the absolute reality. This knowledge was acquired before birth and can be recovered through our ability of "anamnesis" or recollection of the soul's pre-natal existence.[61]

Eliade views the Platonic doctrine of memory in the frame of archaic thought. He perceives it as a philosophical elaboration of the universal myth of eternal return, which consists in a cyclical conception of time. In this respect, remembrance of the Ideas is a kind of "'impersonal memory'" that the individual still retains of the time when the soul was contemplating these primordial archetypes. It functions to transport man to a timeless past, to a primordial state of perfection, as a means of attaining truth and participating in Being.[62]

Plato's views are positively echoed in the prologue to the 1937 version of *A Vision*, entitled "Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends: An Extract from a Record Made by his Pupils". In it, Yeats, through the fictional character of John Aherne, attributes the composition of his system to a "process of remembering" and relates Plato's concept of memory to "the timeless" (*AVb*, p. 54). Whether Yeats had actually read the three Platonic dialogues at the time he was making his earlier claims of 1901 about the Great Memory remains indeterminate.[63] As Liebregts observes, the term "Anima Mundi" and its association with the broader Platonic tradition did not appear in Yeats's writings until after he began reading More in 1914,[64] although he had previously affirmed the existence of the Great Memory. Moreover, his prose work even of the early period intimates that Yeats was aware of Plato's "doctrine of pre-natal memory" (*E&I*, p. 416) as well as of the Neoplatonist belief in the immortality of the soul. Thus, in his 1894 review of a performance of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël*, Yeats would write of "the ancient doctrine of the spirit" (*UP* 1, p. 323). And in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", Yeats, acknowledging his predecessor's Platonism, traces in his poetry the notion that the divine order, equated with beauty, is beheld by the dead and by souls in ecstasy (*E&I*, pp. 81, 71).

Yeats's acquaintance with these ideas is most likely to have come not only

through Theosophy but also other more direct sources. Plato's *Republic*, presented to him in translation as a gift by Lionel Johnson in 1893, is concerned with such matters as the immortality of the soul, reincarnation and the notion of knowledge as an innate capacity for the contemplation of the intelligible world (Books VII and X). Also, Thomas Taylor's *Select Works of Plotinus*, which was re-edited in 1895 by G.R.S. Mead, expounds the notions of the soul's immortality and of recollection.[65] As already suggested, Yeats had previously alluded to the Great Memory in the metaphysical terms of the Platonic tradition, referring in 1886 to the "dim unconscious nature, the world of instinct, which [...] is the accumulated wisdom of all living things from the monera to man" (*CL* I, p. 8). Such a contention forms the basis of his 1898 essay "The Autumn of the Body", with its notion of a mystical "communion" of minds and the belief that dreams and visions impart a kind of pre-existing knowledge from which our thoughts and emotions are drawn (*E&I*, pp. 192, 189).

For Yeats, the Great Memory, or "Anima Mundi", in which all individual memories merge and are enlarged by it, is a repository of symbols; hence his conviction that even our thoughts and mental images are reflections of the forms existing in this universal storehouse, where they acquire multiple associations (*Myth*, p. 352). These permanent images have "transcended particular time and place" and have passed beyond death. They have become symbols, "living souls", awaiting to descend into the hearts and minds of men (*E&I*, pp. 79-80). It is from this buried memory of the universe that man's emotions or passions, which find expression in symbol, well up; for, as the essay on magic asserts, "everything in heaven or earth has its association" in the Great Memory (*E&I*, p. 50). There are Plotinian echoes in Yeats's identification of symbol with soul, which is an instance of animistic perception of the universe. For Plotinus, the Intellectual realm is perceived as a living entity, containing all forms of life, and the Ideas residing in it also possess life.[66]

Yeats relates the significance of "Anima Mundi" to the creation of symbolic art. By invoking images out of this collective of "recorded or unrecorded memories of the world",[67] the poet can discover, via the function of imagination, the means to articulate his vision of reality. But for all its metaphysical qualification, Yeats's poetic symbolism is essentially, as Northrop Frye points out, "language and not truth, a means of expression and not a body of doctrine". It is "a dramatic mask",[68] one that Yeats wears for the purpose of expressing his personal truth. A fundamental precept of this truth is

the belief in the capacity of the imagination to uncover "those laws according to which present things are to be ordained" (*E&I*, p. 67) and thereby shape the future. Thus, for Yeats, the symbolic imagination functions not only to bridge the gap between the natural and the supernatural but also to link present and past, thus ensuring continuity of thought and uniting both artist and reader to their inherited literary tradition.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I: *The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; first publ. 1997), p. 50.

2. The quotation is from the essay "An Irish National Theatre", originally published in *The United Irishman* for October 1903 and reprinted in *The Irish Dramatic Movement* in *CWY*, Vol. IV (*Bibl*, p. 89).

3. Adele M. Dalsimer, *The Unappeasable Shadow: Shelley's Influence on Yeats* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1988), p. 88.

4. In a diary entry of 1930, Yeats combines wisdom and power in such figures as Swift and Berkeley, who "saddled and bitted reality" or abated materialism because they wrote from the standpoint of a spiritualist and idealist philosophy (*Ex*, pp. 297-298).

5. The essay was first published in three parts as an introduction to *A Book of Images*, which was published in 1898 and contained visionary drawings by William T. Horton, a mystic and painter. Only the first two parts were reprinted in *E&I*.

6. In a later essay of 1932, "Prometheus Unbound", Yeats goes back to his distinction of symbols. He criticises Shelley for creating "arbitrary" symbols that formed part of a system of thought which was not a "symbolical revelation" but was "constructed by his logical faculty" (*E&I*, pp. 424, 421).

7. Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 107.

8. I disagree with James Esterly that, for Yeats, emotional symbols are primary (*Yeats, Plotinus and Symbolic Perception* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1972), p. 56). In view of the turn in his poetics, around the beginning of the twentieth century, towards acceptance of ideas and, considering the importance tradition held for him, I believe that Yeats's preference lies with symbols evoking both emotions and ideas. In the essay under discussion, Yeats also reserves for the intellect the role of determining which symbolic associations will be conjured up for the reader. However, in "Symbolism in Painting", the symbol, once it has entered the Great Memory, is identified with emotion *(E&I*, p. 149) and I agree with Esterly that Yeats "virtually hypostasises human emotions into substantive principles of the cosmos itself" (*Yeats, Plotinus and Symbolic Perception*, pp. 56-57).

9. The essay first appeared in *The Savoy* for July 1896 and is therefore erroneously dated 1897 in *E&I*.

10. Hereafter, an uppercase *S* will signify the literary movement that took place in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, whereas the lowercase *s* will refer to the symbolist style outside of this movement.

11. C.M. Bowra in his *Heritage of Symbolism* (London: Macmillan, 1947; first publ. 1943), Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (Glasgow: Collins, 1976), Joseph Hone in his biographical *W.B. Yeats: 1865-1939*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1962; first publ. 1943), and Anna Balakian in her study *The Fiction of the Poet: From Mallarmé to the Post-Symbolist Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) see Yeats as a direct heir to the French Symbolists, or at least as having strong links with them. On the other hand, W.Y. Tindall in his essay "The Symbolism of W.B. Yeats", in *The Permanence of Yeats: Selected Criticism*, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinman (New York: Macmillan, 1950), T.R. Henn in *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1969; first publ. 1950), Robert O'Driscoll in *Symbolism and some*

Implications of the Symbolic Approach: W.B. Yeats during the eighteen-nineties (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1975) and Denis Donoghue in his "Yeats: The Question of Symbolism", in *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*, ed. Anna Balakian (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984) argue for Yeats's symbolism in the context of the Romantic tradition, and more especially in relation to Blake and Shelley, taking also into account the poet's study of the occult.

12. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), pp. v, 4-10.

13. For a comprehensive analysis of French Symbolist poetry see Laurence M. Porter, *The Crisis of French Symbolism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 1-26; *French Symbolist Poetry: An Anthology*, trans. John Porter Houston and Mona Tobin Houston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 3-12; Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 29-100. Balakian argues that the Symbolist conception of "correspondences", as perceived by Baudelaire, has an intellectual rather than a spiritual connotation. It consists in the projection of the inner vision upon the outer reality. The synesthesia attained in the poem occurs in the connection not of the inner mood with the divine but of the mind with the senses by means of a natural stimulus. Thus, the experiential world becomes the instrument or symbol for the expression of the poet's mood (Ibid., pp. 34-39).

14. Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design*, pp. 110-112.

15. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs in the Twilight: W.B. Yeats's Use of the Classical Tradition* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), p. 35. In her discussion of Mallarmé's symbolist aesthetics, Balakian notes that the symbol is the product of a creative process whereby the different elements of reality are intellectualised and synthetically reproduced into a "nondescript, pure totality" from which multiple, subjective interpretations are derived (*The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal*, pp. 82-83, 88).

16. C.M. Bowra, *Memories 1898-1939* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 240-241.

17. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (London: The Athlone Press, 1972), p. 84.

18. In a letter of 1934 to Bowra, Yeats speaks of the great influence that Hallam's essay exercised on him, especially what the latter "called 'aesthetic poetry'", meaning by it "exactly what the French mean by 'pure poetry'. It may interest you that an English critic was probably the first to make that definition" (C.M. Bowra, *Memories*, p. 241).

19. The Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875 and Yeats joined its Esoteric Section in 1888. The Golden Dawn was founded in 1888 by McGregor Mathers and William Wynn Wescott, and Yeats was initiated into its Hermetic Order in 1890. Five years earlier, Yeats had presided over the first meeting of a theosophical organisation calling itself "The Dublin Hermetic Society", founded by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland. The Society aimed to "'promote oriental religions and theosophy generally'" (E. H. Mikhail, ed., *W.B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 12). As Yeats recorded in his 1898 essay "The Poetry of 'A.E.'", its members discussed matters of Eastern philosophy including the reading of papers on "the Neoplatonists" among other topics (*UP* 2, p. 121). For a detailed account of Yeats's involvement with Theosophical organisations see George Mills Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974).

20. Other titles included *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians* (1895), *Hymns of Orpheus* (1896) and *Mystical Hymns of Orpheus ... Demonstrated to be the Invocations Which were Used in the Eleusinian Mysteries* (1896). For details see George M. Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, p. 192, note 81; Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper, eds, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 9-10, 532.

21. A. Norman Jeffares, "P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs in the Twilight: W.B. Yeats's Use of the Classical Tradition*", in *Yeats Annual No. 12*, ed. Warwick Gould and Edna Longley (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 350. For a list of books in the Wescott Library see George M. Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, Appendix S, pp. 290-305.

22. In his essay on Pico della Mirandola, a Florentine Platonist, Walter Pater wrote that the former sees in the ancient philosophical and mythological texts an unbroken system of correspondences. Within this system, the terrestrial world is perceived as "an analogue, a symbol or counterpart, of some higher reality in the starry heavens, and this again of some law of the angelic life in the world beyond the stars". Thus, every natural object is "filled with higher meanings" (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 29-30).

23. For further details on the development of the Neoplatonic tradition and the teachings of Theosophy see Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), pp. 25-26, 42-48; P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, pp. 29-32; F.A.C. Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition* (London: Methuen, 1968; first publ. 1958), pp. 26-28.

24. See F.A.C. Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition*, pp. 33-34; J. Hone, *W.B. Yeats: 1865-1939*, pp. 375-378.

25. Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul*, pp. 8-9. For Yeats's gift copy from Johnson, which was an 1885 translation of *The Republic* of Plato by J.L. Davies and D.J. Vaughan, see Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1948), p. 143; Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats's Library* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. 209.

26. Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I, p. 50.

27. Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog*, pp. 202-203.

28. Yeats had made an early reference to Plotinus in his 1898 review "'A.E.'s' Poems" and had probably read him at the time in Mead's 1895 reprint of Thomas Taylor's translation of *Select Works of Plotinus* (*UP* 2, p. 112; George M. Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn*, p. 183, note 22). A translation of the *Enneads* of Plotinus by Stephen MacKenna appeared in five volumes between 1917 and 1930 and Yeats seems to have read them as they came out. He read Volume I, which contained *Enneads* I, in 1918 and Volume IV, which contained *Enneads* V, in 1926 (see Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul*, pp. 13-14; A. Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 237-238).

29. G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company; Cambridge: The Athlone Press, 1980), p. 5.

30. The doctrines of immortality, recollection and reincarnation can be traced back to the Pythagoreans, whose religious beliefs bore an affinity with those of the Orphics. There are, however, differences between the Pythagorean and Platonic conception of the soul in that, whereas for the latter recollection is of non-empirical truth, according to the former personal experience is included in the soul's memories (W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962-1981), Vol. IV: *Plato: The*

Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period (1975), pp. 249-250.

31. For a detailed discussion of Plato's philosophical system see G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*; Lloyd P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994; first publ. 1990), pp. 40-81; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vols IV and V: *The Later Plato and the Academy* (1978).

32. Thomas Taylor, trans., *The 'Cratylus', 'Phaedo', 'Parmenides' and 'Timaeus' of Plato* (London: Benjamin and John White, 1793), pp. 254-264, 274-281.

33. Kathleen Raine, *Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death: 'Cuchulain Comforted' and 'News for the Delphic Oracle'* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974), p. 20.

34. J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 223-224. For a comprehensive discussion of Plotinus' thought see Lloyd P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy*, pp. 185-226, and *Plotinus* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994); also Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the 'Enneads'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

35. Plotinus, *The Enneads* (2nd edn), trans. Stephen MacKenna, rev. B.S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1956; first publ. 1917-1930), V.8.1.

36. Ibid., VI.4.10.

37. For Iamblichus see F.A.C. Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition*, p. 59. For Proclus see Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul*, p. 14; A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1948), p. 291.

38. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* (2nd edn), trans. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992; first publ. 1932), Props. 162-165.

39. Ibid., pp. 259-260.

40. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, pp. 110-111.

41. F.A.C. Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition*, p. 26.

42. "William Blake and his Illustrations", *The Savoy*, 3 (July 1896), p. 41. This passage was omitted when the essay was first published in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, in 1903, and in subsequent editions of *E&I*. Henri Peyre has similarly claimed that the movement of Symbolism was not "based upon a sufficiently solid philosophical or aesthetic system of thought" (*Qu'est-ce que le Symbolisme?* (1974), p. 154, cited in Laurence M. Porter, *The Crisis of French Symbolism*, p. 18).

43. In "William Blake and his Illustrations", Yeats claims with Blake that, via the imaginative arts, man can gain access to the divine world and enter into communion with it. He also quotes Blake's equation of beauty with lineament or form as that which divides art from "surrounding space" (*E&I*, pp. 117, 121).

44. "William Blake and his Illustrations", *The Savoy*, p. 41.

45. Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design*, pp. 109-110.

46. "William Blake and his Illustrations", *The Savoy*, p. 41. The correlation between vision and imagination is also reiterated in "Symbolism in Painting" (*E&I*, p. 146). Three years later, Yeats repeated the same idea in his essay "Magic" (1901). He asserted that visions are "symbolical histories" of moods calling forth a primordial state of being and signifying the unifying power of the imagination, whose workings reveal the presence of a "supernatural artist" (*E&I*, p. 36).

47. In a letter of 1899 to Lady Gregory, Yeats claimed authorship of "The Symbolic System" and attributed "almost all" of the rest of "the actual writing" to Ellis (*CL* II, p. 469). He restated this in the comments he wrote on the flyleaf of Vol. I of his own set in May 1900 when he remarked: "The writing of this book is mainly Ellis's, the thinking is as much mine as his. [...] The greater part of the 'symbolic system' is my writing; the rest of the book was written by Ellis" (*Bibl*, p. 241). See also Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 70; Robert O'Driscoll, *Symbolism and some Implications*, p. 10; Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs* (Suffolk: Golgonooza Press, 1985; first publ. 1967), p. 73.

48. Harold Bloom, *Yeats*, p. 69.

49. In a letter of 1890 to Katharine Tynan, Yeats, while working on the "symbolic system", pointed out how important his work on Blake was in that it liberated his mind from "theories of several kinds" and opened up for him "new kinds of poetic feeling & thought" (*CL* I, p. 218). But in September 1890 he confessed that the "Biblical part" in Blake's philosophy was still impenetrable to him (*CL* I, p. 224). Commenting on the finished work a few years later, in 1899 and 1900, he admitted that he was not entirely satisfied with it and that his interpretation of Blake's system, although "mainly right", was in some parts a cause of "uncertainty" (*CL* II, pp. 468-469; *Bibl*, p. 241).

50. Robert O'Driscoll, *Symbolism and some Implications*, p. 11.

51. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 3-5, 9-10, 17-18, 20-21.

52. Robert O'Driscoll, *Symbolism and some Implications*, p. 12.

53. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 18; Ofelia Schutte, *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 18. In *The Will to Power*, Dionysus is allied to "continual creation" and incorporates both productive and destructive forces, whereas Apollo is linked to a deceptive sense of eternity and perfection (*The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first publ. 1967), p. 539).

54. *Republic* VI (509d-510b). See also G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, pp. 24-26. In *Republic* X (596d-e) and the *Sophist* (239d), Plato makes a similar distinction between real objects and their reproduction as images in a mirror or water. All references to Platonic texts are from the edition in the Loeb Classical Library.

55. David R. Clark, ed., "'The Poet and the Actress': An Unpublished Dialogue by W.B. Yeats", in *Yeats Annual No. 8*, ed. Warwick Gould (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 132-133.

56. Louis Forestier, "Symbolist Imagery", trans. Edouard Roditi, in *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*, ed. Anna Balakian, pp. 116-118.

57. Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988; first publ. 1954), p. 281.

58. In the 1897 version of Yeats's story "The Wisdom of the King", the king revealed his wisdom to his beloved and told her "how the great Moods are alone immortal, and the creators of mortal things" (*VSR*, p. 31).

59. Harold Bloom, *Yeats*, pp. 71-72.

60. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, p. 41.

61. For Liebregts see note above. For the references to the Platonic texts see *Meno* (81b-d, 85d-86b), *Phaedo* (70c-d, 75b-76a) and *Phaedrus* (246d-e, 248e-249c).

62. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1960), pp. 52-53.

63. Yeats made an early reference to Plato in 1888, quoting a passage from the *Phaedrus* (229b-230a) in his "Introduction" to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (pp. xvi-xviii). He used as his source Benjamin Jowett's translation of *The Dialogues* of Plato published in 1871 and re-edited in 1875 (*WIFLM*, p. 396, note 27). Yeats owned a copy of the second edition in his library (Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog*, pp. 208-209).

64. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, p. 166. In a letter of September 1914, Yeats wrote to his father about "Henry More, the seventeenth century platonist whom I have been reading all summer" (*L*, p. 588).

65. George Yeats possessed a copy of Mead's edition of Thomas Taylor's translation, signed "1913", and she also had a copy of the 1817 edition of Thomas Taylor's *Select Works of Plotinus*, containing the substance of Porphyry's life of Plotinus and signed "1914". In 1908 Stephen MacKenna's translation of *Ennead* I.6 was published under the title *Plotinus on the Beautiful*, a copy of which is to be found in Yeats's library (Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog*, p. 210). The treatise develops the idea that the soul's reaction in the experience of beauty is an act of recognition and recollection of the realm of Ideas on account of the soul's kinship to the divine. It is also possible that Yeats knew Taylor's *Select Works of Porphyry* published in 1823 (Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper, eds, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, p. 296), which includes Porphyry's "Auxiliaries to the Perception of Intelligible Natures". In it, Porphyry describes memory as "not the conservation of imaginations, but the power of calling forth *de novo* those conceptions which had previously occupied the attention of the mind". In a footnote, Taylor comments that, for Porphyry, memory is "*stability of knowledge*" (Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry* (Somerset: The Prometheus Trust, 1994; first publ. 1823), p. 173).

66. Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.7.12.

67. Steve L. Adams and George Mills Harper, eds, "The Manuscript of Leo Africanus", in *Yeats Annual No. 1*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 20. Yeats's script was a record of an exchange of letters between him and the spirit of a sixteenth century Spanish Arab poet, historian and explorer identified as "Leo Africanus". Claiming to be Yeats's guide, Leo was purported to have first appeared to him at a séance in 1912, although Roy Foster remarks that an earlier appearance had materialised in 1909 (*W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I, pp. 464-466).

68. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York; London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 236.

CHAPTER THREE

Fatherland and Song:
Mythic Unity

I

Yeats's early critical work advocates the creation of a spiritual, symbolic art operating within the framework of a long-established, intellectual tradition. But it also raises a basic issue: the choice of subject matter deemed appropriate not only for the kind of poetry Yeats champions but also for modern art. The search for a theme steered Yeats onto the path of folklore, legend and myth. He desired his art to be catholic, to encompass the realities of the human condition so that, although personal, it would articulate the joys and sorrows of men. To attain unity and coherence Yeats sought to create an art in which the personal element would be embedded in "a general pattern of myth and symbol" (*Aut*, p. 151), an art founded upon a shared "half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief" (*VPl*, p. 566). This meant, as Edward Engelberg points out, the production of a "'spiritual' literature which would find its 'reality' in the universals of myth and in the history of the soil".[1] It is Yeats's mythic perspective on art that the present chapter proposes to examine in the light of the myth theories of Ernst Cassirer and Mircae Eliade. Their insights into mythic consciousness explicate the nature of Yeats's mythopoeic activity and elucidate his employment of the mythic mode of thought in re-creating a mythic narrative.

In Yeats's work, the artistic realisation of such a scheme is premised on the conviction that art aims to retrieve the ideals of the "Golden Age", to recapture the "simplicity of the first ages" (*E&I*, p. 167). Northrop Frye remarks that such an approach to art can result in archaism and the sentimentalising, even idealising, of the past. Its concern is the revival of "the faded splendours of classical culture".[2] Yeats would maintain that the employment of myth in modern literature should not be construed as a way of supplanting the cultural structures of the past into the present. Still, his call for an imaginative restoration of folk and mythological traditions shows

him subscribing to Frye's view. Not surprisingly, Yeats sees the artist as performing the priestly role of making his religion of art once again a communal form, the "Art of the people" (*E&I*, p. 168). This, Yeats believed, was the art produced by the great poets of the past – Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. Their works celebrated "the hopes and destinies of mankind" (*UP* 2, p. 124) and thus served as literary models for the modern poet.

What attracted Yeats to the world of mythology, initially to Celtic folklore and myths, was a conviction that poetic knowledge and insight comes from spiritual belief, and that the country people of Ireland possessed such a metaphysical awareness. Eliade contends that folklore provides the key to understanding the religious perspective of archaic man and thereby his mythic mode of thought. He supports that a great part of the religious heritage, handed down from antiquity, has survived in the peasants' beliefs and customs by being incorporated into a new faith. Thus, to a considerable extent, the Christian religion still expresses, mostly among the rural populations, the same feeling of the sanctity of the world as that experienced by man in pre-Christian, primitive societies.[3]

Similarly, for Yeats, the Irish peasant, for whom his myths and legends were still a living experience, seemed to have preserved an old and imaginative tradition, which came down from "the beginning of the world" (*CT*, pp. 153-154). In so doing, he seemed to have reconciled two disparate orders of religious experience, "Paganism" and "Christianity" (*CL* II, p. 213). In a series of articles on different aspects of Irish folklore and supernatural experience, written between 1897 and 1902,[4] Yeats elaborated how the "old religion", still retaining its spiritual significance, co-exists with the "new religion". In peasant folk stories, Yeats discerned pagan mysteries and beliefs that had survived almost unchanged in an age dominated by materialism and reason, and were thus a revelation of "an ancient knowledge or of an ancient wisdom" (*UP* 2, pp. 56, 275).[5] This was an assertion repeated later in life when, in 1934, Yeats affirmed that the Irish had retained in their Christianity "characteristics of [...] older faiths" and that perhaps he himself "had made a beginning" of honouring these ancient traditions (*VP*, p. 837) by founding his art upon them.

Yeats's homage to these traditions began by way of publication in 1888 of an anthology of Irish folklore and legend entitled *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. This was soon followed by the publication in 1893 of *The Celtic Twilight*,

the poet's own collection of folk stories from the West of Ireland.[6] Yeats was not a folklorist in the sense that his friend Douglas Hyde was, or John F. Campbell, the collector of Scottish folklore, although of the two Yeats considered the former to be superior. The preference for Hyde was grounded on the assertion that he did not merely provide English translations of the Gaelic text but also "searched out colloquial equivalents from among the English-speaking peasants" (*UP* 1, p. 188). Thus, in Yeats's view, Hyde's translations formed literary texts in their own right.

Fundamentally, Yeats viewed folk tradition not as a cultural phenomenon forming the subject of scientific or ethnological study[7] but as "literature", as narrative, and consequently as the object of literary use (*CL* I, p. 145). Legend and myth constituted, for Yeats, the "literature of a class" who felt a sense of unbroken continuity and read a symbolic meaning into every incident of their life (*FFTIP*, p. xii). Hyde therefore was the ideal folklorist, for his renderings of Irish folk stories not only "faithfully reproduced" the idiom of the peasants but equally importantly captured the true spirit and imaginative appeal of the mythic narrative. They thus combined the "scientific" with the literary (*CL* I, pp. 229, 443). Yeats's criticism of previous Irish folklore collectors and story-tellers, especially of David McAnally, Crofton Croker and Samuel Lover, consisted mainly in his view that their depictions of the Irish peasantry and its beliefs in the spirit world were inaccurate and bordered on the humorous or picturesque (*RIT*, pp 26-27).[8]

Yeats's own interest in myths and folk tales was sparked by the discovery that such material could provide him with an inexhaustible source of themes and symbols for his poetry. Furthermore, he felt that in order for the artist to create a unifying body of literature, which would restore to the land its sacred and symbolic associations, he would need to recapture the "wild beauty" and passionate imagination of his legendary and mythological tradition (*E&I*, p. 205). This unitary ideal, as he affirmed in an article of 1888, "The Poet of Ballyshannon", would place art in a broader context of the universal and spiritual life manifesting its unity in its every particular (*LNI*, p. 78). According to such a pantheistic view, artistic expression cannot be seen as an isolated instance but as reflecting in microcosmic form the ordered structure of a divine macrocosm.

At the base of such assertions lies a belief that folk art is the expression of sincere emotion and also the voice of what is eternal in man. It embodies in its stylistic

simplicity the "most unforgettable thoughts of the generations" and is therefore the "soil where all great art is rooted" (*CT*, p. 154). For Yeats, literature, if grounded in the cycle of legend and myth, rekindles the spirit of folk imagination by depicting the everlasting forms of human nature. Moreover, as the symbolic articulation of man's loftiest thoughts and greatest passions, such literature acquires validity on the basis of its appeal because it involves a passionate response to the world. A precedent for this was again sought and found in the great writers of the past. Homer, the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, and Dante are deemed "little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues". For the purpose of expressing their "most subjective moods", they drew inspiration from the stories and legends of their time when these still formed part of a "living tradition" that united man to nature (*UP* 1, pp. 284, 287-288). They conveyed in their art an emotional intensity linked to a sense of spirituality.

II

The aesthetic Yeats was formulating during the 1880s and early 1890s was based upon the assumption that art's end is not to teach but to shape life by revealing the ideal world incarnated in the myths and legends of the past. It is a backward glance to a time when "the world was fresh" and Nature, rather than functioning as a mask of self-expression obscuring man's perception of reality, was "a clear glass to see the world through" (*UP* 1, p. 103). A letter of 1896 to Robert Bridges epitomises and re-affirms a belief that became a cardinal principle in Yeats's poetic theory: "all art is dedicated to wisdom & not because it teaches anything but because it reveals divine substances" (*CL* II, p. 65). Because such art, Yeats holds, is universal, speaking as it does "to the manhood in us" and singing of our "delight in things beautiful and gallant" (*UP* 1, p. 104), its power endures and therein also lies its capacity to shape the future. In this sense, we can understand Yeats's assertion that a myth-orientated literature, such as epic or bardic, is "the poetry of action", for it stimulates our deepest sympathies by arousing feelings "of wonder and pity, of fear and joy" (*UP* 1, p. 84).

This was not the first and certainly not the last time that Yeats was privileging folk art over scholarly literature. The justification provided was that the former remained truer and closer to the spirit of the whole people, and formed an unbroken poetic tradition since the beginning of time (*FFTIP*, p. xii). In effect, it amounted to a

basic distinction between the written and oral tradition. The latter, Yeats reasoned, had produced the great epic cycle of heroic poetry, steeped in myth and legend, and filled with the beauty and sanctity of life, with spontaneity of expression, and with the intensity of universal emotions. It was a poetry which lived in "the minds of the populace" and had arisen out of a unified sense of the world placing nothing between itself and the audience (*UP* 1, pp. 105, 147). It is therefore seen as creating a sense of authenticity, for it required no secondary vehicle of representation but articulated thought directly via verbal utterance.

On the other hand, Yeats asserted that the written tradition, with its artificial, literary patterns and its emphasis on "intellectual attainment", had produced a literature which had lost in epic grandeur and vigour of rhythm. It had substituted individualism for national character and history, and had eventually separated the artist from life and culture alike (*UP* 1, p. 151). It no longer spoke to the whole people but to a "cultivated class", which turned art into a private affair no longer sustained in the common thought (*Ex*, pp. 205-208). Whilst the spoken tradition had supported the idea of presence, the voice as the primary medium of meaning, the written one had allowed for absence, the effacement of an authentic, authorial voice. Such a line of argument stretches back to Platonic metaphysics and to Socrates' denigration, in the *Pheadrus* (274d-275b), of writing on the grounds that it erodes memory and imparts not true wisdom but false knowledge. According to Jacques Derrida, this is an idealist position, which assigns "the origin of truth in general to the logos" and consequently subordinates writing to speech.[9]

This supreme positioning of verbal utterance is regarded by Cassirer as typifying the mythic state of consciousness. It bases spiritual world-views on the "dualism of good and evil" and venerates the spoken word as "the primary force" in the transformation of Chaos into "an ethico-religious Cosmos".[10] Such a perception underlies Yeats's belief in the spiritual character of poetry, a belief associating art with religion and myth. Nonetheless, Yeats soon came to recognise that both traditions are equally valid and that the written "presupposes" and is grounded upon the oral one. Thus, when in 1901 he was pondering "What is 'Popular Poetry'?", he discerned some affinities between them. Both were free from the logic and rhetoric of the popular middle-class poetry, which Yeats derided; both incorporated "thoughts and images" of ancient wisdom. Moreover, Yeats discovered that the two traditions had so mingled

that, in the minds of the common people, it was almost impossible to "separate the idea of an art" from " the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries". A genuine ballad was indistinguishable from a consciously made poem (*E&I*, pp. 8, 10-11).

Still, for Yeats, the distinction persisted and in the 1902 essay "Edmund Spenser" it became a division necessitated by history. "Is not all history", he asks, "but the coming of that conscious art which first makes articulate and then destroys the old wild energy?" (*E&I*, pp. 372-373). What was needed to salvage this "old wild energy", embodied in "an ancient culture of the song and the spoken word" (*UP* 2, p. 493), was a way of combining the two kinds of art; of breathing new life and vigour into a literature presumed to have lost its imaginative appeal. To achieve this, Yeats would insist that the artist turn to the ancient heroic themes, to the great traditions of myth, not merely for inspiration but to find "new methods" of expressing himself (*CL* I, p. 119).

Yeats's choice of terminology is quite significant for, I believe, it reveals more than an intention simply to borrow and utilise images, symbols and themes from the domain of folklore and mythology. His search for a "new method" of expression of the self entails the ultimate transcendence of that self in an act of reconciliation with the outer world, an act realised in the artistic product. It set Yeats on the path of mythic apprehension. According to René Wellek, the employment of myth and symbol, located in the tradition of Romanticism, is seen as "part of the great endeavour" to unite the self and the world.[11] Similarly, James Jones regards mythic apprehension as the intent to re-establish "some identification of subject and object" not entirely dissimilar from the "predisjunctive" identity experienced in archaic mythic consciousness, when the self was not perceived as separated from the outer world.[12]

In its quest for unity with the world, the self strives to realise itself in the field of what Norman Austin, borrowing Hegel's term, calls "the Other". This it achieves by arriving at a level of consciousness attainable only if it embraces consciousness of that Other. For Austin, however, the self, in undertaking such a quest, engages in a dynamic process with the world whereby the latter converses with us and directs us into the domain of the Other. This dialectic movement, according to Austin, informs mythical symbolism. Myth is thus seen as the timeless medium for the articulation of human experience and for self-realisation, which transcends all difference.[13]

In his 1899 review of "Fiona Macleod's" – the literary pseudonym of William Sharp – *The Dominion of Dreams*, Yeats praised its writer for re-discovering the " art of

the myth-makers" and giving a "visible shape to joys and sorrows" (*UP* 2, p. 165). He had already insisted on the need to link myth and the heroic ideal to literature in order to restore to the latter passion and an appreciation of the unity of life. Now, he was affirming that the modern poet could achieve this unification by integrating the mythical process into the domain of poetic composition. Yeats saw this process as the one which, in ancient times, had created the great divine and legendary figures, "Aphrodite out of love and the foam of the sea, and Prometheus out of human thought" (*UP* 2, p. 165). If employed in modern art, it could evoke images of ideal beauty and memories of the thoughts and emotional experiences of mankind. On this basis, Yeats draws a parallel between the old makers of myth, who sought unity and permanence without denying multiplicity or change, and their modern successors, the poets. The latter, Yeats believes, would articulate, through myth, a vision of a unified life transcending the limitations of sense-perception and also binding men to one another and to the world.

For Cassirer, such a strong sense of the solidarity of life governs mythic consciousness and functions as a principle of unity, identified as what Ivan Strenski terms "the feeling of the unity of life".[14] Thus, in Cassirer's view, the unity of myth is not rational or logical but emotional. Mythical thought originates in "the dynamic of life feeling", and it is by appealing to this feeling that Cassirer accounts for belief in myth.[15] In this respect, we can understand Yeats's claim that mythology was "born out of man's longing for the mysterious and the infinite" (*UP* 1, p. 423), thus linking myth to emotion. For Cassirer, the emotional unity operative in myth entails the identification of a singular perception with the entire realm of reality; so much so that all distinctions between them are ultimately dissolved. Consequently, the divine essence is not merely "represented" by any of its particular instances but "lives and acts in it".[16] This was also Yeats's early conception of mythic unity whereby "the hailstone is a journeyman of God" and "the grass blade carries the universe upon its point" (*LNI*, p. 78). It is a notion according to which everything bears relation to the universal and the divine. But after the turn of the twentieth century, Yeats emphasised an imaginative unity, discernible in the old, Gaelic heroic tales and centred upon "aesthetic realities", in the same way that the unity of religion centred upon "moral realities" (*Ex*, p. 6)

In a letter of 1901 to Fiona Macleod, Yeats stresses the importance for myth to "stand out" in the artistic work as "something objective" and independent. The

emphasis here is not on an individual mind revealing an "inner way of looking at things", but on a self-existing reality, the mythic text, allowing only one voice to be heard, that of "the god" or divinity, whose presence in the world it communicates (*CL* III, pp. 124-125). Submerged in this voice and this presence, the poet no longer speaks through the myth, placing the words as a barrier between himself and the myth. Rather, it is the myth that speaks through the poet. Thus, Yeats not only conceives of mythical art as embodying some external, transcendent reality, whose truth it voices; he also argues, in Platonic fashion, for the centrality of divine Logos as textual authority, which essentially effaces the poetic word.[17]

Yeats's assertion accords with Eliade's advocacy of the independence of myths from the mind that has constructed them. Once the images and symbols of myth have been generated, they retain their true meaning and validity irrespective of "any individual's degree of understanding". Because they spring from the depths of the human soul, they emerge in "every existential situation of man in the Cosmos".[18] Even if myths and symbols have altered their form or ceased to elicit any human response, their structure and function remain "consistent in spite of every corruption".[19] In effect, as Laurence Coupe suggests, Eliade proposes that myth acquires "a hierarchical status independent of human endeavour" and thus transcends the historical situation conditioning it.[20] Cassirer also argues for the autonomy of myth. He propounds, however, that its meaning and truth are measured not by "something extraneous which is supposed to be reproduced" in it but by its own intrinsic criterion. As such a criterion Cassirer recognises "a spontaneous law of generation", an interplay of forces that work towards constructing an independent mythic world.[21]

For Yeats, then, myth would function not simply as narrative, by means of which the poet would voice his personal utterance, but primarily as a mode of thought or cognition. It would form a particular perspective from which to view the world in a more holistic and culturally identifiable manner, allowing for the fusion of the personal into the universal. Folklore and myth are presented by Yeats as offering a way of evading individualism. They would confer meaning and order upon the diversity of modern life and the mutability of history, re-affirming a vision of wholeness and totality inherent in the old traditions. Furthermore, by virtue of arising from a religious apprehension of the world, they would provide literature with the means of transmuting emotions into forms of eternal beauty (*UP* 1, p. 327). This is an idealistic approach to

art whereby poetic utterance is elevated to the status of revelation. It largely informs Yeats's work even when he comes to validate physical experience as art's foundation.

Admittedly, in Yeats's time, myth, as he perceived it, was not the living force it had once been in the older myth-orientated societies and Yeats was well aware of it. As Helen Regueiro argues, Yeats's poetry, which constitutes a "quest for a changeless world", stems from a profound "awareness of living in a mythless culture".[22] In his 1893 article "The Message of the Folk-lorist", Yeats laments that, whereas in the past folklore was the basis of great art and its inspiration, in the "latter decades" it has been divorced from artistic expression. Without the "inflow from living tradition" art, and even mythology, which is here distinguished from folklore,[23] lose their vitality because divested of the passions of the people (*UP* 1, pp. 284, 288). During this early period, Yeats would still look to the Irish peasant for an imaginative "tradition of feeling and thought" (*Ex*, p. 209), which he hoped would infuse art with a renewed sense of creative energy.

III

The emphasis on folk literature as embodying "an ancient knowledge" underlies Yeats's association of art with both magic and ritual. All three are perceived in the essay "Magic" (1901) as displaying a "power of creating magical illusions", by which to attain visions of eternity in "the depths of the mind" (*E&I*, p. 28) through the evocative force of imagination. In the earlier times of bardic poetry, Yeats had asserted in his 1890 essay "Bardic Ireland", a poem was as potent and dynamic as "an incantation". The bards were the most influential and highly revered presence "in the land", bringing into consciousness the character of the nation (*UP* 1, pp. 163-164). Such a notion points to art's performance of a social function, that of forging national identity and shaping culture. "A nation", writes Yeats in 1910, "can only be created in the deepest thought of its deepest minds" (*Mem*, p. 248), which inspire action by portraying in their art an ideal reality. He later made a similar claim for a link between myth and nationality when he maintained that cultural unity originates in a mythology that binds the nation to "rock and hill" (*Aut*, p. 194).

For Cassirer, myth primarily fulfils a cultural role. He views myth as a symbolic form which, in its non-imitative depiction of reality, acts upon the world of sensation

and re-constructs it into a totality. Being an activity, it functions as an instrument or "organ" of reality by whose "agency" that reality can be intellectually apprehended.[24] Via the mythical process, human consciousness is liberated from "sensory impressions" and engages in the act of fashioning its own world according to a "spiritual principle".[25] Thus, like other symbolic forms such as language and art, myth works towards producing culture. Within this world as constructed by mythic consciousness, human personality is not seen as "fixed and unchanging". Rather, each stage in man's physical and spiritual development is conceived of as "a new personality, a new self".[26] For Yeats, this element of change and transformation permeates the religious perspective of the old societies, which invested nature with a divine spirit and had a more immediate experience of "ancient chaos". But it is a change extending to the entire physical world, in which "anything might flow" and "become any other thing" (*E&I*, pp. 178-179). In this sense, any life form, animal and vegetative alike, even material forms, are perceived as having, at some time, shared in the mystery and holiness of another's existence. Such pantheism, Yeats supports, is still preserved in folk literature and the literature rooted in folk tradition.

Written in 1897, "The Celtic Element in Literature", in which Yeats so argues, points to art's occult links as expounded in the essay on magic. As Warwick Gould remarks, Yeats's intent, from the late 1890s onwards, was to apply "a belief in magic" to what he developed as "a theory of human personality and a cyclical philosophy of history".[27] Hence the connection between mythical art and ritual. The latter, Yeats suggests in his account of ancient Nature-worship cults, generated the first mythic conceptions, images of "the blessed country of the gods and of the happy dead". Myth became a vehicle of expression for the "imaginative passions" of a people who conveyed in them their transcendental world-view (*E&I*, p. 178). In Yeats's scheme of literary history, myth gave rise to art:

> And so it is that all the august sorrowful persons of literature, Cassandra and Helen and Deirdre, and Lear and Tristan, have come out of legends and indeed but the images of the primitive imagination mirrored in the little looking-glass of the modern and classic imagination.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 182)

Originating in ritual, myth and literature are thus seen as the articulation of extravagant emotion and man's most sacred longings and aspirations.

Cassirer also argues for the primacy of ritual activity over myth and views the former as "the preliminary stage" in which myth is founded. According to this view, the mythical explanation is merely a representation, in narrative form, of "what is present as immediate reality in the sacred action" of the cult rite.[28] But Cassirer's exposition on myth offers a linear theory of man's cognitive development, in the course of which he sees mythical thought as a preliminary stage.[29] Unlike Yeats, Cassirer views myth as an archaic mode of apprehension and consequently as embodying an inferior, primitive form of consciousness which develops into higher forms of knowledge such as science or mathematics. He presumes that before man can think "in terms of logical concepts, he holds his experiences by means of clear, separate, mythical images".[30]

This is also the perspective adopted in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which Yeats read soon after its publication in 1890.[31] Frazer sees human history as developing from an early phase of magic to that of religion and ultimately of science. In contrast, Yeats denies scientific progress the advanced status it is afforded in Frazer's theory and seeks to restore mythico-religious thought as a cultural, revelatory force. In his 1934 "Introduction" to *The Cat and the Moon*, he rejects the notion of myth as "a rudimentary form superseded by reflection" and identifies myth with religious belief as a source of wisdom and union with a divinely imbued world (*W&B*, pp. 135-136).

In this, he is in accord with Eliade, who regards myth as a narrative disclosing a metaphysical conception of creation. Such a mode of consciousness is governed by a belief in the intersection of two opposing planes of being, the sacred and the profane. For Eliade, the revelatory message communicated via myth – that man lives in a sacred, ordered cosmos and participates in its divinity – contains the paradigms for human behaviour. In the act of narration, myth is a re-enactment of the gods' "creative activity", upon which all human activity is to be modelled as a means of attaining access to the divine.[32] Like Yeats, Eliade asserts that it is in the human "desire for sanctity" and the nostalgia for a primordial state of existence – the perfection of the sacred time of Creation – that myths originate. At the same time, myth also fulfils the fundamental function of satisfying man's existential need for "orientation", for determining his place in the universe and incorporating himself into some religious vision of reality.[33]

There is, however, another aspect of myth and ritual which is of great significance to Yeats and is linked to his notion of cyclical time, the progression of

history through alternate "primary" and "antithetical" cycles. Both ritual and myth afford a fusion of the historical moment and the present, of eternity and contemporaneity, effected through the unity of the natural and the transcendent world. For Cassirer, time in mythical thinking is not experienced in linear terms. It is "a rhythmic ebb and flow of life" which arrests the fragmentation of the temporal process in distinct stages. Past and future converge in the present, "the magical 'now'". This element of timelessness permeates even the perception of life and death, which are seen not as a transition from the phase of "being" to that of "nonbeing" but "as two similar, homogenous parts of the same being".[34] Like life, time too is experienced as an unbroken continuum.

According to Eliade, myth also reveals the cyclical structure of time, periodically regenerating itself. Through the re-enactment of mythical events, profane time is symbolically abolished and the individual is projected into sacred, mythical time. He becomes contemporary with myth since his experience of life is that of "a continual present" annulling the "irreversibility" of the temporal condition. In this respect, myth signifies the "eternal return" to the origins, the desire to restore the primordial state that existed in *illo tempore*.[35] Thus, to enter into sacred time means to enable man to experience the sanctity of life as "a divine creation". Life is perceived as a cycle of "generation, death and regeneration" being perpetually repeated.[36] This echoes Nietzsche's philosophical principle of eternal recurrence, which, however, is formulated in different terms, as his notion of return does not entail the restoration of a time of beginnings. Via its employment, Nietzsche sought to combat a conception of time positing a serial progression of past, present and future, which, he argued, resulted in a feeling of *resentment* against the passage of time.

Via myth and rite, Yeats sought to "reunite the perceptions of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty" and to restore to local places their symbolic and timeless associations (*Mem*, pp. 123-124). In Yeats's poetic vision, as Thomas Byrd remarks, man "lives", or at least strives to live, "in the totality of the universe".[37] This totality, however, is not conceived of as static but as dependent upon the notion of periodic or cyclic recurrence. In myth, historicity and reality, although maintaining their grasp of the human experiential condition, are infused with an element of permanence and timelessness. And as the essay "The Celtic Element in Literature" suggests (*E&I*, pp. 181-182), mythic art elevates the mind beyond the temporality of mere fact to the

mystery of life, to the endlessly repeated cycle of birth, death and regeneration.

As it has already transpired, Eliade's acknowledgement that myth constitutes an affirmation of divine presence is akin to Yeats's conception of myth as a form of revelation of the religious, sacred dimension of nature and human existence. For Yeats, myth pertains to the universal and the eternal in that it communicates the great passions of mankind and unveils a spiritual reality. "The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths" (*Ex*, p. 10). Yeats's statement encapsulates his approach to myth as well as to the art sustained by it. The latter is thus perceived as encompassing the emotional unity and imaginative creativity inherent in mythic conception. As Eliade supports, the artist who attains a vision of the world as an indivisible whole, as existing not only in but also beyond history, is "*re-making*", re-fashioning the world after a spiritual principle.[38] Yeats views the artist in similar terms: not only as a priestly figure (distinct from the empirical entity), whose poetic word constitutes ultimate truth, but also as a creator of moral and cultural values.

IV

In his 1899 essay "The Literary Movement in Ireland", Yeats delineates the aims of the literary movement to be founded on myth and tradition. Art is once again allied to religion as a source of wisdom and creative energy, whilst myth is presented as the embodiment of a vision of "ideal perfection", unity and beauty. This is the paradisal state of the "golden age", the restoration of which Yeats sees as fundamental to artistic expression. Such a vision entails the perception of the natural world as a symbol of "immortal presences" (*UP* 2, pp. 193-195). Its sanction stems from a conviction that, in the past, it had led to the creation of a religious and poetic tradition valorising spiritual idealism. It

> created that religion of the muses which gave the arts to the world; and those countries whose traditions are fullest of it, and of the sanctity of places, may yet remould romance till it has become a covenant between intellectual beauty and the beauty of the world.

If modern art, Yeats proposes, embraces this symbolic interpretation of the physical domain, it

> will have begun a change that, whether it is begun in our time or not for

> centuries, will some day make all lands holy lands again.
>
> (*UP* 2, p. 195)

In this essay, as in "The Celtic Element in Literature", Yeats draws a link between myth and symbolism. In the context of Eliade's theory of mythic consciousness, symbolic thinking is intertwined with religion and myth; it even precedes language and discursive reason. Eliade, no less that Yeats, recognises the symbol as "autonomous" and an "instrument of knowledge". It functions to communicate a spiritual truth about existence and retrieve the mystical experience of the original communion with the sacred. In doing so, it transports man from his historical situation, his existence as conditioned by time and history, to an "eternal present", a non-historical condition that suspends duration.[39] Thus, the symbol actualises participation in the universal because it transmutes "individual experience" into "metaphysical comprehension" of the universe.[40] In a manner recalling Yeats, Eliade holds that in the modern world spiritual renewal is attainable by recovering the meaning of archaic images and symbols.[41]

In Yeats's two essays mentioned above, myth and symbol perform a similar function. The underlying idea is that modern literature can regain its lost vigour and spirituality through a steady influx of "the passions and beliefs of ancient times". The new symbolic movement, which, in "The Celtic Element in Literature", Yeats heralds as a reaction against rationalism and materialism, is presented as founded upon such a tradition of symbolic thought. The legitimacy of the literary employment of mythic imagery is argued on the basis that it displays emotional diversity and possesses a regenerative capacity. The return to their religious and mythical heritage would thus enable the arts to reconstitute "a sacred book" (*E&I*, pp. 185, 187), a text positing the existence of a transcendental truth as its authority, and thereby restore imaginative and cultural unity.

Following Yeats's assertions about myth, we may surmise that, because it points to an ideal reality, to the resolution or suspension of opposites, which, as Yeats came to recognise, cannot be actualised, given the antinomial character of the experiential reality, myth is in effect a mask. It is a mask for that part of the human personality which always desires extravagant "dreams and emotions" and hopes "in secret that it may become" (*UP* 2, p. 92). As a mask, it functions as a means of integrating subjective and objective truth, the individual and the universal, the physical and the spiritual. This

idea is explored in Yeats's 1916 dialogue "The Poet and the Actress", which expounds the doctrine of the mask linked to the conception of art as a battle taking place in the poet's soul. In this "struggle of a dream with the world", the struggle of antithetical and primary qualities, mythology occupies an important place in heightening the contest by transmuting personal experience into archetypal images. It becomes part of a phantasmagoria, through which "the dream and the reality may face one another in visible array".[42] Yeats had already contended in his 1890 article "Browning" that myth, far from communicating some "historical truth", was the medium through which archaic man expressed "symbolically all he knew about God and man's soul" (*LNI*, p. 29). Almost half a century later, in his "Introduction" to *The Words upon the Window-pane*, Yeats would still validate myth as the driving force "to the unknown" depths of the human nature (*W&B*, p. 8) and as the universal receptacle of wisdom and truth.

Yeats's insistence that the artist should seek his subject matter in the material of legend and myth is an attempt to regain the unity of being and culture that he felt was lost with the decline of the mythological perspective and comprehensiveness. "Nations, races, and individual men", he asserts, "are unified by an image, or bundle of related images" (*Aut*, p. 194), the images and symbols of myth. The reinstatement of the mythical method in art, championed as the method of Homer and of Shakespeare, would enable the self to be whole, at one with itself and the external world. More importantly, it would allow a whole people to "share in the creative impulse of the poets" (*UP* 2, p. 155). Through the use or re-invention of myth, which carries the "hereditary thought and feeling" that have shaped personality and national character, Yeats felt he could achieve "the ideal expression" (*Ex*, p. 293) he sought to articulate in his art. Not the individual voice but "the re-creation of the man through that art, the birth of a new species of man" (*Aut*, p. 273). Such birth could be realised in the experience of the intensity and fullness of life, in the balance between imagination and reality.

He elaborated this idea in his 1907 essay "Poetry and Tradition". Despite his disappointment in what he saw as the failure of the Irish movement to re-establish a unified culture forged on the "old traditional anvil", Yeats still insisted on the validity and relevance of myth in the modern world. For him, mythological literature reflects "an ancient imagination" arising out of a communion of many minds. Such art possesses primitive energy and rejoices in the abundance and excess of life, in "the

extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy". But it is also a metaphysically orientated art. Eventually, the emphasis falls on the issue of imaginative freedom. Tradition, which, for Yeats, encompasses mythic and symbolic expression, is advocated as the only means of liberating the artist from the constraints of utilitarianism and servitude to a moral or political cause. As art's purpose, Yeats proposes, aside from creating national character, contemplation of the tragic truths of life and attainment of wisdom that comes from recognition of these truths, from the poet's embrace of a vision of tragic joy (*E&I*, pp. 249-253). In Yeats's poetic universe, despair and defeat are what ultimately await the artist. Yet, the futility of the personal struggle notwithstanding, art is generated out of the conflict of the inner with the outer. Therein lies the deliverance of the artist, his reconstitution not as individual but as type.

By going back to tradition, to the mythological corpus that had fed all the great literature of the past, Yeats endeavoured to create a "synthetic, homeric" art (*CL* I, p. 8) in which the poet's vision would find proper expression in the ideal forms and symbols of myth:

> We have behind us in the past the most moving legends and a history full of lofty passions. If we can but take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems, and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie, we may deliver that new great utterance for which the world is waiting.
>
> (*UP* 1, p. 250)

For Yeats, the spiritual renewal of the arts lay in the rediscovery of the old myths and legends. Being the creation not of a single artist but of the entire nation, they reflect national character and history.

This idea underlies Yeats's literary survey offered in his 1893 lecture "Nationality and Literature". In it, Yeats advocates an ideal of national poetry. He identifies three stages in the development of literature: epic, dramatic and lyric. The advancement through them is seen as a movement from "unity to multiplicity", from the universal and external to the particular and internal. The simplicity and comprehensiveness of the epic stage, represented by Homer, gives way to the complexity and further division of the dramatic and lyric. Literature ceases to preoccupy itself with the whole of life and seek inspiration from "external activities" but remains content to "express every phase of human consciousness" in ever-growing

subtlety of rhythm and elaboration of language (*UP* 1, pp. 268-273). For Yeats, the road to the recovery of the lost unity leads backwards: to myth and the rediscovery of the moral and religious values of the old epic poems and ballad songs.

While compiling the 1893 edition of Blake's works, Yeats identified two opposing tendencies as dividing both art and civilisation, the way of epic inclusiveness and of lyric subjectivity:

> The mind or imagination or consciousness of man may be said to have two poles, the personal and impersonal, or, as Blake preferred to call them, the limit of contraction and the unlimited expansion. When we act from the personal we tend to bind our consciousness down as to a fiery centre. When, on the other hand, we allow our imagination to expand away from this egoistic mood, we become vehicles for the universal thought and merge in the universal mood.
>
> (*WB* I, p. 242)

Yeats, who often oscillated between these poles, strove to resolve the antithesis by attempting a synthesis of anonymity and personal passion, of scope and intensity. It was by establishing literature in the "still living folk tradition" of Ireland and the mythological inheritance of the past that Yeats hoped to restore "the emotion of heroism to lyric poetry" (*E&I*, pp. 506-507), and thus escape the limitations of too abstract or too private an art. He acknowledged that, in order for the arts to be "transmittable" and "teachable" (*Aut*, p. 548), they would need to follow a shared tradition. This would enable the artist at once to articulate his individuality and place his vision within a received procession of universal symbols drawn from the domain of myth and legend.

V

In "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937), Yeats expounded the aesthetic principles governing his poetic endeavours. The poet, he contends, always creates out of the tragedy of his own experience but must ascend beyond feeling to a state of timelessness. Personal utterance must blend into the "great tapestry" of convention that connects the artist to the past generations and brings him into communion of thought and emotion with a whole people. Wishing "to cry as all men cried, to laugh as all men laughed", Yeats resolved to get "back to Homer, to those who fed at his table" (*E&I*, pp. 509-511, 513). In his search for unity and comprehensiveness, it is the mythic ideal,

stretching back to Homer, that determines Yeats's choice of artistic perspective.

In the ideality of myth, then, Yeats would seek the means to evade what, to him, seemed the shortcomings, the "leprosy" of the modern age: fragmentation, isolation and solipsism – "tepid emotions and many aims" (*UP* 1, p. 104). In the qualities he discerned in mythic narrative, its sense of anonymity, its appeal to "the great concourse of the people" (*UP* 1, p. 101) and its clarity, he seeks to regain the profoundness and creative vitality of the ancient vision so as to render art relevant to the modern experience. Ultimately, Yeats is calling for a myth-orientated poetry of passion and reverie, of simplicity and beauty, of intensity of expression and vastness of scope, of vigour and precision. But it is also a revelatory poetry after "the ancient manner" (*UP* 1, p. 377), communicating the creative impulses inhering in the universe.[43] Yeats epitomised his preference for an art that would lend itself to "vast sentiments, generalisations supported by tradition", hence his use of myth, in a letter of 1936 to Dorothy Wellesley. With most of his poetic and prose work behind him, he reiterated the fundamental postulate of his aesthetics, to "'think like a wise man'" yet express oneself "'like the common people'" (*L*, p. 853).

Despite an obvious preference for Irish folk material, wedded to a belief that all "great literature" is linked to nationality, a notion Yeats ascribed to the influence of John O'Leary, (*LNI*, pp. 30, 12), Homer and the cultural tradition of ancient Greece constituted for Yeats a standard by which to compare the achievements and aspirations of the Irish literary movement.[44] Homer in particular served as a literary model, for not only had his poetry expressed universal beliefs and emotions but he had also used "the history and legends" of his own country as a medium of artistic expression (*UP* 2, p. 141). In his search for precedent, Yeats discerned an affinity between epic Greece and modern Ireland, the literature of which he regarded as being in its "ballad or epic age". His "Nationality and Literature" essay offers the contention that both cultures were in their early stage of literary development and shared in the wealth of a mythological tradition rooted in religious feeling. Greek mythology is seen as having generated the arts – the epic cycle with Homer for its chief representative, then the great tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles, and the lyric poets. Irish mythology is championed as being akin to that of Greece, for it reveals the same ideological framework of religious and mythic thought. It could therefore, by affinity, initiate a modern literary movement conveying a spiritual understanding of life (*UP* 1, pp. 269-274, 284).

This notion is propounded in two of Yeats's essays written at the start of the twentieth century, "Ireland and the Arts" (1901) and "The Galway Plains" (1903). In both, Yeats heralds the beginning of an Irish literature, both dramatic and poetic, to be founded upon Irish legends and folk tales, still alive among the peasants. In both, he advances the proposition that Ireland could create, out of its legendary tradition, a literature that would only require craftsmanship to parallel the literary achievement of ancient Greece (*E&I*, pp. 206, 213). The comparison of the Irish literary revival to Greek art serves not only to support Yeats's advocacy of a myth-orientated art but also to lend validity to his attempts at shaping a national literature.

By the turn of the century, Yeats had abandoned his earlier notion that art is "tribeless, nationless, a blossom gathered in No Man's Land". Following the example of the Greeks, who had "looked within their borders", he directed his artistic efforts to the re-creation of "the ancient arts" founded upon Celtic legends, which are equalled in terms of beauty, and therefore of artistic potential, to the myths of Greece (*E&I*, pp. 205-207). Yet, despite the emphasis on Irish mythology, the connection with Greece is maintained throughout Yeats's poetic career. The synthetic craft of Homer and Sophocles informs Yeats's conception of artistic creation as both imparting a religious sentiment and depicting national character. In this respect, we can understand Yeats's opposition to "international" literature:

> The core of a thing must be national or local. But at the same time it ought to be a fundamental piece of human life, which is the same everywhere. [...] Any great play can be put into any other nation or age, but at the same time it is essentially local. A great piece of literature is entirely of its own locality and yet infinitely translatable.[45]

In effect, the mythology of which Yeats availed himself was not only Irish but also ancient Greek. The latter is seen as forming an essential part of a tradition carried on by Irish folktales and finding substance in the spiritual movement of the arts in Ireland. By lending themselves to re-interpretation, Greek myths functioned as a pathway for the exploration of different aspects of experience and provided the framework for the poet's conception of history. Thus, they served to give Yeats's work structural unity as well as afford a sense of integration. Ultimately, the link between Greece and Ireland, which became the dialectic between epic expansiveness and dramatic intensity held together in the form of the lyric, would be translated into an

attempt at the creation of a single myth. This is a reductive artistic perspective centred on the generation of a single image: "a Krishna, a Christ, a Dionysus" (*Aut*, p. 501). Art is construed as progressing from multiplicity to a principal unity rendered in metaphysical terms.

Throughout Yeats's critical work, it becomes apparent that the mythic mode of thought remains operative and that myth functions to resolve the tension between impersonality and individuality, multitude and intensity, reality and spirituality, history and eternity. For Yeats, myth not only lends art universal validity but also conveys an expression of heroic life which brings us nearer to the archetypal ideas and emotions:

> The Irish stories make us understand why the Greeks call myths the activities of the daemons. The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes more often from stories that are all, or half, mythological, than from history or stories that give one the sensation of history, understanding, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage bed.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 10)

Like poetic inspiration, enacted by the power of imagination, mythic utterance too finds its source in a transcendental force that stirs man's creative energies and impels towards ultimate union with the divine. In the concept of daemonic possession, which can be traced back to Heraclitean and Platonic metaphysical doctrines, Yeats would link his notion of myth to that of symbolic and visionary expression realised in the forms of art.[46]

In myth, then, Yeats sought the permanent and the recurring, the immutable and the infinite. By revealing the sacred beauty of the world and capturing its immanent essence, myth actualises the transcendence of historical circumstance and the suspension of time. The attainment of a state of timelessness effects a return to the perfection of origins, to the "first Source" out of which civilisations rise and to which they recede. "Does not", Yeats asks in his essay of 1934 "The Holy Mountain", every civilisation "imagine that it is born in revelation, or that it comes from dependence upon dark or unknown powers" (*E&I*, p. 472). To create an art that would come to bear upon the unchanging powers shaping the life and actions of man and nation, Yeats turned to myth and blended into the "vast design" it afforded him his vision of reality.

But, despite its mystical and metaphysical flights, it was an art that retained its roots in the world of physical experience. It engaged in a dialogic relation with history, which it proceeded to record via a symbolic language elaborated out of the mythic perspective.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W.B. Yeats's Aesthetic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 48.

2. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York; London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 223.

3. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), pp. 162-164.

4. The articles were the result of Yeats's collaboration with Lady Gregory in collecting folk tales (*Mem*, p. 126). The titles included "The Tribes of Danu" (1897), "The Prisoners of the Gods" (1898), "The Broken Gates of Death" (1898), "Ireland Bewitched" (1899), "Irish Witch Doctors" (1900) and "Away" (1902). Some of the material used in the essays was also incorporated in the 1902 edition of *The Celtic Twilight* (*CL* II, p. 558, note 4). In a letter of 1898, Yeats indicated that he and Lady Gregory collaborate on a "big book of folklore" (*CL* II, p. 323). In the 1902 preface to *The Celtic Twilight*, he announced his intention to embark on such a project of a "systematical and learned" presentation of Irish folk tales (*CT*, p. 33). The project was not completed until 1916. It was published in 1920 under the title *Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland* and under the authorship of Lady Gregory. Yeats's contribution was in the form of notes and two essays, "Witches and Wizards in Irish Folklore" and "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places", both dated 1914 (*Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland* (Gerard Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992; first publ. 1970), pp. 302-365).

5. In 1896 the *Irish Theosophist* published "The Revival of the Lost Mysteries". The article offered a view of Christianity as "a survival of the exoteric teachings and rites of the Pagan Mysteries of Chaldea, Egypt and Greece". Its "sacred literature contains but mutilated selections from text-books used in the secret schools centuries before the so-called Christian era". The article proposed that, by tracing the affinity between Christianity and older cults, it would be possible to restore the "ancient system" of faith of which "Christianity is only a distorted and misinterpreted fragment" (*Irish Theosophist*, 4:10 (1896), pp. 201-204, cited in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination: Essays in Affinity and Influence*, ed. Robert Fraser (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 132). Conversely, Ronald Hutton observes that between 1870 and 1970 there was a tendency to view the rural past as a timeless, pagan golden age. Thus, the countryside "became credited with all the virtues which were the obverse of [urban-industrial-modern] vices" and its people "became credited with a superior wisdom" (*The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 117).

6. The book contained a number of Yeats's articles on Irish folklore which had appeared previously in the *Scots Observer* and the *National Observer* as well as new material (*CL* I, p. 255; *WIFLM*, p. 413). *The Celtic Twilight* was reissued in 1902 with changes and omissions in the text of the earlier version and with some new stories which had either been collected by Yeats himself or acquired through his collaboration with Lady Gregory.

7. Harold Watts defines mythology as the "composite of man's experiences which are felt to be beyond human control", a response to the presence of a supernatural "Other". From an ethnological perspective, myth is an integral part of the religious life of pagan societies ("Yeats and Lapsed Mythology", *Renascence*, 3:2 (1951), p. 107).

8. Yeats reproved Croker for "that great sin against art – the sin of rationalism" (*CT*, p. 156). Yeats also wrote two unfavourable reviews of McAnally's book *Irish Wonders* (1888): one appeared anonymously in the *Scots Observer* for March 1889 (*UP* 1, pp. 138-141) and the other in *PSJ* for July 1889 (*LNI*, pp. 91-97). Despite his critique, Yeats included all three

writers on his list of authorities on Irish folklore, appended to the end of his "Notes" to *FFTIP*. Yeats himself was censured for the unscientific method of selecting and presenting his folk material. In an unsigned review, probably by Alfred Nutt, which appeared in the *Atheneaum* for September 1889, the objection was raised as to the validity of applying literary criteria to the recording of folk tales. In the "Introduction" to his *Fairy and Folk Tales*, Yeats had dismissed the scientific folklorist for being interested solely in a word-for-word transcription of the tales, thus failing to encapsulate the "very voice of the people, the very pulse of life (*FFTIP*, p. xiv). The *Atheneaum* reviewer cautioned that folklorists must avoid any stylistic or other modification of the material they record so as not to damage the "genuine products" of folk imagination (*CL* I, p. 145, note 5). In his review of Lady Wilde's collection *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland*, Percy Myles also reproved Yeats for gibing at "the honest folk-lorist who tells what he has actually heard, and not what he thinks he might have heard, or what he thinks his audience would like to hear". Myles argued that the employment of such a method could result in Irish folklore becoming "a literary sham instead of a scientific reality". The review, which appeared in March 1890, prompted Yeats to reply with a letter in order to clarify and defend his views (Ibid., p. 229, note 1; *UP* 1, pp. 173-174).

9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; first publ. 1974), p. 3.

10. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1953), pp. 45, 47.

11. René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (1963), p. 220, cited in James Land Jones, *Adam's Dream: Mythic Consciousness in Keats and Yeats* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 3.

12. James Land Jones, *Adam's Dream*, p. 6.

13. Norman Austin, *Meaning and Being in Myth* (University Park; London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), pp. 2-3, 5, 13.

14. Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), p. 31.

15. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. 2: *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 69.

16. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, pp. 90-93.

17. Derrida asserts that "*There is nothing outside of the text*" and consequently any reading of it cannot "transgress the text" towards a metaphysical, historical, or other reality that may be taken as determining its content or conferring meaning upon it. Opposing himself to the logocentrism of western metaphysics, he adds that "beyond and behind" any text, "there has never been anything but writing", seen as "the disappearance of natural presence" (*Of Grammatology*, pp. 158-159).

18. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1961), pp. 24-25.

19. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 450.

20. Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 62.

21. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 8.

22. Helen Regueiro, *The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats and Stevens* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 113.

23. It is not always possible to make a clear distinction between myths, folktales and legends, although each narrative form may possess certain features or qualities setting it apart from the others. Thus, and here I follow G.S. Kirk's proposition, myths often feature superhuman characters, who "turn into culture-heroes", they reflect serious preoccupations and take place in a timeless past. Folktales, even when incorporating supernatural elements, are set in historical time and are primarily concerned with exploring "simple social situations" or providing ingenious solutions to problems. Legends, on the other hand, are thought to be founded on historical persons or events (*Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; first publ. 1970), pp. 31-41).

24. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 8.

25. Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, p. 14.

26. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 51.

27. Warwick Gould, "Frazer, Yeats and the Reconsecration of Folklore", in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, p. 122.

28. Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, pp. 219-220.

29. Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, p. 60.

30. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 37.

31. According to Warwick Gould, Yeats's acquaintance with Frazer began in 1897 ("Frazer, Yeats and the Reconsecration of Folklore", in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, p. 123; also see Thomas L. Dume, *William Butler Yeats: A Survey of his Reading* (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1950), p. 65). Yeats owned a set of the Third Edition of *The Golden Bough*. He also possessed others of Frazer's books, namely, *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead* (1913) and *Folklore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law* (1923) (Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats's Library* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1985), pp. 98-99).

32. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1960), pp. 14-15; also see *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 14-15, 116-118, 96-97.

33. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 106, 63-65, 30.

34. Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, pp. 109-111, 36-37.

35. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 35, 85-86, 89-90.

36. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 88-89, 196-197.

37. Thomas L. Byrd, Jr., *The Early Poetry of W.B. Yeats: The Poetic Quest* (Port Washington, NY; London: Kennikat Press, 1978), p. 16.

38. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp. 35-36.

39. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, pp. 9, 12-13, 33.

40. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 211.

41. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, pp. 18-19.

42. David R. Clark, ed., "'The Poet and the Actress': An Unpublished Dialogue by W.B. Yeats", in *Yeats Annual No. 8*, ed. Warwick Gould (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 132-133, 135-136.

43. In 1895 Yeats wrote four essays on Irish national literature, offering a critical appreciation of the Anglo-Irish literary past, in the context of which he attempted to place the Irish Literary Movement he was propagating. In all articles, Yeats emphasises the artistic merits of myth and the need for its re-employment in moulding a national literature (*UP* 1, pp. 360-364, 367-373, 378-387).

44. The issue of the connection between Ireland and Greece, which Yeats maintained in his theoretical texts that existed, will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four. In the present chapter, it is dealt with only to the extend that it affords sufficient evidence to explicate his treatment of myth, as a mode of cognition, and the significance he attached to it in the context of his poetic theory.

45. From an interview given in 1931, cited in *W.B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 2, ed. E. H. Mikhail (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 202.

46. For the notion of daemons in Heraclitus, as guardian-spirits of the living and the dead, see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; first publ. 1957), pp. 207-208. For Plato's conception of daemons as mediatory spirits see *Phaedo* (107d-108b) and *Symposium* (202d-203a). In the *Cratylus* (397e-398c), Plato offers an etymological interpretation of daemon as departed soul that has acquired wisdom.

In his earlier 1901 essay "At Stratford-on-Avon", Yeats remarked that, for the Greeks, myths were the culminating outcome of daemonic activity, adding that "Daimons shape our characters and our lives" (*E&I*, p. 107). A few years later, in 1913, Yeats similarly would contemplate whether "symbolic thought, as all thought, [is] a reality in itself [...], a mid-world between the two realities, a region of correspondences, the activities of the daimons" (*Mem*, pp. 268-269). By the time he completed his first version of *A Vision*, Yeats had already crystallised his view of the "Daimon" as an intermediary between two planes of reality, the physical and the transcendent, and between the artist and artistic creation. Via his activity, the "Daimon" enabled the perception of ideal images and visions from which art arises. Yeats would write in a letter of 1928 to Sean O'Casey that "the ancient philosophers thought a poet or dramatist Daimon-possessed" (*L*, p. 741). Significantly, in 1923 Yeats was speculating, in his autobiographical "The Stirring of the Bones", on the actual reality of visions as revelations of a hidden life concealed in myth: "Had some great event taken place in some world where myth is reality and had we seen some portion of it?" He had been pondering upon the symbolic meaning of a vision he had experienced in 1896, of a centaur and a naked woman shooting an arrow at a star, and recalled a Greek saying, that "'Myths are the activities of the Daimons'". But at this stage, Yeats was unable to determine whether his shared vision had been communicated through the "memory of the race", through Anima Mundi, or by means of "transference of thought" (*Aut*, pp. 373-374).

CHAPTER FOUR

Under an Ancient Roof:
Yeats and the Greek Tradition

Yeats's philosophical and mythological explorations were a quest for structure and unity: the architectural unity he felt was exemplified in the integration of life and art before the Renaissance, but lacking amidst the cultural fragmentation and isolation of modern artistic creation. In effect, what Yeats sought was to fuse together his interest "in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality" as expressions of "a single conviction" (*Ex*, p. 263). This notion of unity and coherence was to have a twofold function. On one level, it would be realised in the context of Yeats's poetic work, binding together, in an organic whole, the diverse elements in individual poems as well as the poems themselves within and across collections. On another level, it would operate in a cultural context, placing the artist in the line of established tradition.

In this sense, Yeats's literary output can be approached as a body or text of interrelated and interwoven parts, an elaborate design in which to unite art and life. This comprehensive, fictive work would function, according to John Unterecker, as "a kind of literary equivalent" for the totality of human experience, which, moulded through art into "a form freed from accident", would acquire permanence and validity.[1] As already discussed in the previous chapters, Yeats's search for articulation and synthesis led to the formulation of a poetic theory that would form the basis of his art and enable the integration of the disparate materials he drew upon from a variety of fields. Of this theory and art, the Greek literary tradition constitutes an intrinsic part. It becomes a vehicle for expressing the artist's oscillation between opposing aesthetic and metaphysical principles. The present chapter will discuss the significance this tradition held in Yeats's work by examining the dialogic relation between the essays and the poems that it occasioned.

PART ONE: THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

I

Yeats's attempts to forge a poetic identity took shape at a time when, from the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of nationhood in Ireland was being linked, on the one hand, to political separation from England and, on the other, to the rediscovery of a shared culture. The emphasis on the cultural component came to occupy a central position in the struggle for self-definition. It led to the emergence of an intellectual movement whose proponents, with Douglas Hyde and Yeats among its leading figures, aimed, to paraphrase Declan Kiberd, to "elaborate a landscape" of national consciousness via the search for a new mode of expression that would constitute "a national style".[2] Such a search would raise issues not only of the linguistic medium to be employed (Irish versus English) but also of the character of the literature to be created (national versus cosmopolitan). Rejecting literary cosmopolitanism, Yeats championed, as early as 1892, "a national literature" which would be "Irish in spirit from being English in language" (*UP* 1, p. 255) and would also attain synthesis by submerging individual freedom into the national character.

The relation between these two elements is one of reciprocity. The process of self-definition necessitates and even conditions the emergence of national culture, which, in turn, provides the frame of reference for personal utterance. As Kiberd argues, for Yeats, the invention of "a unitary Ireland" entails the "reconciliation of opposed qualities which must first be fused in the self". Paradoxically, "individual expression" becomes attainable "in a code whose values are nonetheless communal".[3] Insofar as it constituted a shared experience, Celtic tradition, Yeats believed, reflected the community consciousness. If re-invigorated by being placed in a modern literary context, Ireland's cultural heritage would infuse both the new literature and national life with the wisdom and energy of "primeval poetry" (*BIV*, pp. xxvii-xxviii). Moreover, as the embodiment of archetypal images embedded in the memory of the nation, this tradition would effect cultural unification so that "all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design" (*Aut*, p. 194). Thus, Yeats would hold that the past could have a shaping influence upon the future by functioning as the nation's binding force:

> Is there nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another, no matter how distant the minds, how dumb the lips? [...] Was not a nation, as distinguished from a crowd of chance comers, bound together by this interchange among streams or shadows; that Unity of Image, which I sought in national literature, being but an originating symbol?
>
> (*Aut*, p. 263)

Still, in the 1880s and 1890s the literary use of mythological material for similar purposes remained a subject of controversy. But, for Yeats, it was in the imaginative works of the poets rather than in historical processes that national feeling best expressed itself. "The powers that history commemorates", Yeats contends in his 1895 essay "Modern Irish Poetry", "are but the coarse effects of influences delicate and vague as the beginning of the twilight" (*BIV*, pp. xiv-xx). He grounded his assertion partly on the model that Irish bardic poetry provided him and, as the present chapter will show, partly on the example of Homer and the Greek classical tradition. Yeats's argument for the relevance of bardic poetry rested on the premise of analogy between past and present. For Yeats, the bardic order had voiced "the racial unity of Ireland" (*CL* I, p. 472) by preserving its cultural and historical past and thereby cultivating awareness of its distinct Celtic character, much as Homer and the Greek tragedians had done for Greece. Similarly, claimed Yeats, modern Irish literature, centring upon the ideal images contained in its mythological heritage, could conceptualise and articulate the national identity of modern Ireland.[4] It could usher in "the great race that is to come" (*VPl*, pp. 311-312), a race moulded into existence by the poetic voice but redefined to accommodate a shared sense of culture.

Intent though he was on realising his ambitious national aims, of recreating for Ireland its national consciousness, Yeats would, nevertheless, acknowledge the importance of exposure to "foreign models" in shaping the literature of a country. At the same time, he warned against the dangers of imitative tendencies inherent in the early stages of its formation. "It is only before personality has been attained," Yeats cautioned, "that a race struggling toward self-consciousness is the better for having, as in primitive times, nothing but native models, for before this has been attained it can neither assimilate nor reject" (*Ex*, p. 233). But, for Yeats, who sought to achieve coherence for his poetic identity, the capacity for assimilation and appropriation was a key force behind the syncretic fabric of his artistic compositions.

In the process of self-reconstruction, whether on the level of nation or individual, the longing for realisation and articulation often expresses itself in the imaginative re-interpretation of the past. Yeats describes this stage as one in which the artists treat history not as "a chronicle of facts" but as a symbol of their creative energies, doing "its personages the honour of naming after them their own thoughts" (*Ex*, p. 236). Despite the utopian nature of such an ideal in terms of supplying a viable definition of national character, Yeats would look to the past, both of his own and of other countries, for adequate forms of artistic expression. Without entirely surrendering their ascribed national function, that of becoming, as Kiberd notes, "the actual environment of the future",[5] such forms would, however, illuminate the artist's passions and desires.

The turn to the Greek tradition, both literary and philosophical, which, for Yeats, bore an affinity with that of Ireland, was meant as an attempt to unlock the future via a return to the past. Seeking to identify personal belief with the thought of the nation, Yeats perceives, as late as 1934, the modification of the past as "a return to the sources of our power, and therefore a claim made upon the future" (*W&B*, p. 8). In this sense, Greece was to provide a model of thought that would ensure freedom of imagination while retaining strong links with a "more universal and more ancient" tradition (*Myth*, p. 369). The desired result would be the creation of a modern art which, Centaur-like, would be grounded in the mythological heritage, finding in it "its back and its strong legs" (*Aut*, p. 191), but with a poetic voice as distinctly personal as it would be communal.

This dialectic, which informs Yeats's attitude to poetry, found dramatisation in the later poem "Under Ben Bulben" (1939). The poem epitomises the artist's task as the poetic expression of a vision of perfection that could shape civilisation. But it is a vision that derives its potency from the heroic idealism of the past, from the mind's backward glance "on other days". Casting his lot with Phidias and Michael Angelo, Yeats delineates man's existence as a struggle between "two eternities,/ That of race and that of soul".[6] The notion of struggle intimates a dualistic relation of tension between the two poles, the public and the private, constantly re-negotiating and re-codifying one another, and thus projecting the realisation of their fusion into a tentative future. The poem can thus only function as testament to the artist's engagement in the dialogue between past and present. But ultimately, in order to allow the historical

process to unfold, he must acknowledge with Nietzsche the need "to break up and dissolve" the past in the prospect of reaching a true present, "that which is evolving and has just arrived".[7]

In his last radio broadcast in 1937, Yeats declared that at the beginning of his career he turned his "back to foreign themes, decided that the race was more important than the individual, and began my 'Wanderings of Oisin'" (*UP* 2, p. 509). Nonetheless, he found a model for the dialectic of "race" and "soul" not only in ancient Irish literature but also in the literary works of Homer and classical Greece. At the same time, he was becoming increasingly aware, and his poetry after 1910 records such a sentiment, of the disjunction between community and individual; that in fact it was left to "a small minority" (*UP* 2, p. 452) to express cultural values.

II

Yeats's acquaintance with the classics, and especially the classical literature and mythology of Greece, started at an early age, initially under the tutelage of his father. John Butler Yeats, a classics reader himself, undertook to augment his son's education by reading out to him such poetic texts as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which were fraught with classical allusions and which the poet ranked "among the sacred books of the world" (*E&I*, p. 65). Roy Foster also records how Yeats's father wrote retrospectively, in his unpublished memoirs, of his son's enjoyment at being told "things out of ancient philosophy".[8] In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats remarks that during those formative years his father held a growing intellectual "influence upon my thoughts" cultivating in him a taste for dramatic poetry as the highest form of literature, for it was full of passion and intensity rather than abstract thought (*Aut*, pp. 64-66). In fact, Yeats's later views on the affinity of Ireland with Greece may owe something to his father's comparison of Ireland and England in terms of Greece and Rome:

> Ireland is like ancient Athens where all were such talkers and disputants. England is like ancient Rome with its legions and cohorts and dull business of conquering the world.[9]

The comparison with Greece asserted the cultural supremacy of Ireland over England by setting the former on the side of imagination and the latter on that of rationality. But it also cultivated on Yeats's part an interest in the world of ancient

Greece, which did not wane despite the inadequacies of a classical education received at school.[10] In fact, his youthful delight "in a prose retelling of the *Iliad*" (*Aut*, p. 47) developed into a life-long fascination with Homer, whom he came to regard as among the "builders of my soul" (*Aut*, p. 59). It was essentially by Homer's poetic standards that Yeats came to measure the artistic value of Irish literary achievements; and it was with Homer's example in mind that he extolled Irish folk literature. In their simplicity and element of wonderment, these tales would never cease to strike him as "stories that Homer might have told" (*Aut*, p. 61). Even with the enthusiasms and declamations of his early youth moderated or in some respects repudiated, Yeats would in later life consistently reserve for Homer a most distinguished place in what Foster describes as his "spectacularly unIrish" list of six favoured writers.[11]

From the 1880s onwards, Yeats made a systematic attempt to acquaint himself with the Homeric epics and his knowledge of them must have been quite thorough by the time he wrote *The Wanderings of Oisin*, his first attempt at creating an epic-like poem. As Katharine Tynan recalls, Yeats read Chapman's Homer to her and his father while she sat for her portrait at John Butler Yeats's studio in 1886.[12] Thomas Dume, however, suggests that it was more likely to have been either Lang and Butcher's translation of *The Odyssey of Homer* (1879), or Lang, Myers and Leaf's translation of *The Iliad* (1882). Yeats was familiar with both texts and used them subsequently for his references.[13] An early mention of these works occurs in his 1896 essay "Greek Folk Poesy", which cites the translations as a model for literary rendering and for preserving the poetic value of the original text (*UP* 1, p. 411). In addition to these, Yeats also knew of William Morris's *The Odyssey of Homer* (1887), from which he quoted in the 1937 version of *A Vision* (p. 226),[14] and T.E. Lawrence's translation, *The Odyssey of Homer* (1932; 1935). Of the latter, Yeats remarked to Dorothy Wellesley in 1936 that he regarded it as the "only serious literature" in his possession worth reading (*LDW*, p. 55).

His knowledge of Homer also derived from other, indirect sources. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, in the 1890s the Theosophical Society reprinted a number of Thomas Taylor's works. Among them was his translation of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs in the Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey* (1895), which explicates the symbolic connotations of the Cave, encountered in the island of Ithaca upon Odysseus' return to his homeland, from the philosophic standpoint of the Platonic tradition. Viewing Homer in the context of this tradition, Porphyry argued that "when we consider the

great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in prudence and in every kind of virtue, we ought not to doubt but that he has secretly represented the images of divine things under the concealments of fable".[15] Such an interpretation postulates a notion of poetry as an expression of esoteric, transcendental doctrines. As such, it is in accordance with Yeats's belief not only that the visionary artist, of whom Homer is the supreme paradigm, has access to the ultimate reality but also that myth, as the embodiment of ancient wisdom, encapsulates and reveals that very reality.

Porphyry's *Cave*, which, according to Kathleen Raine, was one of Yeats's favourite books,[16] underscores the philosophical exposition in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900). Offering a metaphysical reading of both Shelley and Homer in the light of Neoplatonic philosophy, the essay presents Yeats's dualistic world-view with Taylorean echoes. It posits the existence of a spiritual reality independent of the mind's perceptions, a reality communicated via symbol, thus pointing to the sacred qualities inherent in nature (*E&I*, pp. 81-87). By relating Shelley's poetic images to a philosophic and religious tradition that he perceives as extending back to Homer via Plato, Yeats attempts to place his beliefs within the framework of a traditional thought system and to invest them with the validity of convention. The essay reflects not only Yeats's own thinking but also his propensity for synthesis.

It is possible that Yeats also knew Taylor's *Select Works of Porphyry* (1823), which contains "His Treatise on the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs" and an Appendix by the translator "Explaining the Allegory of the Wanderings of Ulysses".[17] In a note to Porphyry's text, Taylor correlates the Neoplatonic interpretation of the Odyssean tale with Orphic and Pythagorean notions on the immortality of the soul, on memory as recollection of the soul's divine origin, and on dreams as departed souls that have discarded all memory of earthly existence.[18] These notions are akin to Yeats's belief in the afterlife and the existence of the spirit realm. It is a belief which Yeats held since the 1880s, when his occult studies began, but which largely informs a number of his writings appearing in the second decade of the twentieth century, especially *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places* (1914) and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917). In these essays, the Neoplatonic ideas on the substance of the soul, as expressed by Porphyry in Taylor's translation and notes, bear upon Yeats's views on the incarnations of the soul and its mediating role in effecting communication between the spiritual and physical world through dream or trance.

In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1921), as in the earlier poem "The Cold Heaven" (1912), Yeats, echoing Neoplatonic notions, expresses the view that after death the soul must disengage itself from its corporeal past, "cast off body and trade". Passing through a stage of purification from all memory of earthly life and achievement, the purged soul will then be able to enter into a state of blessedness. It is in this sense that "a lucky death" must be understood as the cessation of all strife and antinomy, the transcendence of temporality and spatiality, and the attainment of a condition of pure being. In *A Vision* (1937), the stage of remembrance through which the soul moves towards ultimate union with the divine is called the *Dreaming Back*. It is a reliving by the spirit of "the events that had most moved it". These events "occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity, the most intense first, and the painful are commonly the most intense, and repeat themselves again and again" (*AVb*, p. 226).

This idea, which echoes Plato's description of the soul's recollection of earthly life (*Rep.* X 614e), also informs the poem "The Cold Heaven", with its apocalyptic vision of the soul's departure after death. But, whereas the speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" can still express, in the physical and metaphysical bleakness of the surroundings, a glimmering hope for transcendence, "The Cold Heaven" speaks of the agony of punishment. Riddled with the cold light of what Hazard Adams describes as "the blinding otherworld of bodily annihilation",[19] the speaker is caught between desire and attainment, the suffering of life and the eternity of suffering.

In his 1931 "Introduction" to *The Words upon the Window-pane*, Yeats repeats a similar idea but distinguishes between the spirit, seeking its archetypal plane of existence, and the projected form that communicates with the realm of the living. The poem interpolated in Yeats's discussion is a dramatisation of this distinction between the discarnate spirits and the spectres appearing as "their messengers" before "the bodily eyes":

> Of double nature these, one nature is
> Compounded of accidental phantasies.
> We question; it but answers what we would
> Or as phantasy directs – because they have drunk the blood.
>
> (*W&B*, pp. 33-36)

This doubleness of psychic life also suggests that fantasy and the faculty of imagination, both of which create by conjuring up images, are associated with what was

described in 1888 as "a state intermediary between this life and the next" (*FFTIP*, p. 128). Similarly, Taylor affirms in his notes to Porphyry's treatise on Homer that the fantasy, which "consists from memory", occupies a middle ground between the higher part of the soul, directed towards the intelligible realm, and the lower part, drawn to the sensible world.[20]

Yeats's immersion in the classical tradition typifies the revival of interest in classical Greece, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Homer as the epitome of the cultural and artistic values promoted in the Victorian age. The period between 1850 and 1870 saw the publication of twelve translations of the Homeric epics. Furthermore, the relevance of Hellenic ideals to modern society was stressed by Matthew Arnold, whose essays and lectures extol Homer's poetic virtues,[21] whilst in Ireland Trinity College was the centre of classical scholarship.[22]

However, while Greek studies flourished, Irish culture and literature were regarded by the academic establishment of Trinity as insignificant, inferior and even lacking in idealism compared to the cultural and literary achievements of England and Greece.[23] This attitude, which was also prevalent among the English-speaking Irish population, may help explain Yeats's conscious choice of Irish subjects for his poetry as an attempt both to define his role in the world of art and to shape national character. The connection he drew between Ireland and Greece can thus be seen not only as resulting from his classical education and reflecting his own poetic preoccupations; it also provided the basis for affirming the value of both Irish folk and Anglo-Irish literature.[24] For this, Yeats turned to the works of a number of leading figures whose studies in Celtic tradition he saw as justifying the emphasis he placed on the employment of mythological material in poetry. At the same time, these authors endorsed his belief in the spiritual and imaginative affinity which, in his mind, Ireland bore to Greece.

III

The years preceding Yeats's artistic efforts at recreating, via a narrative poem, the epic ideal of Homer and of the old bardic poetry of Ireland saw the publication of two books in the field of Celtic mythology: *Le Cycle mythologique irlandais et la mythologie celtique* (1884) by Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville and *Lectures on the Origin*

and Growth of Religion as lllustrated by Celtic Heathendom (1888) by John Rhys.[25] Both books emphasise Greek parallels for the figures and events of Celtic mythology, and postulate the notion of a common origin or source of inspiration for the myths. Thus, they strengthen Yeats's own belief in a close resemblance between the Greek and Irish mythological and folklore tradition.

The two authors become, for Yeats, the champions of a literary rather than an historical interpretation and evaluation of the Irish mythological cycles, a notion which also characterises Yeats's own approach to myth. In his review of Sophie Bryant's *Celtic Ireland*, which appeared in 1890 under the title "Bardic Ireland", Yeats treats the old Irish legends not as historical narratives, and therefore pertaining to any notion of historical "truth". Rather, he views them as bardic creations, literary constructions veiling a symbolic, spiritual meaning and afforded artistic value.[26] Invoking de Jubainville and Rhys, Yeats speculates that "Cuchulain, Finn, Oisin, St. Patrick, the whole ancient world of Erin may well have been sprung out of the void by the harps of the great bardic order". Interestingly, Yeats here grants art supremacy over history, for, by its creative power, it can shape worlds into being out of the dissipating forces of chaos. But the legitimacy of the myths' literary use by modern writers is primarily defended on the grounds that they reflect the Celtic imagination and the "persistence of Celtic passion" (*UP* 1, pp. 164, 166). Thus, they could establish a link with the past and provide models for the future.

On more than one occasion, Yeats noted with approval de Jubainville's assertion that there is a common basis to Greek and Irish mythic conceptions. In his 1897 essay "The Tribes of Danu", Yeats lays emphasis on the antiquity of the Celtic myths as embodying notions of an eternal reality and thereby paralleling or even preceding Greek myths. Thus, the traditions of Ireland and Greece are treated as having symbolic and metaphysical connotations. Moreover, Homer serves as the paradigmatic poet who epitomises Yeats's conception of the artist as revealing, through his poetic work, a hidden truth – the sanctity and mystery of the natural world. "We must begin", Yeats urges his fellow poets, "making our lands Holy Lands," as "the Greeks made the lands about the Ionian Sea" (*UP* 2, p. 56). The essay reflects Yeats's esoteric interests but also his literary speculations of the time, with the reference to Greece lending support to his ideal of Irish national literature as expressing the spiritual sentiment of folk belief. The association with Greece also meant that Yeats, as champion of this

ideal, would be placed in a line of poets going back to Homer.

With de Jubainville's sanction of his own notions of unity and comprehensiveness not only within a single culture but also across peoples and civilisations, Yeats proceeded even further to trace the similarities between the two traditions. In his address to the Irish Senate in June 1924 on the matter of Irish manuscripts, Yeats grounded his recommendations on the importance that de Jubainville had attached to Irish literature:

> Going back 1,000 or 1,200 years before Christ we find Dorian tribes descending on the Mediterranean civilization. They destroyed much and wandered much, and it has been held that we owe to their destruction, the story of the Fall of Troy, and to their wandering, the Story of Odyssey. D'Arbois de Jubainville considered that only through Irish literature can you rediscover the civilization of these tribes before they entered the Mediterranean.
>
> (*SS*, p. 76)

The idea was not new. Almost a year earlier, in another address to the Senate, Yeats had also invoked de Jubainville to validate his assertion that the study of Irish tradition afforded knowledge of "what the world was immediately before Homer" (*SS*, p. 42). Now, once again, he was employing an already familiar line of argument. Far from claiming any direct descent of the Irish from the ancient Greeks, Yeats supports the notion of Celtic mythology as a means of rediscovering the artistic and historical legacy of the ancient Greek civilisations. Celtic legends and books, he affirms, "have preserved and gathered together the old literature and much of the history of a similar period". Of that literature and history, Irish tradition is seen as a continuation and therefore as a legitimate heir to its greatness. Furthermore, being the product of creative imagination and the embodiment of the nation's values, the old tradition is deemed to be the force that has shaped national identity (*SS*, pp. 75-76). The battle for its restoration is fought not only on cultural but also historical grounds.

Three years after the declaration of Ireland as a Free State, in 1921, and with the violence and anarchy of the Civil War still fresh in memory, Yeats was invoking the authority of tradition to legitimise his cultural pronouncements. Envisioning a new future for Ireland and an influential role for himself to play in it, he advocated "a system of culture which will represent the whole of this country and will draw the imagination of the young towards it" (*SS*, p. 87). For Yeats, the "whole of this country" meant not

the cultural predominance of the Catholic element but its infusion with the values of Anglo-Irish Protestantism. In this system, Greece was to be a focal point, providing inspiration, as well as a model for shaping national consciousness and effecting the cultural and, subsequently, political unification of Ireland.

"Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) conceptualises and articulates in poetic terms Yeats's grand scheme. It constructs an intellectual and spiritual land of absoluteness, intended to embody Unity of Being and Culture. Creator and creation merge in the elaborate fabricating of "the artifice of eternity", a process whereby the creator becomes the artefact itself. But for all its transfiguring power, or because of it, Byzantium, if attained, is a land "out of nature" and therefore a land of artificiality, much like that other artificial land of the later poem "Byzantium" (1932). It is an abstraction from the physical realm of youths drawn together not by the co-operative spirit of a unified culture intent on producing "monuments of unageing intellect" but by a common lot of birth and death, and the transitoriness of passion.

In the 1908 version of Yeats's story "The Tables of the Law", the fictive character Owen Aherne expresses a preference for Byzantine style on the grounds that it bears "less relation to the world about us than to an abstract pattern of flowing lines, that suggest an imagination absorbed in the contemplation of Eternity" (*VSR*, p. 154). This idea of form and art as embodied disembodiment underlines Yeats's description of Byzantium in *A Vision* (1937). There, the transcendent is realised in the anonymous, symbolic work of "some philosophical worker in mosaic", which, pertaining to "the supernatural" more directly than Plotinus' philosophical treatises, would reveal spiritual truth as "a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body" (*AVb*, p. 279).

"Sailing to Byzantium" attempts to construct itself into such an image, much as its poet imagines himself metamorphosed into a golden bird. In its artificiality, the bird celebrates stasis rather than flux, and such a negation of life proves the inadequacy of the construction. Ultimately, the soul that claps its hands with joy despite a tattered, mortal body does not sing of the divine beauty that Plato's pure soul beholds in its discarnate state in the *Phaedrus* (247c-e); rather, it is of history and time, "what is past, or passing, or to come". But even with its implicit dismissal of Platonic metaphysics and its notion of a temporal eternity achieved via art's redemptive quality, the poem is, as Adams points out, "a process that never yields the contentment of triumph".[27] As a private, mythical land of cultural unification, Byzantium must and does remain an ideal.

However, in the context of Yeats's critical work, the assertions about Greece appear less problematic and the ideal it represents is defended as attainable. In the 1932 "Introduction" to *Fighting the Waves*, Yeats, citing de Jubainville as his authority, sees the affinity he had discerned between Ireland and Greece as operating on two levels: firstly, on the level of mythic thought, for both races had derived inspiration from a similar belief system for the creation of their sacred stories, myths and art; and secondly, on an educational level, suggesting an associated study of the two languages:

> Let him translate Greek into Irish and learn that our chariot fighting Red Branch resembled the chariot-fighting Greeks and Trojans; that D'Arbois de Jubainville spent his life in the study of Irish for no other reason; that the sacred grove where Oedipus was carried off by the gods differed in nothing from the groves where, according to Connaught tales, men, women and children are carried off; [...] that our stone crosses got a part of their design from the Painters' Books of Mount Athos; that in general character the patterns upon the croziers and missal boxes in our National Museum are Byzantine Greek.
>
> (*VPl*, p. 573)

Ultimately, knowledge of Greek and Irish would bear out the truth that "Greek literature was founded on a folk belief differing but little from that of Ireland". The supremacy of oral over written tradition, which Yeats had formulated as an aesthetic principle in the 1890s, determines here the poet's praise of ancient Greece and his renunciation of Rome, whose literature, like that of England, he perceives as being founded upon "the written word" (*VPl*, p. 573).

In the 1902 essay "Speaking to the Psaltery", Yeats, citing the example of Homer, had expressed a desire for verse to be recited to the accompaniment of "a harp", for "it is not natural to enjoy an art only when one is by oneself" (*E&I*, p. 14). Such an art as Homer had practised Yeats saw as affiliated with the old Irish tradition of story-telling. The poets who belonged in it were "of Homer's lineage" because they voiced the beliefs and emotions of an entire nation, and stirred its passions and imagination through the directness of their performance (*E&I*, p. 372). Such pronouncements reflect Yeats's inherent phonocentrism and signify a belief that art should form an integral part of life, uniting the artist and his audience, as did the great literature of the past, intended as it was to be spoken. This emphasis on the immediacy of oral artistic performance, as opposed to the intermediacy of the printed text, points to the dialectic of experience and contemplation, of the sensually apprehended and the intellectually perceived. In the

terms of *The Birth of Tragedy*, this can be translated into the dialectic of the Dionysian, with its ecstatic revelling, and the Apollonian, with its reflective perception of image.[28]

The association of Greece with Ireland largely informs Yeats's views on education throughout the 1930s. In "A Letter to Michael's Schoolmaster", from a 1930 Diary entry, Yeats underlines the value of a classical Greek education, writing that his son should be taught Greek so that he could read "that most exciting of all stories, the *Odyssey*". Opposing Roman to Greek literature, Yeats grounds his affirmation on the notion that the latter epitomises his ideal of artistic creation as form in union with meaning. Furthermore, it offers a regenerative perspective on life and the perceptions of imagination so that "could we but approach it with eyes as young as its own, [it] might renew our youth" (*Ex*, pp. 320-321). For Yeats, such an art would result in a holistic experience because it could capture vigour of expression and a childlike ability for emotional intensity. This had also been Nietzsche's perspective in his contrast of Greek to Roman culture, the former being perceived as "unanimity of life, thought, appearance and will".[29]

Yeats's endorsement of the poetry of Greece, as being paralleled by that of Ireland, allows him to view the Irish poets as the literary heirs of the Greek cultural heritage, who will emulate and even surpass the artistic achievements of their predecessors:

> Civilisation rose to its high-tide mark in Greece, fell, rose again in the Renaissance but not to the same level. But we may, if we choose, not now or soon but at the next turn of the wheel, push ourselves up, being ourselves the tide, beyond that first mark.
>
> (*Ex*, pp. 439-440)

Echoing the prophetic overtones of *A Vision*, Yeats's thoughts, written in 1939, reach back to his youthful convictions. Greece is correlated with the cycle of time embodying the victory of form and unity over vagueness and multiplicity. Nietzsche had described the victory in terms of the conflict between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the former, read as the "will to the terrible, multifarious, uncertain, frightful", surrendering to the latter "will to measure, to simplicity, to submission to rule and concept".[30]

In "The Statues" (1939), Yeats elaborates this idea of victory as realised in the act of artistic creation. The mathematical proportions of Pythagoras engender and find perfect expression in the sculptures of Phidias,[31] themselves the product of a culture

that achieved synthesis between "Ionic elegance" and "Doric vigour" (*AVb*, p. 270). "Pythagoras planned it." But "greater than Pythagoras", the Greek plastic artist, with whom the second millennium of the pagan era reached its apex (*AVb*, p. 269), "modelled these/ Calculations" and "put down/ All Asiatic immensities". His works crystallise the eternal and unchangeable forces of life and are therefore the embodiment of unity and harmony. They epitomise an art which, as Yeats affirmed in 1909, would result in "the creation of one single type of man, one single type of woman" (*Aut*, p. 501). The statues may look "but casual flesh" but they convey an element of impersonality. They are at once human and divine because "all there is empty and measured" (*Ex*, p. 451).[32]

Far from displaying what Walter Pater, in his essay on Winckelmann, saw as repose and restraint of passion,[33] the marble or bronze statues of the poem are alive with "that energy which seems measureless" (*Aut*, p. 502), balancing passion and purity of form. One remembers Yeats's thinking body and his discussion of Strozzi's painting of a Venetian gentleman as exemplifying the union of body and thought in art (*Aut*, p, 292). Rather than portraying "character", which signifies the fall into multiplicity and division, the statues celebrate, to use Thomas Whitaker's terms, the unity of "body and intellect, temporal and eternal". It is for this that artistic creation could effect liberation from "the formless by form," from "the chaotic" Asiatic sea by "intellectual control",[34] and make the historical victory of Salamis possible.

Pater had described the contrast between Eastern and Greek art in terms of the distinction between symbolic representation and intellectual realisation. The thought of the East lacked definition and its art was representational. It expressed "a vague conception of life" whereby humanity was fused in nature. But in Greek thought,

> the "lordship of the soul" is recognised; that lordship gives authority and divinity to human eyes and hands and feet; inanimate nature is thrown into the background. But just there Greek thought finds its happy limit; it has not yet become too inward; the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh; the spirit has not yet absorbed everything with its emotions, nor reflected its own colour everywhere.[35]

Acknowledging this achievement of unity in Greek thought and art, Yeats would proclaim in his poem the Irish as belonging to "that ancient sect". Possessing its knowledge, they would counteract modern abstraction by returning to the past to trace the "lineaments" of an ideal of perfect harmony.

For Pater, this ideal had consisted in the "blending and interpenetration of intellectual, spiritual, and physical elements, still folded together, pregnant with the possibilities of a whole world closed within it". It is an ideal realised at a time when man was at one with himself, as a physical and spiritual being, and with the world around him.[36] Similarly, Yeats in 1909 perceived Greek painting and sculpture as the embodiment of the principle of unity (*Aut*, p. 501). Not only did it display a capacity for passion, binding all men together, but also showed "a compact between the artist and society", enabling the creation of forms modelled upon those of Nature (*Mem*, p. 188). Thus, the old art was as much a private, in the sense that it sprang from personality, as it was a public act.

Back in the 1880s, however, the premise on which Yeats connected Ireland and Greece was not so much philosophical or aesthetic as mythological. Rhys and his *Celtic Heathendom* further provided parallels between Greek and Celtic mythological figures. Rhys, however, propounds a solar interpretation of the Celtic mythic tales, which for a time found a sympathetic response in Yeats and underscored the mythico-philosophical frame of his collection of poems *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Into his extensive notes to the poems, Yeats incorporated much of the evidence he had gathered from his reading of Rhys's book as well as Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Although the perspective adopted in the two texts is not identical, Yeats construes the latter in the light of the former. This would serve a twofold purpose: to elucidate his own symbolic interpretation of the mythological material he utilises in the poems, and to strengthen his position on a close link between Greek and Celtic patterns of folk and spiritual belief. Thus, on the basis of Rhys's solar theory, intermixed with elements from Frazer's study of ancient sacrificial cults, Yeats would proclaim that "the folk belief of Greece is very like that of Ireland". Furthermore, he would maintain that "the mythology out of which" Irish stories "have been shaped" not only carries echoes of the Greek legend spirit but is also infused with Neoplatonic symbolism (*VP*, pp. 806-810).

Indeed, the "neo-platonist" who regards the sea as "a symbol of the drifting indefinite bitterness of life" may well have been Porphyry. Yeats could have encountered the description either through his occult studies, which also inform the poems in the collection, or in Thomas Taylor's translation, in which the sea and water are associated with generation and seen as symbols of the sensible world.[37] In the later

poem "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" (1932), Yeats would echo Porhyry in the revelatory question "What's water but the generated soul?". The association of water with incarnation intimates the soul's descent from the transcendent to the corporeal and is suggestive of the speaker's pervasive sense of spiritual and imaginative degeneration experienced in the modern age.

In "The Valley of the Black Pig" (1896), which thematically anticipates the later compositions about the cyclical movement of history, Yeats presents his apocalyptic vision through what Jahan Ramazani terms "binary oppositions".[38] On the basis of Rhys's and Frazer's theories, Yeats employs a primarily mythological reading of the battle, uniting in its symbolic connotations Irish and Greek vegetation myths of the death and resurrection of the associated deity (Diarmuid and Adonis). In his extensive note, he offers an interpretation of the subject of the poem in terms of sets of opposites: light and dark, winter and summer, sterility and fertility, life and death (*VP*, pp. 808-810). But at the same time, the Neoplatonic philosophy remains implicitly present, as in many of the poems in the collection. The allusions to the dewdrops and "the flaming door", which frame the poem, echo Porhyry's world of generation (water) and the flames of purgation (fire) which in "The Gyres" destroyed Troy.

However, the poem does not equate the metaphysical transcendence endorsed by Plato and Plotinus with the darkness-induced vision of Dionysian surrender implied in the fire metaphor. The speaker desires not the flight from earthly reality, attained through the ascent of the soul to the realm of the ideal, but the dissolution of the world brought about by dark, primal forces. Although the vision lacks the palpability and even violence of similar images of destruction in the later poetry, in which the apocalypse is rendered in mystical terms combining the empirical and the spiritual, it heralds a return to a state of formless chaos. The "Master" of light and fire, to whom the speaker bows and who constitutes an early antecedent of the beast of "The Second Coming", signifies the absorption of the self into elemental, cosmic powers.

IV

D'Arbois de Jubainville and Rhys strengthened Yeats's conviction that the Irish shared with the people of ancient Greece a literary past "of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action" because steeped in national life (*E&I*, p.

213). But it was Standish O'Grady who first provided such a model of comparison. As Yeats recalls in *The Trembling of the Veil*, "O'Grady was the first, and we had read him in our teens".[39] The acquaintance with his works, however, is likely to have taken place after Yeats's encounter with John O'Leary in 1886, when the former, seeking a more imaginative approach to the presentation of historical past, turned to O'Grady (*E&I*, p. 510). Yeats's enthusiastic praise can be accounted for by the fact that O'Grady, at least in Yeats's view, had followed the example of Homer in artistically shaping the mythological material of his native land and "had made the old Irish heroes, Finn, and Oisin, and Cuchulain, alive again" (*Aut*, p. 221).

For Yeats, then, O'Grady provided inspiration for the revival of the old Irish tradition as a living force in the imagination of the country. The inclusion of six of O'Grady's books in the reading list assembled by Yeats in 1895 bears testament to the significance which O'Grady held for the younger poet.[40] O'Grady is being heralded as "the most important of living Irish prose writers" for retrieving the literary potential of Irish mythology and for making it readily available (*UP* 1, p. 385). For revivalist writers such as Yeats, who saw the formation of a new national identity for Ireland as inextricably linked with the recovery of its literary past, O'Grady became an inspiring force.[41] Seeking to bring back into modern poetry the passionate energy and multitudinous resonance he detected in the poetry of Homer and the Irish bards, Yeats found in O'Grady a strong ally for his efforts to create an art modelled upon a heroic ideal.

In this sense, O'Grady's impact on Yeats's mind was instrumental. Not only had he encouraged the literary use of Irish legends, which he defended for their imaginative rather than historical merit, as the embodiment of the ideals and passions of the people, but had also discerned parallels between Irish and Greek culture. According to John Kelly, O'Grady's notion of legendary materials as representations of a nation's imagination rather than as historical documents is echoed in Yeats's 1887 essay on the bardic hero Finn Mac Cumhaill. In it, Yeats argues for a literary rather than factual interpretation of Irish legends. Without denying the existence of a historical basis to these legends, Yeats accentuates their imaginative significance in that therein, and not "in what it does, this invader or that other", a nation's history is embedded.[42]

Anticipating Yeats, O'Grady had based his claims about Irish legendary poetry upon the model of ancient Greece. O'Grady maintained that the entire Greek

civilisation – its literature from the Homeric epics to the Attic drama, its art, and even its architecture – arose out of the creative imagination of the ancient bards. Those forgotten poets had shaped the mythological material of the country and had encapsulated, in their poetic compositions, man's spirit and creative impulse in their archetypal form: they provided "the types" and "ideality". In so doing, they prepared the ground for the great achievements of Greek artistic and cultural enterprise that were to exert significant influence on the world.[43]

Shelley had purported in *A Defence of Poetry* that "the poems of Homer and his contemporaries" constituted "the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed".[44] Not surprisingly, Yeats would similarly claim in his essay on Finn that "without her possible mythical siege of Troy, perhaps, Greece would never have had her real Thermopylae".[45] Almost half a century later, this idea of a nation being formed out of the ideal images contained in its epic or bardic constructs would be shaped into the central theme of "The Statues". At the same time, still pondering upon the formative power of the mythological imagination over historical reality, Yeats would profess in *On the Boiler* that

> Europe was not born when Greek galleys defeated the Persian hordes at Salamis; but when the Doric studios sent out those broad-backed marble statues against the multiform, vague, expressive Asiatic sea, they gave to the sexual instinct of Europe its goal, its fixed type.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 451)

Written at the end of his poetic career, the passage re-affirms Yeats's conviction about a common literary ancestry that Europe shared with ancient Greece, whose artistic achievements Yeats recognised as poetic models since they contained archetypal representations, the eternal principles of human life. Shelley had termed these principles "the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator,"[46] a delineation alluding to Plato's immutable Ideas, the divine Forms of all existents. It is the same idea which also underlies Yeats's belief that myth and legend are the embodiment of a higher, divine reality existing behind the phenomenal world and that, through them, we can gain access to this reality.

In his "Introduction" to *Fighting the Waves*, Yeats noted with approval that "in the eighties of the last century Standish O'Grady, his mind full of Homer, retold the story of Cuchulain that he might bring back an heroic ideal" (*VPl*, p. 567). During that

same period, and following in O'Grady's footsteps, Yeats had also embarked on a project of his own poetic retellings of ancient myths for similar purposes. As he was to assert later in "Vacillation" (1932), in an allusion to the theme of *The Wanderings of Oisin* on the antinomy of the saintly and the heroic, spirituality and physicality, transcendence and incarnation, "Homer is my example and his unchristened heart". Caught between oscillating impulses and striving for reconciliation and unity, the poem's speaker seems to proclaim not the attainment of synthesis but the embrace of the barbarous knowledge of Homer and his theme of "original sin".[47] In this, he aligns himself with the earlier Yeatsian figure of the poet-wanderer, Oisin, who, functioning as Yeats's poetic mask, had sought, via his rejection of St. Patrick's morality, to affirm the faded idealism of a heroic past.

For Yeats, support for the mythological and literary association of Greece and Ireland also came from the works of Walter Pater. Pater's analysis of the religious ideology of Greek antiquity confirmed Yeats's notion, which he also learnt from his theosophical practices, that all mythological systems, and consequently those of Greece and Ireland, shared a common spiritual ground. Pater, who construed mythic utterance as a symbolic expression of the deepest passions and aspirations of the race, regarded the mythic body of Greek religion as one of "pure ideas". Arising out of man's spirit rather than historical reality, these conceptions held, "in adequate symbols," the thoughts of the people regarding their "physical and spiritual life".[48]

Pater traced three stages in the development of Greek myth as it progressed from a naturalistic to a literary to a symbolic mode of cognition. First, there is the "half-conscious, instinctive, or mystical, phase", in which myths are created, predominantly in spoken form, as conceptions of "certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world". Next, comes the "conscious, poetical or literary, phase" with the artistic treatment and imaginative rendering of myths as poetic narratives by the poets. The final stage is "the ethical phase", in which the myths are elevated to symbolic status as idealities of "moral or spiritual conditions".[49] Thus, for Pater – and this would also conform with Yeats's own approach to myth – Greek myths constitute everlasting or archetypal images of the human soul, which apprehends reality in emblematic form.

PART TWO: ART VERSUS LIFE

I

It is uncertain whether Yeats had become acquainted with the essays of *Greek Studies* by the time his first critical writings appeared.[50] But there seems to be in them, if only by affinity of thought, a resonance of the Paterian view of a symbolic apprehension of Greek myth as an intellectualised form of religious feeling. Thus, in the first of his two essays on Samuel Ferguson (1886), Yeats would proclaim that the Homeric and the Irish cycles of legends belonged in "the garden of the world's imagination" as sources of poetic inspiration, being among the "seven great fountains" there (*UP* 1, p. 81).

What, in Yeats's mind, marks these cycles as supreme is that they are imbued with qualities characteristic of his ideal of artistic creation. They are the expression of national character, voicing the deepest passions shared by the race, and betray a spiritual apprehension of life. They not only offer a comprehensive vision of reality but also arouse the whole spectrum of human emotions, "the whole nature of man", thus engaging the reader in a process of emotional reciprocity. Such a conception prompts Yeats to pronounce that "heroic poetry", which is woven around myth, because it is not preoccupied with immediate concerns, "is a phantom finger swept over all the strings", inducing a state of perfect "harmony". This Yeats perceives as a state of unity both on an existential and an artistic level, fusing the physical with the spiritual, the personal with the universal, the individual with the national. Its business is not to proffer a code of daily practice but to awaken the spirit and elevate the soul to an ideal reality by "burning away what is mean and deepening what is shallow" (*UP* 1, p. 84). The emphasis here is on the spiritual depth and power with which Yeats endows legends, as well as the literature founded on them, to bring the people into contact with the archetypal and mould their character.

In both essays, Yeats places Ferguson in this tradition as "the one Homeric poet of our time". His poetry, being "truly bardic" and appealing to all, possesses a universal element: it imparts a profound knowledge of life, having gone "deeper than the intelligence which knows of difference – of the good and the evil, of the foolish and the wise" – to "the universal emotions" which transcend any specific form of verbal

conception (*UP* 1, pp. 90, 101). In tracing the development of religious thought, Cassirer has argued that mythic thinking progresses from an "original, 'anonymous' stage" to the opposite "phase of 'polynomy'". Such progression is in effect a movement from the level of mythic consciousness, on which religious concepts, especially of divinity, lack linguistic concreteness and differentiation, to that on which such concepts receive diversification through language. For Cassirer, however, this development is cyclical rather than linear, for he observes also a contrary tendency at play, a tendency for "generality":

> Guided by language, the mythic mind finally reaches a point where it is no longer contented with the variety, abundance and concrete fullness of divine attributes and names, but where it seeks to attain, through the unity of the word, the unity of the God-idea. But [...] beyond this unity, it strives for a concept of Being that is unlimited by any particular manifestation, and therefore not expressible in any word, not called by any name.

This tendency, remarks Cassirer, is essentially displayed in mysticism with its orientation towards "a world beyond language, a world of silence".[51] In the light of this, we can understand not only Yeats's notion of unity, which is a return to the fundamental spiritual experience of mankind, when the world was perceived as an indivisible whole, but also his praise of Ferguson. Ferguson's poetry is viewed as embodying the Yeatsian ideal of "'barbarous truth'", of a primitive mode of apprehension that invests physical and geographical reality with a sense of religious veneration. In this respect, then, for Yeats, Ferguson is "like the ancients", like Homer, for "his spirit had sat with the old heroes of his country" and in his *Deirdre* "he has restored to us a fragment of the buried Odyssey of Ireland" (*UP* 1, pp. 87, 92). The literary connection between Ferguson and Homer, which in effect enables the establishment of a link between Ireland and Greece, reveals the basis of Yeats's developing aesthetic of the time. Poetry is removed from the sphere of practical application, which reduces it to an agent of social or political reformation, to be vested with a revelatory and shaping power which effects change by communicating the eternal, spiritual principles that govern life. Organic unity within such poetry is attained by a capacity to evoke the wealth and breadth of human experience, a quality which Yeats discerns in both Ferguson and Homer, with whom all thought is interconnected, "each line, the sustainer of his fellow" (*UP* 1, p. 92).

Yeats's praise of Ferguson as a "national" poet can be viewed as an attempt to claim the latter for the cause of a cultural and political restoration in Ireland. For Yeats, this revival is interconnected with the formation of a sense of national identity shaped out of a native tradition, both literary and historical.[52] As Colin Graham maintains, Yeats sees Ferguson as a poet "writing at the point of emergence" of the Irish nation. Consequently, the latter's work becomes "central to the formation of a resurgent sense of nationality". Hence Yeats's positioning of Ferguson in "an uncomplicated affinity with the Irish nation and nationalism", of which, at least in the terms defined by Yeats, the older poet, being a Unionist, could not be an advocate.[53]

Yeats's nationalist claims also pervade his reading of Ferguson in the 1889 essay "Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland". Ferguson's literary merit – his simplicity, his passionate intensity, his "severity of mind" – is rated above that of Mangan because "most Homeric". With him, Yeats feels, "one seems to be listening to some old half-savage bard chanting to his companions at a forest fire" (*UP* 1, p. 159). The comparison with the old bardic order and with Homer is revealing of the restorative role Yeats wished to see art perform in a modern Irish context – an activity integrated in life and shaping the people's imagination by rendering its everlasting revelations. Not surprisingly, Yeats would again, in the poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892), view Ferguson, together with Mangan and Davis, as singing "to sweeten Ireland's wrong". And he would place himself in their company as a poet whose work embodies, in symbolic form, images of a spiritual reality, "Of things discovered in the deep" and of "elemental creatures" glimpsed in an incontestable "truth's consuming ecstasy".[54]

Homeric, however, is an epithet which Yeats does not apply exclusively to Ferguson although the latter is set apart, as the unrivalled "ballad Homer", for the epic qualities of his poetry, in which "Ireland's heroic age" finds adequate expression (*LNI*, p. 80). The link between Homer and the Irish bardic tradition also extends to include the poetry of R.D. Joyce, who took his subject from the legendary past of Ireland. Although in subsequent writings Yeats never recommended Joyce, and his name is not included in Yeats's reading list compiled in 1895, Joyce receives enthusiastic praise in the early 1886 article "The Poetry of R.D. Joyce". And this, on the grounds that he, like Homer, belongs to the "bardic class" of poets who write for the people and do not "leave after them a school". In a manner comparable to Homer's, Joyce's poems, despite their stylistic faults, reveal, in their simplicity and unaffected naturalness, the

earthly beauty of the heroic world – "the barbaric earth [...] of hunters and riders, and all young people" (*UP* 1, pp. 105, 114). They therefore re-establish the symbolic associations of the land.

Admittedly, a year later, Yeats's review of Katharine Tynan's book of verse, *Shamrocks* (1887), offers a somewhat revised, albeit covert, evaluation of the literary virtues of both Ferguson and Joyce.[55] Ferguson, although still supreme among the Irish bardic poets for possessing truly Homeric qualities, appears to be hard and bald in his poetic treatment of Irish myths, whereas Joyce lacks "poetic intensity".[56] As John Kelly points out, the critical stance adopted in the article derives from a necessity of acknowledging the difficulty which any modern poetry drawing upon its mythological tradition has in appropriating "bardic simplicities or unself-conscious heroic energies".[57] In effect, Yeats felt compelled to ponder upon the question of whether the austerity and primeval heroic sentiment, which, a few months earlier in his essay on Finn, he had admired about the figures of the Fenian cycle,[58] could once more be restored to Irish poetry. Nonetheless, Yeats would continue to accentuate the symbolic and spiritual significance of the heroic ideal, upon which he sought to model his narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisin*. Equally so, he would insist on the need to employ myth as the only possible means of overcoming what he perceived as the limitations of modern poetry – its fragmentariness, inspiration diffused "into many glints and glimmers", rather than burning "in one steady flame" (*UP* 1, p. 251).

II

Throughout Yeats's poetic career, Homer remained a model of creative vitality and craftsmanship, providing the literary standard by which to measure artistic achievement – "savage strength" and "tumultuous action" combined with simplicity, "tranquil beauty" and subtlety of expression (*UP* 1, p. 363). In the *Discoveries* essay "Why the Blind Man was made a Poet" (1906), Yeats speaks of the universality and relevance of Homer's poetry, which is not an observation but an exaltation of life, although not at the exclusion of the individual perception. "We have never seen", he asserts, "anything Odysseus could not have seen while his thought was of the Cyclops, or Achilles when Briseis moved him to desire" (*E&I*, pp. 277-279). The essay reflects Yeats's need to reconcile the anonymity of Greek art, which in Pater's words had

sought "the type in the individual",[59] with the notion of personality, the individual character and experience. Implicit in Yeats's remarks is the adoption by the poet of a stance of deliberate detachment from the world of current affairs. The analogy with the modern era is drawn from the past. By renouncing all worldly gain and external consideration, the visionary poet of ancient times could engage in the creation of an art that depicted the permanent, archetypal forms of human nature, and into that depiction he incorporated his personal vision.

For Yeats, modern Irish literature can escape bareness and cultural isolation by recapturing the epic ideal and drawing upon the heroic legends of the past. For this, it would need to go, as he declared in his "Introduction" to Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), "where Homer went if we are to sing a new song" (*Ex*, p. 25). Ferguson had shown the way, for his poetry, which displayed an energetic imagination, owed its qualities of "epic vastness and *naïveté*" to Homer (*LNI*, p. 106). Of the modern Irish poets, Synge also travelled in the "road" that Homer had paved in that his art, which was "full of passion and heroic beauty", dramatised an inner conflict in "the depths of the mind" (*E&I*, pp. 321, 341). It was thus truly national not because it advanced some cause but because it revealed the permanent characteristics of the race.

Synge is another of Yeats's "Homeric" poets, whose work displays the anonymity and universality of what, for Yeats, constituted the great literature of the world: from Homer and the Greek tragedians to Shakespeare and Dante to the Irish bards and folk poetry. A poet belonging in this tradition, Yeats contends in the 1910 essay "J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time",

> can see himself as but a part of the spectacle of the world and mix into all he sees that flavour of extravagance, or of humour, or of philosophy, that makes one understand that he contemplates even his own death as if it were another's and finds in his own destiny but, as it were, a projection through a burning-glass of that general to men.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 322)

The passage renders more than Yeats's admiration for the poetry of a contemporary artist, whose literary merit it attempts to establish within a modern Irish context. It delineates the characteristics which conform to Yeats's canon of true art, a canon forged on the literary anvil of ancient Greece. Because it is a literature that merges the voice of the poet into that of the people, it has the capacity not only to define national identity and shape the present but also steer the nation's course and thereby engender its action

in the future. In it, "may lie the roots of far-branching events" (*E&I*, p. 341). Although it is firmly rooted in the soil,[60] it moves from the topical and the temporal to even transcend history and, in the process, it universalises the private and the personal. It turns biography into myth.[61]

The short poem "A Coat" (1914) elaborates this notion and proposes a reading of Yeats's art in this light. Through the metaphor of the coat embroidered out of "old mythologies", the poet presents personal utterance, the "song" as the articulation of individual experience, blending into mythic utterance, the expression of the consciousness of mankind. But the ending of the poem, with its invocation of the image of "walking naked", contests the validity of the earlier assertion. It initiates a process of unmasking, via unclothing, that reveals the tensions in the attainment of an artistic ideal based on notions of mythic unity. Myth's function as mask is implicit in Yeats's assertion that literature finds inspiration in the vision of "naked truth" but "clothes herself" when seeking expression (*Mem*, p. 247).[62]

In "The Tower" (1927), Yeats attributes the power to grant permanence to what in the human condition is ephemeral or accidental not to mythic activity but to the poetic imagination. Having repudiated the philosophic idealism of Plato and Plotinus as abstract, and therefore hostile to the reality of imagination,[63] Yeats proceeds to assert that

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

Historical time and place, the entire physical world, and even visions of eternity, are here perceived as imagistic creations originating in the poet's mind, which defines and transfixes in the poetic text man's perception of reality. In these mirrorings of the imagination, rendered here in Apollonian terms, physicality merges with spirituality, the immanent with the transcendent, action with reverie, in creating a new image of reality that the poet avows as his truth. But this is a subjective, self-referential reality and truth that invokes no external authority for its validation.

By the 1920s, Yeats had already moved from the disembodied ideality of early years to the formulation of an aesthetic that rooted artistic creation in the reconciliatory discourse of body and spirit. At the same time, he was grounding the imaginative act in the soil, in the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the people that had sustained individual conception by providing the symbols for its articulation. He would thus write in 1930:

> I have before me an ideal expression in which all that I have, clay and spirit alike, assists; it is as though I most approximate towards that expression when I carry with me the greatest possible amount of hereditary thought and feeling, even national and family hatred and pride.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 293)

Seeking to identify his own convictions with the consciousness of the nation by creating an ideal image that would constitute the lineament of the "permanent form" of the modern mind, Yeats turned once again to myth. Echoing Nietzsche's affirmation in *The Anti-Christ* that a strong and proud people have "national" rather than "cosmopolitan" gods, who embody its spirit,[64] Yeats writes:

> Thought seems more true, emotion more deep, spoken by someone who touches my pride, who seems to claim me of his kindred, who seems to make me a part of some national mythology, nor is mythology mere ostentation, mere vanity if it draws me onward to the unknown; another turn of the gyre and myth is wisdom, pride, discipline.
>
> (*W&B*, pp. 7-8)

The passage is a meditation on Swift as the epitome of the Unity of Being and Culture that Yeats had advocated. Swift stands, as Whitaker notes, as "both reflection and shadow", not only projecting Yeats's own artistic and ideological position but also intimating "an ideal passion and ideal unity", which, however, remains tentative.[65] For Yeats, who would remain open to influences from Europe, and beyond, despite his conviction that literature is interconnected with nationality, the purpose Swift serves may equally apply to a figure such as Homer. The parallel between Swift and Yeats prompts the latter to anticipate an era in which the wisdom embodied in myth will once again hold true, and not for the individual alone but for the whole nation.

These ideas lie behind "Those Images" and "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", both written in 1937 and seen as complementary. The emblematic images of the first poem – the lion and the virgin, the harlot and the child, the hovering eagle – are

intended to embody the elemental qualities of human experience, from whose tentative union art arises. Via their employment, the poet renounces ideological abstraction in favour of artistic expression that finds inspiration in physicality and locality. However, the poem does not quite seem to escape what it repudiates. In enumerating its images but failing to contextualise them, it can be read more as an announcement than a realisation of intent. But in "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", the universal denotation of the images chosen previously is allied to the symbolic associations they acquire not only in the poet's mind but also, more significantly, in the hereditary thought incorporated in tradition. And this tradition more than encompasses the historical and intellectual past of the nation; it is rather a composite of diverse elements drawn from different sources, native and foreign alike, and fused together to form a reconstituted expression of national identity. Such an apprehension of tradition allows Yeats to proclaim, on behalf of Synge and Lady Gregory, that

> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
> We three alone in modern times had brought
> Everything down to that sole test again,
> Dream of the noble and the beggarman.

These lines echo the earlier 1910 passage on Synge and place him, together with Lady Gregory and the poet himself, in the line of great artists who sought to express the universal through the particular, the permanent through the transitory, the ideal through the empirical. These are affirmations carried forward from the historical reconstruction attempted in *The Bounty of Sweden* (1924). In it, Synge and Lady Gregory are summoned to Yeats's side as artists preoccupying themselves with "history and tradition" so that their work is celebratory of what lies deeper than the "individual, modern and restless". The return to the past and to "old truths", whereby a nation's political and literary foundation can be constructed (*Aut*, pp. 554, 542), is also a return to Homer and the tradition he initiated. That they are both meant to serve as literary precursors is implied in the allusion, in the Municipal Gallery poem, to Antaeus, employed as a mediating figure between myth-inspired Greek art and modern Irish literature wrought around the literary resources of the country.

Greece and "the banquet of Homer" (*Ex*, p. 25), not England and her mechanical verses, would serve as the elemental model for the Irish literary revival. In his efforts to

dissociate Irish culture from what he saw as a declining English tradition, Yeats had claimed in his essay "The Rhymers' Club" (1892) that Irish literature was "still very young". The implication of such an argument was that the national character and impassioned imagination of Ireland had remained largely unexpressed, seeking "singers to give them voice" (*LNI*, p. 60). The articulation of such a distinctly Irish voice could only be realised by utilising the unexhausted, mythological materials contained in the old native tradition. In this, the Irish writers are urged to follow the example of the Greeks, who, as in the case of Aeschylus, had "but served up dishes from the banquet of Homer" (*Ex*, p. 25). Evidently, Homer is championed as the founder of a literary tradition moulded out of a collective, mythic consciousness. Interestingly, Pater had similarly claimed that Greek myths were the collective creation of the race and therefore belonged "to no man".[66] For Yeats, Homer's supremacy lies in that he found inspiration in the common ground of folklore, "on an earthen floor and under a broken roof". By capturing the nation's spirit, his works furnished subsequent generations with an ideality which formed the basis of their life and art.

III

For Yeats, Homer's paradigmatic status remained undisputed and the ideal model with which he provided Yeats epitomised his aesthetic of artistic power, the power to "define races" (*E&I*, p. 341) by shaping their identity and engendering culture. This notion was very much in Yeats's mind during the years 1909 and 1910, as his journal entries of that period indicate. Speculating on the course of the Irish national literature and deploring the lack of "a model" to sustain "national feeling", Yeats came to the realisation that the creation of "an heroic and passionate conception of life" could not be accomplished in his age, much less embraced by the whole people. Falling short of its expectation to draw the nation to a comprehensive point of cultural reference, their movement would inevitably "have to give up the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, a Holy Sepulchre" or "Holy Grail for the Irish mind". In Yeats's scheme, cultural solidarity, whereby the artist and the common people are of one mind, rested on the premise that they share "some simple moral understanding of life" that would ultimately "inspire" action on a collective basis. Failing this shared

ground, art could no longer be an expression of national feeling but rather of "the individual" (*Mem*, pp. 183-185).[67]

Despite the despondent views expressed in these meditations, the emphasis on unity and wholeness afforded by a heroic vision of life, modelled on "a conception of the race as noble as Aeschylus and Sophocles had of Greece", is unmistakable. The allusion to Homer, viewed as precursor of the Greek tragedians, is poignant, especially in the light of the events taking place in 1907. The controversy over *The Playboy of the Western World* and the death of O'Leary marked, for Yeats, the beginning of an era which saw the ascendancy of a new, middle class: a class which, seen as detached from tradition and the ideal of personal sacrifice, obeyed "the demands of commonplace and ignorant people"[68] and served its own utilitarian interests. This sentiment permeates the 1907 essay "Poetry and Tradition", written in the aftermath of these events. With O'Leary being one of the last, great leaders to have embraced a "romantic conception of Irish Nationality" drawn upon heroic legend, the "old romantic Nationalism" withered. The "ideal Ireland" Yeats had envisioned as modelled upon the unified society epitomised by Homer seemed further removed from becoming a political and cultural reality. In this new order, the artists, who, in Yeats's view, held the stature of "Artificers of the Great Moment", were reduced to "protesting individual voices" divorced from the voice of the nation. "Ireland's great moment had passed" (*E&I*, pp. 246, 259-260).

A short time later, the death of Synge precipitated more bitter thoughts about the future of Ireland. Yeats now discerned in dramatic literature a substitution of logic and rationality for evocativeness and passion. In public art, he noted a pervasive sense of diversification that revealed a fragmented culture behind whose creations the strong presence of a single, unifying mind could no longer be felt (*Mem*, pp. 209, 215). Here, Yeats's ideal of Byzantium emerges to counteract a historical present that can neither afford nor sustain a vision of unity between art and life. In a Journal entry of 1910, Yeats would privilege a "literature created for its own sake or for some eternal spiritual need" over one shaped by a "conscious political aim" on the grounds that the former inspires political action. But more importantly, it engenders a culture of heroes and heroic values (*Mem*, pp. 247, 249). Yeats's insistence on cultural unification betrays a simplistic approach to the issue of defining a modern, pluralistic state in that he frequently treats the latter as the collective projection of a unitary personal image. By

promoting the idea of a state where the leader, as *The Bounty of Sweden* suggests, would gather about him "rank" and "intellect", and where every public work would betray "artists, working in harmony" (*Aut*, p. 572), Yeats's model is as detached from modern, political reality as Plato's Republic is.

The despondency of Yeats's thoughts of the time would re-surface almost two decades later in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931". Here, Homer would re-appear but not as the potent emblem of poetic inspiration and power that he was in "The Tower". Being the last of the romantics to have chosen for his theme the celebration of human experience, "the book of the people" that had constituted traditional thought, the speaker laments both the loss of this tradition and of the power of imagination to conform reality to the personal vision. A few years later, Yeats would bemoan that the modern trend for political and moral reformation would "no longer permit life to be shaped by a personified ideal" (*W&B*, p. 6). Amid the ruins of cultural fragmentation, which affords little or no possibility of renewal, and with the "great glory" of an era of cultural achievement irretrievably gone, even art fails to create a sense of permanence:

> Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
> Man shifts about – all that great glory spent –
> Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.

With a modernist twist, it too becomes as transient as that other emblem of beauty and purity that transfixes the contemplative mind in the temporal world – the mounting swan. So fragile that it "can be murdered with a spot of ink", so evanescent and yet so terrible as it "drifts upon a darkening flood". The desire for spiritual transcendence, which remains thwarted or at best tentative, and the danger of absorption into the primordial darkness of historical flux render the tension between the "two movements" of the soul, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The speaker oscillates between them, achieving only the partial fulfilment of the poetic utterance of his meditation.

The pervasive mood of dejection in the poem reaches its climax with a backward look to a remote past extending from the poet himself to "dark" Raftery and to Homer. But here the continuity of tradition has been broken and the allusion to the two great bardic poets only reinforces the sense of decline. The "wingèd horse" that Pearse rode in "Easter, 1916" (1917) and on whose saddle also "Homer rode", now stands wingless and "riderless". Despite the faint prospect of the beginning of a new civilisation at the end of the present era, a prospect almost denied by the "dry sticks

under a wintry sun", neither the spiritual dimension of the Neoplatonic tradition nor the artistic accomplishment of Homer can bring any sense of regeneration in the human world of the poem.

Nonetheless, in 1910 Yeats still felt determined to press on his vision of cultural integrity despite any awareness of its unattainability. The association between the metaphysics of the soul and the politics of the state, prompted by the rendition of Mont-Saint-Michel into a symbol of cultural unity, leads to the admission that national art, as the expression of common belief and feeling, is impossible. No "modern nation is an organism like a monastery by rule and discipline, by a definite table of values understood by all," or "by habit of feeling and thought". The model of a race bound together by heredity of thought proves outmoded. Yet, the notion of the Homeric ideal, persists:

> When I try to create a national literature, for all that, do I not really mean an attempt to create this impossible thing after all, for the very reason that I always rouse myself to work by imagining an Ireland as much a unity in thought and feeling as ancient Greece and Rome and Egypt?
> (*Mem*, p. 251)

The passage reflects Yeats's views on the dialectic of art and life. But it also reveals a need to accommodate the cultural and artistic values of ancient Greece to his own art.

In the mythological art of Greece, especially its epic poetry, as in the old, Irish bardic and folk tradition, Yeats discerned the unifying principle he sought to apply in his own work and in Irish literature: the integration of artist and nation, of culture and spirituality, of thought and feeling. Thus, the parallel between Greece and Ireland becomes a central force in the realisation of Yeats's artistic and national aims. The ideal worlds created by the epic poets and the bards constitute a literary model for modern art. But by being the embodiment of a vision, they are detached from ordinary life. The artist, remarks Northrop Frye, never affirms. He "works in a direction exactly opposite to that of the political leader who insists on trying to attach [the vision], and so perverts its nature".[69] Yeats's Greek model functions as a mask of the poet's creative self, rendering, more so in the poetry than in the critical work, the tensions of historical reality. Via its employment, Yeats seeks to recodify the modern world within his own poetry and Irish society.

IV

The belief in the rejuvenation of art and life via emulation of literary models can be traced throughout Yeats's work. In his 1934 "Introduction" to *Fighting the Waves*, Yeats detects a movement in modern art towards the surrender of personality as a result of its engulfment in "a deluge of experiences". In this literature, which Yeats equates with the literature of the new generation, of Joyce, of Virginia Woolf, or of Pound, limits melt, the artist vanishes in the flood of chaotic experience, and "man in himself is nothing" (*W&B*, pp. 72-73). For Yeats, this total elimination of personality had resulted from the disengagement of the individual from a common culture and the heritage of tradition.

In the 1925 version of *A Vision*, Yeats had deplored the carrying of abstraction, in content and form, to the point of dissolution of the unity of art that he saw typified in the artistic achievement of Greece. Such dissolution meant the separation, in modern times, of myth from history, of what is uniquely individual from the universals of human experience (*AVa*, p. 212). "Our generation", he repeated almost a decade later, "has witnessed a first weariness, has stood at the climax" and "when the climax passes will recognise that there common secular thought began to break and disperse" (*AVb*, pp. 299-300). Seeking to reverse the tide away from abstraction and flux, Yeats would again turn to Homer and the Greek tragedians, who continued to epitomise his concept of a mythological art grounded on conviction and the expression of intense emotion.

In the essay that contained his remarks on Joyce and the modernists, Yeats prophesied the ending of a cycle of civilisation that has replaced spiritual belief with scientific positivism. The former, he notes, had in the past been the foundation of heroic art. He construed the last period of this cycle in terms of his notion of antinomies. On one side stood Homer and the Greek dramatists, whose works had been a "simple celebration of life tuned to the highest pitch", on the other a contrary phase of "something more deliberate [...], more systematised, more external, more self-conscious, as must be at a second coming". For Yeats, the turn of the wheel would bring, at the point of climax coinciding with the advent of a new era, an art not inspired by, and in turn shaping, a heroic perception of life made whole and holy. Rather, it would initiate an art absorbed in intellectual processes and philosophical systems of thought, "Plato's Republic, not the siege of Troy" (*W&B*, p. 74). For someone who had

spent much of his life as a critic constructing ideal cities, the denigration of Plato sounds ambiguous. It can be understood in the context of his attitude towards Platonic philosophy as developed in the two *A Vision* texts.

Yeats's remarks recall his exposition of his quasi-mythological, quasi-philosophical system of alternating historical cycles in the first version of *A Vision* and anticipate that of the second. Both texts offer a dualistic model for history based upon the tension between two opposing principles, the subjective or "*antithetical*" and the objective or "*primary*":

> Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound, and it amuses one to remember that before Phidias, and his westward moving art, Persia fell, and that when full moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and that at the outset of our westward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell.
> (*AVa*, p. 183)

As one cycle expands to the point of dissolution, another begins at the point of influx, both "dying each other's life, living each other's death". In this scheme, the Christian era, begun by the virgin birth of Christ, has been an age of "*primary* impulse", whereas that of Greek antiquity, which preceded it and was inaugurated by the swan's rape of Leda, was an age of "*antithetical*" impulse (*Ava*, p. 183).

In Yeats's survey of Greek culture, Homer prominently comes to represent a historical phase in which the expression of life displays a pervasive sense of unity between the individual and society, as well as between cultural and religious practice. Artistic achievement and philosophic thought are characterised by a concern not with the "moral or political effects" of truth but with truth itself, with the experience of life in its fullness. It is only with Plato and Aristotle, Yeats professes, that Nature is divested of its spiritual dimension, foreshadowing thus the loss of feeling and the need for moral reformation that came with the advent of Christianity (*AVa*, pp. 181-183). If we apply Nietzsche's definition of the Apollonian condition as "the urge to perfect self-sufficiency",[70] Yeats's objection to the two Greek philosophers' elevation of the Eternal Ideas to an ontologically "self-sustained" status signifies the first instance of dichotomy of the Dionysian and the Apollonian in the Greek world.

But "the old is to come again," Yeats had felt certain to proclaim in his 1906 essay "Literature and the Living Voice". When "one kind of desire has been satisfied for a long time it becomes sleepy, and other kinds, long quiet, after making a noise

begin to order life." The essay reflects Yeats's ongoing concern with the function of art in the historical process of becoming as interpreted through his cyclical theory of history. In this respect, the current age, seen as dominated by moralistic preoccupation and interest in technical matters, will give way to a new dispensation that will awaken the old imaginative life, wherever it is still left intact. In the meantime, the artist must be satisfied to "compare his art" with "the arts that belonged to a whole people", the art of Greece and of the Irish bards. The purpose would be to discover "whatever in the thoughts of his own age" can have a formative influence on the future (*Ex*, pp. 208-209).

In *A Vision* (1925), the new anti-Christian era, being aristocratic in spirit, whereas the preceding Christian age had been democratic, would be marked by an initial period of "irrational force". Its rise would involve the collapse of the current social order and the emergence of a new one which, in its diversity, would resemble the tribal civilisation of ancient Greece:

> I imagine new races, as it were, seeking domination, a world resembling but for its immensity that of the Greek tribes – each with its own Daimon or ancestral hero – the brood of Leda, War and Love; history grown symbolic, the biography changed into a myth. Above all I imagine everywhere the opposites, no mere alternation between nothing and something like the Christian brute and ascetic, but true opposites, each living the other's death, dying the other's life.
>
> (*AVa*, p. 214)

Such understanding of historical change, rendered here in Dionysian terms, not only entails the revival of polytheism – as opposed to the monotheistic, unitary structure of Christianity – and of a militant culture of hero-worship. It also conditions a mythic apprehension of history: history perceived not as representing a succession of events but the accumulated experience and knowledge of the race. Unity as a principle of measure, which is the Apollonian expression of cultural life, would manifest itself not in the absence of plurality but in the co-existence rather than alternation of opposites. The new era would thus witness the true brotherhood of Dionysus and Apollo.

A number of poems written in the 1920s and 1930s, and linked thematically to the philosophical exposition of *A Vision*, dramatise Yeats's dialogue with history and present his conception of historical progress in terms of alternating, antinomic cycles. In "The Second Coming" (1920), the speaker exultantly anticipates the beginning of the

new era, which will emerge out of the violence and "mere anarchy" that coincide with the dissolution of the preceding age. Being revelatory in tone, the poem employs the image of the falcon spiralling in the air as both an agent of destruction and the medium of an apocalyptic vision of the historical cycle to be inaugurated:

> The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
> When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
> Troubles my sight.

The "Second Coming" prophesied juxtaposes Christianity – governed by a principle of objectivity, a diminishing of moral conviction and of passionate intensity – to a new, terrible era of great imaginative energy; an era that in all respects will be the antithesis of the previous one. Yeats would render the terms of such change from moral dogmatism to passionate instinct in *A Vision*: "When the old *primary* becomes the new *antithetical*, the old realisation of an objective moral law is changed into a subconscious turbulent instinct. The world of rigid custom and law is broken up by 'the uncontrollable mystery upon the bestial floor'" (*AVa*, p. 38). The political and aesthetic significance of Yeats's pronouncement is intimated in "The Second Coming", with its polemic for the de-construction of the old social order and of art and the re-construction of a new one.

In the poem, the opposition of Christ and beast, which, half-lion and half-human, will herald the new pagan awakening, follows Yeats's dialectic between contrary cosmic forces, historical processes or artistic impulses – primary and antithetical, solar and lunar, Apollonian and Dionysian. With the "blood-dimmed tide" loose upon the world, the beast appears to symbolise not so much the incarnation of form as its transcendence, the surrender of the will and the ensuing return of the forces of irrationality. Such condition is akin to what Nietzsche describes as "the fragmentation of the individual and his unification with primal being", effected by the operation of the Dionysian principle, although Nietzsche's principle lacks the Yeatsian association with chaos.[71] But the advent of Yeats's new, Sphinx-like god, although in a sense actualising a Dionysian dispensation, also blurs the boundaries with the Apollonian. Its gaze "blank and pitiless as the sun", it will bring not unity and concord but division and discord, the multiplicity of the Godhead itself.[72]

The conclusion of the poem, "terrifyingly certain and yet uncertain", as Whitaker remarks,[73] presents Yeats's vision of the "rough beast" slouching towards the

cradle of Bethlehem as a tentative realisation, both destructive and re-creative, much as the rape of Leda had been for summoning into being the Greek civilisation. For this reason, it is to be anticipated with the joyous excitement but also the horror that the necessity of a violent, new beginning generates.[74] In his "Introduction" to *The Resurrection* (1934), Yeats would ask the same question, wondering with awed exhilaration whether "there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order" and "the irrational return" as the cycle commences anew (*W&B*, p. 109).

This belief also resonates through the second part of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1921). Here Platonic references to the Great Year, far from being invested with the abstractive connotations of "The Tower", are associated with the bewildering change anticipated at the end of a cycle and with the perpetuity of this process:

> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead;
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

As it unfolds its gusts of violent energy in a "rhythmic and repetitive movement",[75] echoing the gyring motion of historical cycles, the image of the whirlwind recalls the blood revelation of "The Second Coming". But it does not translate its horrifying necessity either into a vision of "tragic joy" or into a pattern of ordered life. Even the dance – a form of art whereby the speaker attempts to impose coherence upon the flux of history, and therefore accept it – evokes a sense of ominous pre-destination that ultimately sweeps the dancer in its frenzy. Yet, the image is also an affirmation of physicality. The merging of dance and dancer dissolves the limits of human agency and presents participation in the historical process as inevitable.

It is this sense of inevitability that previously, in the opening section of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", had forced the speaker to engage in a dialogue with the forces of history. This led to acknowledgement of the failure of tradition and art to inspire and sustain a unified culture. The allusion to the lost art of Phidias, the principles governing its creation now forsaken, carries implications for the present. It signifies the ultimate fragmentation and disintegration of modern civilisation. The "pretty toys" of youth, translated into the fundamental structures of culture (art, law, custom, belief), have collapsed, shattering the illusion of their permanence:

> O what fine thought we had because we thought
> That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.

Now, with all "ancient tricks unlearned", all imaginative energy spent, the artist is left to contemplate in the fragility of his solitude the reversal of the age, which will manifest itself in the violence and anarchy that marks the transition from one historical cycle to the next.

With their prophetic overtones, "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli", written between 1936 and 1937, take up the same theme but correlate Yeats's vision of historical change to the transformative power of art. The convergence of history and art, whereby the former is translated into the latter, is conveyed via the employment of images of artistic achievement. In the first of the two poems, the lost world of Phidian art and of Homeric craftsmanship, its poetic inspiration exhausted, is evoked in the allusion to the "ancient lineaments" of beauty and worth, of the human form divine, now relinquished:

> Things thought too long can be no longer thought
> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out.

The mathematical proportions of Pythagoras, which had found perfect embodiment in Greek sculpture, have now dispersed with the resurgence of Empedocles' Discord, separating all the elements that the activity of Concord had brought together into "'an homogeneous sphere'" (*AVb*, p. 67).

Yet, the oracular voice of "Old Rocky Face", which is invoked to bear witness to the destruction of the old world brought about by the "irrational streams of blood", also provides an affirmation for the return of creative vitality. "Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy". The fire that had consumed the old, barbaric civilisation of Greece, grown Asiatic in its multiplicity and "intellectual anarchy" (*AVb*, p. 269), had also engendered the poetic works of Homer with their principle of unity. Jefferson Holdridge reads the stain of "blood and mire" that the "sensitive body" of the poem suffers, being caught amid opposing primary and antithetical forces, as a form of "Ledean suffering, the rape of body and soul", which foreshadows "a violent turn of the gyres".[76] As the use of the word "disinter" implies, out of the violence of this turn will emerge a new art which will shape the new era to come according to its ideals of beauty. The ancestral darkness of the Dionysian surrender will give rise to the

incarnation of Apollonian order and the winged horse will be mounted again.

But if for Yeats, the destructive flood of violence engenders revitalising forces of creativity, for Nietzsche, transformation of a profound nature does not entail revolutionary violence. The latter, however, can be a means for releasing savage energy. Rejecting revolutionary politics, Zarathustra dismisses the notion that there can be "'great events'" precipitated by political violence and advocates the adoption of a stance of silent waiting. "The greatest events", he proposes instead, "are not our noisiest but our stillest hours." What therefore effects a change of life or feeling is not action but the setting of new values.[77]

"Lapis Lazuli" offers a poetic rendering of Zarathustra's recommendation. In it, Yeats returns to the concept of Greece as a model of the values which, although no longer valid in the modern world, the artist seeks to re-establish in the new dispensation. The allusion to Callimachus and his stylised marble statues, which in their Asiatic propensity display a capacity for energy,[78] emphasises a central point in the poem: that not even art can withstand the ruins of time and that it too is finite, subject to the rise and fall of everything human:

> His long lamp chimney shaped like the stem
> Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
> All things fall and are built again
> And those that build them again are gay.

However, underlying the gyratory movement of history intimated in these lines is not only a negative but also a positive force. The terrible violence that destroys the aesthetic perfection of the poet's world also generates a sense of exhilaration, springing from the re-creation of a new civilisation that will embrace what the poet esteems. Thus, the poem endorses a view of the artist as the supreme guarantor of man's return to a state of regeneration.

Poised between the dramatic perspective of the Shakespearean characters and the contemplative perspective of the Chinamen carved on the stone, between tragic hero and tranquil sage, the artefacts of Callimachus appear to mediate between self-possession and self-surrender, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. As Whitaker remarks, "the Apollonian heroes, who oppose the destructive forces of the universe but go down in defeat, merge with the Dionysian satyr chorus, which rejoices in the fall of the hero and in that eternal life which gives birth to all things and destroys and

reabsorbs all things."[79] Thus, as the poem progresses from West to East via Greece, it renders the convergence of these two opposing movements and, in so doing, it re-affirms the potency of art.

Yeats anticipated that the new era to supersede Christianity will "find its philosophy already impressed upon the minority" who have "turned away at the last gyre" from the primary. It would, then, be the individual artist's responsibility to restore coherence and meaning, organic rather than artificial unity, by expressing through art not a philosophical or religious ideality set "beyond experience" but the immediate reality of the human condition. Art would be a celebration not of "Plotinus' ecstasy, the ecstasy of the Saint" but of "the idea of God" as concordant with that "of human genius" (*Ava*, pp. 213-214). For Yeats, acknowledgement of a spiritual basis to life is the true mark of all great art and always carries the sanction of tradition. Thus, the return to "the nobility of tradition" (*W&B*, p. 71), which, in Yeats's mind, comprised not only the old, Irish bardic sagas but also the epic and dramatic poetry of Greece, is advocated as the only defence against the effects of a literature turning solipsistic and mechanistic.

As both the critical writings and the poetry of the period exemplify, Yeats had moved towards the conception of an art rooted as much in the physical and the mundane as in the spiritual and the ideal. In "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939), the speaker looks back upon the past and locates the generation of "those masterful images" that have conveyed the poet's vision and truth within the mind, within the storehouse of the imagination from which they spring. But at the same time, he stresses the validity of ordinary, human experience as the source of poetic inspiration:

> 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.

At the approach of death, it is the personal drama, set in the framework of historical reality, rather than the transcendent domain that asserts itself as providing metaphors for art. The poetic journey reaches its conclusion where it began, in "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart". Such a conception was certainly not new. For all its visionary predilection and mystical insight, "The Gift of Harum Al-Rashid" (1924) proposes a similar understanding of the process of artistic creation. The truths about life, its great

mysteries of beauty and sanctity, of which Kusta Ben Luka's wife spoke, and which were embodied in emblematic form in

> Those terrible implacable straight lines
> Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream,

are equally revealed in the passion of "Sappho's song" as in the philosophical exposition offered in the "great Treatise of Parmenides". Here the Greek tradition, encompassing the erotic and the spiritual, is afforded a prominent place in Yeats's canonical structure of wisdom as displaying an indivisible unity. But the true meaning of the abstract, geometrical diagrams drawn and their relevance to human experience lie in that, although lineaments of a spiritual reality, they trace the shape of the human body as whole:

> All, all those gyres and cubes and midnight things
> Are but a new expression of her body
> Drunk with the bitter sweetness of her youth.

What the Caliph asserts, and the speaker of the poem discovers, is that the revelations of poetry, the artist's very thoughts have their source in those earthly realities which engender contemplation of the ideal world – the tragic joys and passions of the heart. It is this richness and vitality of life, lying beyond the idealised vision of order and unification sustained by "mere dreams", that Homer, the paradigmatic Apollonian poet of "Ancestral Houses" (1923), had celebrated in his art. For he had sung of "life's self-delight", out of which the "abounding glittering jet" of imaginative creativity springs and which transforms the violent anarchy of historical circumstance, as Holdridge also notes, into a pattern of "transcendent sensual beauty".[80] Thus, for Yeats, individual expression acquires validity if translated into images of human experience, the representations of which are embedded in myth.

In "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937), the validity of myth as the basis of poetry is established on the grounds that it provides a unified image of reality appealing to and shared by "peasant and noble alike". Functioning as the poet's persona, the bard or mythological artist, who reconstructs such images of reality, links, as Marcus also remarks,[81] modern poetic utterance to a tradition whose beginnings can be traced in the world of Homer:

> Homer belongs to sedentary men, even to-day our ancient queens, our mediaeval soldiers and lovers, can make a pedlar shudder. I can put my

> own thought, despair perhaps from the study of present circumstance in the light of ancient philosophy, into the mouth of rambling poets of the seventeenth century, or even of some imagined ballad singer of to-day, and the deeper my thought the more credible, the more peasant-like, are ballad singer and rambling poet.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 516)

Once again, the experience of Greece features prominently in the argumentation as Yeats rejects "every folk art that does not go back to Olympus" (*E&I*, p. 516). Casting his mind back on an age when art both revealed and reflected the unbroken continuity of life and tradition; when the alternating cycles of religion had not yet displaced man from the cultural heritage connecting him to the ancient world, and "Christ was still the half-brother of Dionysus" (*E&I*, p. 514), Yeats viewed his poetic oeuvre as an endeavour to restore the archetypal unity of the golden age to modern times. If Irishness was an element that Yeats wished to cultivate in and with which to imbue not only his own poetry but also national literature, the Greek model existed in dialectic correlation with it as a tentative ideal which shaped Yeats's thought and underpinned his artistic achievement.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959), p. 5.

PART ONE: THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

2. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; first publ. 1995), pp. 21-25, 116-118.

3. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

4. In the 1904 edition of *Samhain*, Yeats remarked that a national literature is born out of "the work of writers who are moulded by influences that are moulding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end" (*Ex*, p. 156). Yeats's assertion places the artist in the empowering position of forging the identity of the nation, rather than portray him as the passive recipient of its formative influences.

5. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 301.

6. All references to Yeats's poems are from *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992). In a letter of 1938 to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats remarked that his writings were based on the proposition that "'there is now overwhelming evidence that man stands between two eternities, that of his family and that of his soul'. I apply those beliefs to literature and politics" (*LDW*, p. 182). The earlier poem "Vacillation" (1932) had also posited the notion that human life progresses between extremities and is thus in a constant state of flux and strife.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J Hollingdale with an Introduction by J.P. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992; first publ. 1983), p. 75. Stern remarks that, for Nietzsche, history "is not to be seen and studied as an immutable object of knowledge, but to be fully experienced as a living thing". As such, it can operate as a potentially destructive and beneficial agent: it can "overgrow" or "destroy the present", it can be "cultivated" so as "to be of use to 'life'" (Ibid., p. xv).

8. Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I: *The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; first publ. 1997), pp. 16-17.

9. Cited in Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn: A Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance* (Dublin: Town House and Country House, 1999; first publ. 1984), p. 91.

10. The subject of Yeats's classical training and formal schooling has been much discussed and requires no further analysis here. For a detailed exposition see Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. I, pp. 25-27, 33; Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1948), p. 32; Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), pp. 1-4; and P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs in the Twilight: W.B. Yeats's Use of the Classical Tradition* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 11-13.

11. The list was included in a lecture that Yeats gave in Boston in 1932 as part of his second lecture tour in America and was preserved in the notes kept by Horace Reynolds, who attended the lecture. Apart from Homer, whose name appears at the head of the list, Yeats also mentions "Shakespeare, William Morris, all of him, Balzac, all of him" and "an anthology of the best English poetry compiled by myself", whereas "the sixth book I have never discovered" (cited

in Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. II: *The Arch-Poet, 1915-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 458). The list, albeit somewhat altered, reappears in Yeats's 1934 essay "Louis Lambert" and includes Shakespeare, the *Arabian Nights*, William Morris, Homer, the Sagas, and Balzac (*E&I*, p. 447).

12. Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913), p. 190.

13. Thomas L. Dume, *William Butler Yeats: A Survey of his Reading* (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1950), pp. 177-178. Yeats owned two copies of the *Iliad*. One was an 1870 edition of the translation with notes by Theodore Alois Buckley and the other the 1930 edition of Lang, Leaf and Myers' translation. He also had in his library a copy of the 1906 edition of Chapman's *The Odysseys of Homer*, the second volume of which is signed "1914" by Georgie Hyde Lees (Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats's Library* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. 129)

14. Thomas L. Dume, *Yeats: A Survey*, p. 177.

15. Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry* (Somerset: The Prometheus Trust, 1994; first publ. 1823), p. 161.

16. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper, eds, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 296.

17. Ibid.

18. Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry*, pp. 162-167.

19. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990), p. 107.

20. Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry*, p. 167.

21. The connection that Arnold drew between classical Greece and Victorian England forms the subject of such essays as "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1854) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold's concern with Homer features in his lectures "On Translating Homer" (1860) as well as his essay *The Study of Poetry* (1880).

22. J.P. Mahaffy, Professor of Ancient History, and the historian J.B. Bury, Regius Professor of Greek, wrote books on aspects of Greek antiquity. Bury was also the first editor of the *Cambridge Ancient History*. Finally, Trinity issued the classical journal *Hermathena*, first published in 1874 with Mahaffy as one of its editors. For a detailed discussion see Brian Arkins, *Builders of my Soul*, pp. 5-7; P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, pp. 7-10.

23. Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn: A Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance* (Dublin: Town House and Country House, 1999; first publ. 1984), pp. 101-103, 216; Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 145-146.

24. Yeats lacked any knowledge of the Irish language and could only approach Irish texts indirectly through translation, which often resulted in his appraisal of the literary merit of the translation, as in the case of Douglas Hyde. Yeats's validation of Irish folk tradition, which I explored in Chapter 3, also falls within the national idealism of the Revival Movement, which preached a return to tradition and the recovery of the past as a way of defining national identity.

25. According to Dume, Yeats may have encountered de Jubainville's book in *Revue Celtique* for 1883-1885, in whose pages it was reviewed by David Fitzgerald in his article "Early Celtic History and Mythology" (Thomas L. Dume, *Yeats: A Survey*, p. 57). The book first appeared in

an English translation by Richard Irvine Best in *The United Irishman* between 1901 and 1902, and subsequently in book form in 1903 under the title *The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology*. Yeats's writings, however, until 1901 suggest a certain degree of familiarity, enough to allow Yeats to stress with more certainty the parallels between Irish and Greek mythology. Yeats read Rhys's work on Celtic mythology soon after its publication, as his letter of 1888 to Douglas Hyde attests. He had already mentioned Rhys in an earlier letter of the same year to John O'Leary, indicating his intention, which was not realised, to review Rhys's book (*CL* I, pp. 115, 104). Both Rhys and de Jubainville, together with Alfred Nutt, were listed by Yeats as the authors whose works he deemed essential in understanding not only Celtic legends and folklore but also the bardic literature of Ireland (*UP* 2, p. 119). De Jubainville's book had also been included in Yeats's list of recommended Irish books (see endnote 40 below).

26. In his 1895 review of Douglas Hyde's *The Story of Early Gaelic Literature*, Yeats praises the old, Celtic mythological writings for their qualities of "noble phantasy and passionate drama" (*UP* 1, p. 359)

27. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems*, p. 151.

28. In the section entitled "Of Immaculate Perception" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche renounces the aesthetic of disinterested contemplation, a kind of "moon-like", intellectual appreciation, which he calls "emasculated leering". Instead, he favours a passionate response to the world, what he terms the innocence of "sun-love" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969; first publ. 1961), pp. 144-147).

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life", in *Untimely Meditations*, p. 123.

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first publ. 1967), p. 540.

31. In a passage from the end of *On the Boiler*, written in the same year as the poem, Yeats remarked: "There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers" (*Ex*, p. 451).

32. In *A Vision* (1937), Yeats contrasted the artistic achievement of Greece to that of Rome in terms of inner force and outer expression. Whereas the painted eyes of the Greek statues were "gazing at nothing", suggesting an energy within that animates the whole body into movement, the drilled "world-considering eyes" of the Roman statues typified a preoccupation with externality and showed "the delineation of character" in the face (*AVb*, pp. 276-277).

33. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 139-140.

34. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989; first publ. 1964), pp. 238-239.

35. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 132.

36. Ibid., pp. 140, 143.

37. Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry*, pp. 153, 211, 219.

38. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy and the Sublime* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 127.

39. O'Grady's two-volume *History of Ireland* was published in 1878 and 1880, whereas his

History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical came out in 1881.

40. Between January and March 1895 Yeats became involved in a controversy with Edward Dowden, the professor of English literature at Trinity College in Dublin, over the merits of Irish literature and the validity of the Irish literary movement. In response to Dowden's criticism, Yeats drew up a list of the thirty best Irish books. The criteria he applied for their selection were their imaginative appeal and their insight into the imagination of Ireland. The compilation of the list reflects Yeats's interest in Irish mythological and folklore materials. The list was initially included in a letter to the *Daily Express* and was reissued, with slight modifications, in his article "Irish National Literature, IV", published in 1895 (*CL* I, pp. 440-445; *UP* 1, pp. 383-387).

41. In 1937 Yeats rated O'Grady as one of the two influential figures – the other being the "Fenian leader" John O'Leary – to have had a profound effect on both the poet himself and "the Irish intellectual movement". Yeats professes that O'Grady's re-writing "in vigorous Romantic English" of "certain ancient Irish heroic legends" had determined the younger poet's choice of Irish subject for his artistic creations (*UP* 2, p. 509).

42. John S. Kelly, "Aesthete among the Athletes: Yeats's Contributions to *The Gael*", in *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, Vol. II, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 82, 91.

43. Standish O'Grady, *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical*, Vol. I, p. 58, cited in Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and Artistic Power*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001; first publ. 1992), p. 25.

44. Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988; first publ. 1954), p. 282.

45. John S. Kelly, "Aesthete among the Athletes", in *Yeats: An Annual*, Vol. II, p. 91.

46. Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy*, p. 281.

47. In his essay "Art and Ideas" (1913), Yeats remarked that the modern preoccupation with moral judgement had deprived art of a sense of humility and of the joy that comes from the surrender of the self to a transcendent ideal: "I think that before the religious change that followed on the Renaissance men were greatly preoccupied with their sins, and that to-day they are troubled by other men's sins, and that this trouble has created a moral enthusiasm so full of illusion that art, knowing itself for sanctity's scapegrace brother, cannot be of the party." (*E&I*, pp. 350-351)

48. Walter Pater, *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1928; first publ. 1895), pp. 94-96, 133.

49. Ibid., pp. 77-78.

PART TWO: ART VERSUS LIFE

50. Although *Greek Studies* was published as a single volume in 1895, a year after Pater's death, the essays comprising the collection had already appeared individually in magazines between 1875 and 1894. According to Richard Bizot, Yeats's acquaintance with Pater's writings must have taken place around 1887, when the family moved to London. Bizot notes, however, that Yeats's knowledge of Pater's reputation must have predated this event ("Pater and Yeats", *elh*, 43:3 (1976), p. 394).

51. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover

Publications, 1953), pp. 63-64, 71-74.

52. Yeats's position inevitably raises questions of Anglo-Irish identity, especially for a poet whose social and cultural experience was historically that of estrangement from the Irish community. Eventually, Yeats would have to expand his notion of nation to include the Anglo-Irish element. Yeats's views on nationalism are intrinsically linked to his notion of the epic as a literary genre epitomising the ideal of cultural cohesion and reflecting national character in terms that imply homogeneity and identity. Bakhtin's reading of the epic illustrates Yeats's conception. For Bakhtin, the epic takes its subject from "a national past", which it treats as "absolute" and "valorised to an extreme degree" as well as "the single source and beginning of everything good" for future times. For its valorisation of the past, the epic relies on tradition, promoted as "impersonal and sacrosanct" and therefore as excluding any other interpretative or evaluative approach. It is for this reason, Bakhtin notes, that the epic world is distanced from "contemporary reality". Applying Bakhtin's terms, we could argue that, for Yeats too, the epic serves "the future memory of a past" (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996; first publ. 1981), pp. 13-19).

53. Colin Graham, *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire and Victorian Epic Poetry* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 75-76. Graham remarks that Ferguson defines nation in terms that are "cultural but not fully political" and "relies heavily on the existence of empire". In this sense, he views Ireland's relationship with England as "essential, rather than constricting" (Ibid., pp. 74, 76).

54. In a letter of 1892 to the Editor of *United Ireland*, written in response to a reviewer reproaching him for comparing himself to some of Ireland's distinguished poets, Yeats retorted: "I did not in the least intend the lines to claim equality of eminence, [...] but only community in the treatment of Irish subjects after an Irish fashion" (*CL* I, p. 315).

55. The review appeared in *The Gael* under the title "The Celtic Romances in Miss Tynan's New Book".

56. John S. Kelly, "Aesthete among the Athletes", in *Yeats: An Annual*, Vol. II, pp. 99, 109.

57. Ibid., p. 98.

58. Ibid., pp. 88-89.

59. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 43.

60. In *If I were Four-and-Twenty* (1919), Yeats provided the following definition of soil: "I understand by 'soil' all the matter in which the soul works, the walls of our houses, the serving-up of our meals, and the chairs and tables of our rooms, and the instincts of our bodies" (*Ex*, p. 273).

61. In *A Vision* (1925), Yeats remarks that as the antithetical age before the advent of Christianity approaches its last phase, "the myth becomes a biography"; when this new primary era also comes to an end, "the biography [will be] changed into a myth" (*AVa*, pp. 185, 214).

62. Nietzsche's Zarathustra also speaks of seeing "truth naked, [...] barefoot to the neck" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 153).

63. Yeats's dialogue with Plato and Plotinus is often ridden with ambivalence. Thus, in "Among School Children" (1927), the Platonic philosophy is renounced for divorcing the physical from the spiritual and for pronouncing that nature is a shadowy reflection of the ideal, which is the only reality. But in the second of "Two Songs from a Play" (1927), Plato epitomises the self-control and restraint of Greek culture opposed to the dark spirituality of the

Christian era. The later poem "Mad as the Mist and Snow" (1930) renders the opposition in the terms of the antithesis between learning, represented by Plato, and passion, emblematised in the ferocity of the night. Plotinus appears in "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus" (1932), which presents a vision of perfection attained by the philosopher's soul when transcendent reality triumphs over the imperfection of physical existence. But "News for the Delphic Oracle" (1939) undercuts the realisation of immortality by depicting a paradise as fragile as the corporeal world.

64. Friedrich Nietzsche, *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1968), p. 126.

65. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, p. 205.

66. Walter Pater, *Greek Studies*, p. 98.

67. Yeats attributed the failure of their literary movement to afford a viable complex of images, which would stir the imagination of the nation and rouse it to a life of noble passion, to the deficiency of education. In his view, the Irish people lacked the intellectual cultivation essential in understanding a more profound vision of Ireland and of human nature than the simple moral conceptions provided by the Young Ireland poets. Pledging his allegiance to the nationalism of O'Leary and Hyde, Yeats sought his re-created image of Ireland in the distant mythological past. But, as Kiberd remarks, the main weakness of the nationalist movement led by Hyde and endorsed by Yeats lay in its "reluctance" to acknowledge "the economic realities which underlay cultural politics" as well as in its "failure to examine the political assumptions of the movement". Thus, "cultural nationalism" gave way to a more militant, political movement that led to the uprising of Easter 1916 until it later became redundant during the era of the Free State (Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 153-154).

68. James Kilroy, *The 'Playboy' Riots* (1971), p. 32, cited in Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and Artistic Power*, p. 101.

69. Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York; London: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 236.

70. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 539.

71. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 44. Ofelia Schutte remarks that "the Dionysian flow of life" should not be portrayed "as something chaotic" but as embodying "order and perspective" (*Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 145).

72. For Yeats, the new civilisation to spring forth at the next turn of the wheel of history would be a reversal of the previous one and would "be born from all that our age had rejected". Because "we had worshipped a single god it would worship many or receive [...] a multitudinous influx" (*W&B*, p. 102).

73. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, p. 74.

74. Surveying his career as a dramatist, Yeats wrote that at the time he was composing *On Baile's Strand* around 1904 he "began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction". This was to form later the central image of "The Second Coming" (*W&B*, p. 103).

75. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, p. 116.

76. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the*

Sublime (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p. 202.

77. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 153-154.

78. In "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916), Yeats saw the appearance of Callimachus as a return to a half-Asiatic "stylistic management" of material, which followed the naturalism of Phidian art (*E&I*, p. 225).

79. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, p. 279.

80. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, p. 144.

81. Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and Artistic Power*, p. 163.

CHAPTER FIVE

Poet of Many Turns:
Homeric Traits in *The Wanderings of Oisin*

I

The rise in Ireland, in the second half of the nineteenth century, of an interest in myth, especially Irish Gaelic myth, linked to the emergence of the Irish national movement, led to a re-evaluation of the past as embodying truly Irish cultural and literary ideals. As already discussed in Chapter Four, the restoration of Irish culture would serve as a prelude to political independence. But for literary figures such as Yeats, it would also provide artistic models and would enable the creation of a national literature as the expression of the nation's character and imaginative life. In Yeats's scheme of literary development, it is the epic form that epitomises his ideal of cultural and artistic integration grown on the soil of tradition. But it is an ideal which, in its conception as national, is characterised, to apply Seamus Deane's terms, by "its abiding anti-modernism" and "its adherence to a version of the *ancien régime* that was now rewritten".[1]

Seeking to rewrite the mythological past of Ireland as its literary history, Yeats embarked on his ambitious project of supplying the Irish literary movement with its modern epic poem. His longest poem, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, can be read as an attempt to conjoin the Greek epic tradition with mythological Ireland. Offering an evaluation of the poem, Yeats wrote in 1892 that it "endeavoured to set forth the impress left on my imagination by the Pre-Christian cycle of legends" (*VPl*, p. 1288). At the time Yeats was composing *The Wanderings of Oisin*, he was also writing his article on Finn. The essay, with its emphasis on the imaginative force of mythology, contains an early allusion to the plot of the poem[2] but also provides a conceptual frame for it. On the one hand, it links the poem to the Irish mythological tradition. On the other, it allows Yeats to explore, within a poetic context, aspects of artistic expression that he saw as analogous to the Fenian warriors' conscious attempt at self-definition

and self-creation: "While those around them sought to be architects of kingdoms, of armies, of splendour, they longed only to be the architects of themselves".[3] In this respect, *The Wanderings of Oisin* could serve to realise a feat of architectural unity by enabling the artist's self-reconstruction and definition.

Yeats used a variety of Irish sources for his poem.[4] As he explained in a letter of 1889 to the editor of *The Spectator*, the poem was in part founded upon "The Lay of Oisin in the Land of Youth" by Michael Comyn, a "half-forgotten" eighteenth-century Gaelic poet, and upon old "ballad Dialogues of Oisin and Patrick".[5] As for the three islands, they "are wholly my own, having no further root in tradition than the Irish peasant's notion that *Tir-u-au-oge* (the Country of the Young) is made up of three phantom islands" (*CL* I, pp. 176-177). In a note added to the revised version prepared for the collected *Poems* of 1895, Yeats, after briefly referring to the three islands of tradition, remarked that a "story in *Silva Gadelica* describes 'four paradises,' an island to the north, an island to the west, an island to the south, and Adam's paradise in the east".[6] There is also mention in the same note of another tradition, which locates one of the paradisal islands "under the sea" (*VP*, pp. 793-794). These statements situate *Oisin* within the Irish literary and folk tradition.[7] However, the poem moves beyond its temporal and spatial specificity to address issues with regard not only to human experience but also to art. By proposing to offer in this chapter a close reading of *The Wanderings of Oisin* and its purported literary model, Homer's *Odyssey*, I shall attempt to examine the various ways in which Yeats's poem reveals itself not only as a text entering into a dialogic relation with the Homeric epic but also as the locus of the artistic process. In this sense, it can be viewed as informing Yeats's poetic corpus.

Such a reading of allusions between the *Odyssey* and *Oisin* necessarily invites the reader's involvement in what Pietro Pucci calls "textual 'mirrorings'". By viewing texts as "containing other texts within themselves", he remarks, we "demystify the traditional notions of textual 'self-containedness' and 'integrity'". Consequently, this type of reading enhances an understanding that "any narrative is simultaneously an image of the text's self-awareness, since it is composed with an eye on other texts".[8] Thus, texts echo, penetrate and rewrite one another so that they become mosaics of references, tapestries of interwoven signs, traces of memory, shattering the singleness of the poetic work and dissolving its linear unity. They are, as D.H. Lawrence writes, a "stringing together of words into a ripple and jingle and a run of colours"; an "interplay

of images", the "iridescent suggestion of an idea".[9] For Roland Barthes, the text is "a new tissue of past citations" into which "bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages" pass and are redistributed. Therefore, the reading of a text cannot be reduced to tracing sources or influences but becomes a question of perceiving the "fabric" in the intersection of all elements constituting the text.[10] In this respect, I propose to read *The Wanderings of Oisin* as a re-reading of the *Odyssey* and of the epic tradition underscoring it. My aim is to demonstrate that the former presumes and to an extent re-writes the latter although, at the same time, it diverges from its model.

II

The Wanderings of Oisin is set in the dramatic context of the confrontation of Oisin and St. Patrick, swordsman and saint, the former repudiating the latter although not "without vacillation" (*L*, p. 798). In the dialogue of hero and saint, Oisin, the warrior and "poet of the Fenian cycle of legend" (*VP*, p. 796), performs the role of the poet-narrator unfolding in the cyclical movement of the narrative the story of his journey: from present to past, from history to mythology, from poet to warrior. Thus, the poetic text occupies the space where multiple planes of meaning intersect and interconnect, and where the beginning joins the end. The latter can also be understood in terms of the poem's relation with the body of Yeats's poetry. The circular movement of *Oisin* anticipates and even reflects the thematic progression of the later poetry, as many of the interrelated ideas explored in the earlier work find fuller elaboration in subsequent poems. We can therefore trace the development of Yeats's poetic activity back to his earliest compositions. It is in these that the "search for reality",[11] encapsulated in the poetic quest, begins and it is with these that it culminates. As Roy Foster has remarked, "In his end are his beginnings"[12] and, we might add, his beginnings contain in seminal form his end.

Reviewing the poetic quest, and looking back to its beginnings, the poet-speaker of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939) describes the terms in which *Oisin* was composed:

> that sea-rider Oisin led by the nose
> Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
> Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose.

The thematic outline provided in these lines echoes that sketched by Yeats, shortly after the publication of *Oisin*, in a letter of 1889 to Katharine Tynan: "There are three incompatible things that man is always seeking – infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose – hence the three islands" (*CL* I, p. 141).[13] The poem's cyclical movement, rising and falling progressively from life to death – on a physical, spiritual and cosmic plane – only to culminate in a transcendent state of life after death, is also suggested in Yeats's retrospective thoughts some forty-five years later: "The choral song, a life lived in common, a futile battle, then thought for its own sake, the last island, Vico's circle and mine, and then the circle joined" (*W&B*, p. 137). Referring to the imagistic structure of *Oisin*, Yeats professed at the time that he "did not pick these images because of any theory, but because I found them impressive" (*W&B*, p. 102). His statement carries a degree of verity in the sense that the poem, although philosophically informed, remains an artistic production, albeit one which often questions and challenges its philosophical premise.

With regard to the notion of the journey, Gerald Gresseth points out the "correspondence of motifs" between some Irish hero-adventures and the Greek mythological tradition, in which the *Odyssey* also takes shape. The similarities to which he draws attention concern the hero travelling west from island to island, the names of which are "indicative of the Elysium type", that is, of Underworld islands. The journey commences at the instigation of a singing goddess, whose power of seduction has "erotic implications". Central to the movement of the journey is the dominant presence of the sea god, whose function is linked to notions of recurrence and periodicity.[14]

In *The Wanderings of Oisin*, the notion of cycle, implicit in the title and operating as both textual rhythm and recurrence of time, is suggested early in the poem. The first instance, which will be discussed further below, occurs in the opening lines, with their denotation of a story recounted in the present of narration but already having taken place in the past. The second instance, which is of interest here, occurs in Oisin's description of Niamh at the moment of their first encounter. Her flowing dress is fastened with "a pearl-pale shell", whose wavering movement is likened to "summer streams/ As her soft bosom rose and fell" (*TWO* I, 28-30). In 1902, in his essay "Edmund Spenser", Yeats was calling for the "energetic pleasure" and "rougher energy [...] of the active will" that distinguished the art of "the old story-tellers" (*E&I*, pp. 380-381). But two years earlier, in "The Symbolism of Poetry", he was advocating

"wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination". The purpose of such rhythms, he stated, is

> to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, [...] to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.
>
> (*E&I*, pp. 163, 159)

These "wavering, meditative" rhythms, suggested in the image of Niamh's description, permeate the structure of *Oisin*. Although they impede "narrative continuity", as Colin Meir observes,[15] or lack the energetic and even violent movement of later poems, such as "The Second Coming" (1920) or "Leda and the Swan" (1924), which explore the theme of cyclic historical progress, here they express Yeats's notion of cycle as flow. The allusion in the image to a pastoral landscape evokes an idyllic idea of life, which, in its perfected form, corresponds to the immutability and purity of existence on the first island. Nonetheless, it is a form of life which the conclusion of the poem ultimately rejects (as do *The Island of Statues* and the two Shepherd poems),[16] with the prospect of eternal hell awaiting Oisin. More importantly, the image intimates and even prefigures the gyratory development of the poem's themes: the surging and subsiding of the hero's expectations during his quest for contentment, the waxing and waning of all human activity, the rising and fall of civilisation.

In the tradition of the Homeric epics, the beauty of a mortal woman signals the dilapidation of a civilisation of heroic values and the beginning of an age of darkness. It is an unenviable fate, Helen mourns in the *Iliad*, that the gods have allotted Paris and herself so that their name be rendered immortal through the ages in song (*Il.* 6.357-358).[17] In *Oisin*, the presence of a beautiful goddess marks, but does not occasion, the end of the heroic Fenian world and the establishment of Christianity. At their hour of defeat, when "no horn" is sounded and "every hero droop his head", Niamh entices Oisin to the Otherworld with a promise of eternal life spent in sensual enjoyments and "the Danaan leisure" (*TWO* I, 32-33, 86-101).

As an enchantress, Niamh lacks the demonic qualities that she is invested with in "The Hosting of the Sidhe" (1893) or that Circe possesses in the *Odyssey*. Still, hers is an ominous presence and its sinister connotations are suggested not only in the original sub-title of the poem, *How a Demon Trapped Him* (*VP*, p. 1), but also through

the image of her lips likened to a "stormy sunset on doomed ships" (*TWO* I, 23). The lunar associations of Niamh identify her with the female figure of "The Rose of the World" and "The Sorrow of Love" (1892), that archetypal fatal woman whose "red mournful lips" brought ruin to Troy and doom upon Odysseus. In their destructively alluring power, Helen and Niamh are linked as initiators of a historical process which will lead to cultural dissolution but will also give rise to a celebration of a remembered era of glory via the act of poetic composition.[18]

Viewed in this context, Oisin's final choice to join his fellow warriors "be they in flames or at feast" (*TWO* III, 224) represents a way back to the self, to death and, paradoxically, to life. With the journey reaching its end at the point of departure and the illumination of old age "half accepted, half rejected," Oisin "would pass in death over another sea to another island" (*W&B*, p. 102). His gesture signifies an ambivalent kind of rebirth, and therefore an ambivalent kind of return. It is both a celebration of life's physicality and an act of heroic defiance in the face of inevitable defeat – a lost world, a spent youth, old age. But because by its very nature it is an act of opposition to the irreversibility of historical process, it is also an attempt, albeit poetic, to rewrite and thus evade history. As Thomas Whitaker points out, Oisin, having "journeyed through emotional clouds, ironically successful battles, and feebleness", returns "to curse his opposite in Ireland".[19] Thus, the mythic narrative re-enacts the eternal cycle of life and transposes the individual to a level of being that transcends historical time and the mutability of human experience. It effects the ultimate return to the condition of origins.

At this point, the notion of return requires further clarification. As Pucci remarks of the *Odyssey*, and this is equally true of Yeats's poem, "the nature of return […] excludes the possibility of sameness". Because the myth of return to a source is grounded in the assumption of "the existence of a simple, identifiable origin and the possibility of repetition without difference",[20] it is a utopian conception. Nietzsche expounds a similar idea via his notion of eternal recurrence. The proclamation in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that "everything goes, everything returns; the wheel of existence rolls for ever", does not intimate the return of a world of fixed being, of essence, but of constant change and becoming. What returns as "the same" is difference, the act of returning itself.[21] Neither Odysseus nor Oisin immediately recognise their homeland after their long absence and their arrival does not signify the end of their troubles or of their journey. For both heroes, return entails the rediscovery of a condition appearing at

once familiar and altered.

This is not to say that the *Odyssey*, which elaborates the theme of return, does not suggest a cyclical movement in terms of thematic progression. Odysseus' journey can be interpreted, from an ontological standpoint, as the locus of experience he must gain in order to reclaim his identity and ultimately embrace his humanity and its limitations, existence as a physical rather than a metaphysical condition. Thus, the adventures he encounters constitute facets of a laborious process of self-discovery and self-evaluation that entails acceptance of the human reality. In this sense, the return home represents a kind of rebirth, a return to this mode of consciousness.

At the same time, although the end of the *Odyssey* contains a beginning, an original state of humanness abandoned as Odysseus embarks on his sojourn but then retrieved, this is not a return to the same. As Pucci notes, Odysseus "is engaged in a movement" constantly pulling to and drifting away from home. According to this interpretation, the text of the *Odyssey* posits the notion of return as both "a circular movement", which comes to an end with death, and the "ceaseless drifting away of its hero", which puts off an end.[22] Odysseus therefore is destined to resume the journey, forever caught between opposing forces. Analogously, the Yeatsian text also implies that, the cycle of life over, Oisin will repeat in death the cycle of activity – warring, feasting, and hunting – in which he engaged when alive. In Yeats's poem, return signifies both a conclusion, the closing up of the experiential pattern, and a point of departure, the transposition to a different mode of cognition and of existence. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra would affirm, "Everything departs, everything meets again".[23]

III

The correspondence between the *Odyssey* and *Oisin* operates not only on a thematic but also on a textual level, and the strategy that the two poems employ defines their treatment of return. From its opening section, *Oisin* bears an affinity with the *Odyssey* in terms of narrative technique. Both poems start *in media res*, that is, at a point when the hero's adventures, or at least half of them as is the case with the *Odyssey*, are already in the past. Such a technique of beginning the poem in the middle of narration enables the reader to hear the story from the point of view of the hero. The latter is thus, as Stephen Scully notes, at the vantage point of "stepping back from the

action, reflecting, attempting to understand and interpret the experience as he goes along".[24] By operating as the medium for re-assessing the past in order to determine the future, poetry is therefore the locus of knowledge and wisdom.

This idea reveals a belief in an intimate link between art and truth but it also hints at the tension between art and reality, which the former strives to transform. With regard to art's relation with truth, Nietzsche subverts traditional notions and regards truth as an illusion, a metaphor that has "become worn" and "drained of sensuous force". What distinguishes art from falsehood is that, although it produces images which bear no analogue to reality, it "treats *illusion* as *illusion*; therefore it does not wish to deceive; it is *true*". Because art recognises and evaluates illusions by aesthetic rather than moral criteria, "it alone is now honest".[25] In *The Gay Science*, art's profundity lies not in its search for truth and a desire to reveal what should be hidden, but in a belief that "truth remains truth when the veils are [not] withdrawn".[26] In both the *Odyssey* and *Oisin*, the interplay between the world of magic and the world of historicity, and between the aesthetic pleasure afforded by art and the truthfulness of its content with the emotional response it evokes, affirms the interlocking relation between illusion and reality. The hero of the Odyssean and Yeatsian text is thus interpolated between two modes of existence, the one proffering what the other withholds. In neither does attainment become wholly possible, for this would presuppose a transition from the human condition to that of the ideal.

According to Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, Odysseus' performance as a poet, being an act of self-examination, denotes the achievement of "the immediate satisfaction of his ultimate desire", his return to his homeland.[27] The text, however, undercuts the success of his transformation, which the hero's regression from poet to warrior renders implausible in the episode of the massacre of the suitors. In the case of Oisin, on the other hand, the desire he seeks to satisfy is not his return to Ireland, since this has already been achieved, but to a heroic mode of life that has disappeared with the advent of St. Patrick's Christianity. In narrating his story to St. Patrick, Oisin can hope to re-affirm his pagan vision of life, which stands in extreme contrast to the saint's Christian idealism. In this sense, he undertakes a second, poetic journey that parallels the first, supernatural one in terms of the nature of the quest but differs from it in the nature of the goal achieved. In both, the hero is driven by a desire to seek what cannot be attained. Both end in dejection and rejection: one, of a state of immortality, with a

subsequent return to the ontological status of mortality; the other, of Christian morality, with the resolute embrace of pagan ethics.

As he recalls his adventures, falling once again under their spell, judging them in hindsight, Oisin is actually retelling them and in that he resembles Odysseus, who acts as his own poet in the episode with the Phaeacians (*Od.* 9.12ff). Like Odysseus, Oisin too becomes both "the subject of song and the song itself".[28] The act of poetic reconstruction reveals an effort on Oisin's part to make sense of and to impose coherence upon the diversity and irrationality of his experience through the medium of the poetic word. He is the poet-Bard who seeks to reconcile antinomies and transform them into the permanence of art. Feeling old, weary and frustrated; having failed to attain, as Harold Bloom remarks, the "dreaming dimness of the Immortals",[29] who mock at the cyclic pattern of nature and temporality; yet, having survived to tell the tale, Oisin can now come as close to immortality as the poetic recreation of his experience will allow him.

Only art, having survived the ephemeral and death, can bestow fame and immortality. It is the Danaan poets' songs, which sang of his "wisdom and the fame/ Of battles broken by his hands" (*TWO* I, 66-67), that have brought Niamh to Oisin. Similarly, in the *Odyssey*, it is Odysseus' glory and the fame he acquired for his deeds in Troy that we hear commemorated in the blind poet Demodocus' song at the banquet of the Phaeacian King Alcinous (8.489-521). Glory and heroic deeds also form the thematic content of the Sirens' song, which promises to impart pleasure as well as wisdom to its listener. Through "a thousand songs", Oisin will immortalise Niamh's name and set it "all names above" (*TWO* I, 75-76). This of course begs the question of the fulfilment of such a goal, as poetic achievement, especially the kind advocated by Oisin, necessitates the poet's removal from the realm of fantasy and his transposition before a human audience. Ultimately, it is through the singing of his song to St. Patrick and through the repeated enactment of his experience in the re-readings of the poem that Yeats's hero can partake of the divine state of immutability.

Singing or its absence, like dancing, thus informs the entire poem and underscores the symbolic and metaphysical implications of Oisin's journey. It characterises the first island, its joyous rhythm permeating through the bird and tree imagery that describes it and through the soft, murmuring flow of the sea; trumps echo, the Immortals burst into song, and the "painted birds" keep time with their "bright

wings and feet" (*TWO* I, 396-397). It then echoes, but more ominous, in the "foaming tide" (*TWO* II, 27) and the singing voice of the chained lady of the second island, a voice that "fanned the delighted air like wings of birds" (II, 50). It dwindles to a "murmurous dropping: old silence and that one sound" (*TWO* III, 18) of the third island. Finally, it rises again to the "exultant" tune of "war-songs" (*TWO* III, 202-203) and the clatter of "the shaking of the shields and the quiver of stretched bow-strings" (*TWO* III, 207) when, at the end of the poem, Oisin defiantly takes the decision to join his old companions in hell.

On the function of the poetic word and its connection with the quest for knowledge and truth, a number of parallels can be drawn between the *Odyssey* and *Oisin*. The hero, who recounts his adventures and thus himself becomes the subject of song, performs the dual role of poet and reader of his own story. He at once engages in the process whereby, as Barthes states, he, in his function as author, "struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ('is lost')" as well as in the process via which he, in his function as reader, proceeds to disentangle the text's multiplicity of meaning.[30] Both processes necessitate the subject's absorption in and mastery by language; it "wounds and seduces" him.[31] It is for this reason that the Odyssean text associates poetic performance with enchantment. In the passages which depict scenes of singing or the telling of tales, poetry is envisaged as having both pleasurable and ruinous effects. Pleasure and suffering, enchantment and self-forgetfulness are intertwined aspects of poetry, also operating in dialectical opposition in the text of *Oisin*.

In the utopian setting of the island of the Phaeacians, the blind poet Demodocus celebrates the deeds of men and gods. As I shall proceed to explain, the effect of his singing reveals differences in audience response while at the same time it illustrates the enticing power of the poetic text. His song of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite (*Od.* 8.266-369) as well as those about the sufferings of the Achaeans at Troy (*Od.* 8.73-92, 8.499-520), the latter striking a chord with Odysseus, produce pleasure and delight but fail to induce an emotional response from Alcinous and his court. The story on the divine love in particular is as removed from the realm of earthly experience as the song of the immortal inhabitants of the first island in *Oisin* and as Niamh's song of the marriages of fairies with men.

In fact, the land of the Immortals in Yeats's poem shares certain significant characteristics with that of Scheria although, in some respects, the two are sharply

contrasted. For one, Scheria occupies a place at the intersection of the world of myth and the world of historical reality, and its function is to enable Odysseus' transportation from one to the other.[32] The island of the Young performs no such function but instead, immersed as it is in the mythical world, launches Oisin deeper into the realm of the supernatural. For another, the Phaeacians, despite their kinship to the gods (*Od.* 5.35) and their enjoyment of divine company (*Od.* 7.201-203), are men and therefore subject to the same law of necessity, death (*Od.* 13.59-60). Aengus and his people, on the other hand, are unaffected by the conditions of time and change – "We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance" (*TWO* I, 291). Still, their ontological status of immortality remains equivocal, for they too, like Oisin, exist within the cycle of nature. The difference is that the Immortals' enjoyment of perfect freedom can end only with an apocalyptic dissolution of nature when "the stars drop down from the sky/ And the moon like a pale rose wither away" (*TWO* I, 426-427).

Both islands, however, are presented as utopian and mythical, a golden-age land of perfect harmony rendering them, to quote from Thomas Taylor, among "the Fortunate Islands".[33] Isolated from mortals, the Phaeacians live in the midst of "the much-surging ocean,/ The remotest of men" (*Od.* 6.204-205). Aengus' island is similarly placed "over the glossy sea" (*TWO* I, 132) and its inhabitants abide "in a lonely land" (*TWO* I, 357).[34] The connection between Scheria and the Irish Country of the Young is also noted by Yeats, who, in his story "The Adoration of the Magi" (1897), describes the Irish Otherworldly land as "the Happy Islands where the Gaelic heroes live the lives of Homer's Phaeacians" (*VSR*, p. 166). With their seafaring activity, their feasting and their perpetual pleasure-seeking, the islands offer a type of the nonhuman, but it is this aspect of the ideal which renders their society impossible. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet remarks, "The Phaeacians are ignorant of physical struggle and of political struggle as well".[35] Consequently, human toil is seen as providing the subject for song. The gods, Alcinous says, "spun the thread of death/ For men, so that it would be a song for those to come" (*Od.* 8.579-580).

Despite the acknowledgement of a common fate for all humans, the Phaeacians are immune to suffering and therefore to empathy. Their response to Demodocus' singing exemplifies their treatment of poetry as a source of pleasure. So too act Yeats's Immortals. Their songs, which are a hymn to joy and youth, may exhibit awareness of mortal suffering and the affliction of old age and death, but it is not the awareness that

stems from experience. Therefore, their involvement in song remains on a purely aesthetic level:

> Upon the dead
> Fall the leaves of other roses,
> On the dead dim earth encloses:
> But never, never on our graves,
> Heaped beside the glimmering waves,
> Shall fall the leaves of damask roses.
> For neither Death nor Change comes near us,
> And all listless hours fear us,
> And we fear no dawning morrow,
> Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.
> (*TWO* I, 310-319)

Caught in the sensuality of the music, charmed by its overpowering effect, they sway and swoon, rejoicing, as Michael Sidnell observes, "in the limitless possibilities of natural good and perfect freedom".[36] But their ecstatic revelling lacks real empathy. By contrast, Oisin can only read his own despair – "all the ancient sorrow of men" (*TWO* I, 380) – in the exultant songs' denunciation of mortality and their celebration of eternal life. Listening to Demodocus' song about the victorious deeds of the Achaeans, Odysseus is shaken by "piteous" tears (*Od.* 8.92-93, 521-531). For him, as for Oisin, the singing of songs is no pure entertainment, producing aesthetic effects as for the Phaeacians, but empathic participation in the griefs that bind together all mortals. It functions, as Charles Segal points out, as "emotionally involving exemplar of human suffering"[37] that evokes empathy and compassion.

Human sorrow pervades Oisin's song when he sings of "human joy" at the gathering of the Immortals. Deeply affected by its sadness, they weep and remove the harp from his hands. With the exception of Niamh, whose disposition changes from exhilaration to dejection as Oisin travels from one island to the next, this is the only other instance in the poem where the utopian world is so profoundly threatened when it comes in contact with the mortal realm. Through the figure of Oisin as poet, joy and grief, permanence and transience, the painful reality of mortality and the illusory longing for immortality coalesce in the act of poetic composition to make up the wholeness of life. Art, with its beguiling power, can produce pleasure by conjuring up a fantastical world. It can even incur self-forgetfulness, as the third island that Oisin visits exemplifies. But it cannot entirely conceal the menace of death.

The Immortals' response to Oisin's song contrasts that of the Phaeacians as they listen to Odysseus narrate the story of his adventures. The audience, which formerly were simply "pleased" with Demodocus' song, are now enchanted and charmed by the warrior-turned-poet's tale and wish to hear more. So much so, that, as Pucci asserts, they have "become completely oblivious of themselves",[38] effaced in the act of poetic reconstruction. But they remain as ever detached from the pain of the story's content and from human suffering. Theirs is a life of unearthly bliss which, read in the light of Yeats's comment as that emerging from a disposition to "set their hearts in nothing but in 'the dance and changes of raiment, and love and sleep'" (*E&I*, p. 135), can only exist in a temporal vacuum. The Phaeacians only experience fear when, no longer readers but active participants, they are themselves threatened with destruction by Poseidon for securing Odysseus' return (*Od.* 13. 125-184). However, the reader of the *Odyssey* never discovers how their fate is determined.

In Yeats's poem, it is predominantly upon the hero himself that the beguiling power of poetry can be observed. During his stay on the first island, Oisin joins in the singing and dancing, falling under the spell of a song that celebrates a mode of existence untouched by "law" or "rule" (*TWO* I, 339). Losing all memory and self-awareness, he remains in this state of "forgetfulness" (*TWO* I, 365) for one hundred years. He is pulled back to the reality of his condition by a staff whose fragmentary character and association with war activity underlines that very reality. As he approaches the second island, it is the chained lady's doleful song that captivates him. In a manner reminiscent of the delightful tune of the birds of the first island, her voice "fanned the delighted air like wings of birds" (*TWO* II, 50). The emphasis on the delight that poetry produces underlines its aesthetic quality. But its association with wings hints at the evanescent nature even of the poetic word.

The bell-branch, which the chief of the sleepers of the third island sways, represents a more disquieting aspect of poetry. "Wrapt in the wave" of its music (*TWO* III, 69), Oisin passes into a state of oblivion that suspends him between past and present, life and death, and threatens to annul his identity. Like Odysseus, who is mesmerised by the Sirens' invitation to stay and listen to their poetic re-enactment of his past glory and to what the future holds, Oisin is unable to resist the magical power of the bell-branch. Death or its threat is the price of the poet's flight into dream and fantasy. Whenever Oisin as reader interprets music and song as inducing sleep and

forgetfulness, he attributes to the poet the same power of enthralment that Hesiod does to the Muse-inspired minstrel and to the Muses themselves:

> For though a man have sorrow and grief in his newly-troubled soul and live in dread because his heart is distressed, yet, when a singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods [...], at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all; but the gifts of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.[39]
>
> (*Theogony*, 98-103)

This is a reading that St. Patrick appears to endorse. When Oisin exercises his poetic skill, it is St. Patrick who performs the role of reader. The song here is the retrospective narration of Oisin's adventures in the land of myth and of his return to a world in which he feels estranged. Through the figure of his antagonist, Oisin is identified as the wandering poet, destined to undertake many voyages and many returns. Like the Phaeacians, St. Patrick urges Oisin to continue with his tale but his response is a censure of the dreaming poet and his claim to truth. In denying the veracity of Oisin's vision of life and death, St. Patrick represents the force that strives to steer the poetic imagination away from the allure of "heathen dreams" (*TWO* I, 31) back to the stark reality of the futility and emptiness of the quest.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope offers a similar interpretation of poetic activity, characterising all songs as beguiling (*Od.* 1.337). In rejecting a song which, bound by the constraints of audience reading response, implicitly denies the possibility of Odysseus' homecoming and consequently of his heroic glory, she seems to suggest that poetry operates on the principle of creating pleasure. It therefore numbs the mind, averting it from its proper concerns, and does so at the expense of depicting reality. If, then, Demodocus represents the poet of truth who receives divine inspiration, the poetic performance of Phemius, resident bard at Odysseus' palace in Ithaca, and the response it elicits from Penelope call attention to the issue of truth in fiction and of the author's function. Penelope's reading of Phemius' song dismisses the conception of art as what Barthes would term "a weapon against time, oblivion and the trickery of speech".[40] She wishes not to forget by surrendering to the enchantment of song but to remember via the poetic celebration of Odysseus' glory. Her critique, implicitly privileging the song's extolling of the hero over the individual poet's power of seduction, challenges the portrait of the author as an original voice and therefore as centre and guarantor of truth.

The text of *Oisin* also raises similar questions through the debate between St. Patrick and Oisin. The hero's narrative invites the reader to share in the experience, enticing him with the power of the poetic word. But St. Patrick's repudiation of heroic life as shadowy undercuts the validity of Oisin's perception and even the truthfulness of poetic performance. Oisin's final response, itself a rejection of the saint's reading of the story, stresses the subjective element that the reading of poetry involves. It also hints at the poem's exploration of the association of poetic inspiration with daemonic possession. By relating Oisin's wanderings, his many turns of mind, of which the narrative is a mirroring image, to "dalliance with a demon" and by proclaiming in indignation that the hero is "still wrecked among heathen dreams", St. Patrick is affirming a connection between wandering and madness. Accordingly, he interprets the former as spiritual and moral displacement, as estrangement from divinity and consequently from society, and urges repentance as a means of restoring the self to sanity and to rightness.

Ruth Padel points to an identification of wandering with madness in Greek culture and remarks that the two "illuminate each other as two sides of the same torture". Although wandering is not always accompanied by madness, as in the case of Odysseus, being driven away from home entails alienation or disorientation – geographical, social and mental – and is seen as a consequence of "divine persecution". This is often expressed in forgetfulness of one's home or of one's sense of self. Thus, the journey back can be read as "an image of mental activity", a return to the right state of mind, or as "a spiritual journey and aspiration", according to the later Stoics. The motif of mad wandering is also present in Irish legend, in which the wandering figure is driven out into the wild by madness.[41]

In Yeats's "The Madness of King Goll" (1887), insanity effects transcendence of temporal and physical boundaries into a state unifying all the manifold forms of life. E.R. Dodds observes that in ancient Greece the insane were regarded as being "in contact with the supernatural" and as displaying superhuman powers.[42] In Yeats's poem, the figure of the outcast King, who wanders mad in the woods, is an image both of the terrifying, elemental powers that have divested him of his humanity and of the passionate, poetic energies directed towards unity and coherence. But the unearthly world that King Goll has entered brings dissolution of form and renders even poetic utterance ineffective.[43] "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897) elaborates another,

less unsettling aspect of the theme of poetic wandering, here connected with the pursuit of beauty in love and art rather than with madness. The latter, however, is implicit in the original title, "A Mad Song", and Aengus appears to be driven in his futile quest by the possessing power of his vision, a desire to reconcile dream and reality, which remains unfulfilled.

The conjunction of wandering and madness through the figure of the poet also appears in the later poem "A Crazed Girl" (1937). In the wildness of her dance, the anonymous poetess has stepped beyond the realm of ordinary experience. The swirling frenzy of her movement, recalling the demon's "bacchant" swaying in *Oisin* as well as the dancer's effacing of her life through the act of dancing in the second part of "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (1918), comes close to Dionysiac ecstasy.[44] And yet, the solipsistic quality of her song suggests the ambivalence of her unearthly condition. In *The Wanderings of Oisin*, the hero-poet progresses to a state of transcendence akin to madness and the dissolution it implies in the sleep-induced solitude of the third island. Sleep impels the wandering of the soul. So do dreams, and their allure, maddening as it is, corresponds to that of the poetic word.

IV

The connection between enchantment and readership also operates through the figure of Niamh. In this respect, she functions as the beguiling force inviting Oisin to enter the world of eternal, sensuous and artistic pleasures and thus become a reader of "music and love". As a temptress and an enchantress, Niamh is endowed with potentially dangerous powers and in this she resembles the Homeric Sirens. Her invitation to Oisin is ambiguous: she promises him immortality and knowledge of "the Danaan leisure". But for a mortal, the promised pleasure and "sleep" awaiting in a twilight zone where "the white moon climbs,/ The red sun falls and the world grows dim" (*TWO* I, 104-105) have sinister connotations. Alluring as they may be, they imply a forgetfulness that incurs a death-like state of suspended animation. Cast by Niamh's magical spell into a shadowy world of aesthetic sensuality and utopian ideality, Oisin is faced with the danger of forgetting not only his companions but also his human identity. This forgetting is intimated by the offering of honey (*TWO* I, 92), which, according to Porphyry, is a symbol associated with death.[45]

Forgetfulness as death is also suggested in Niamh's association with the Siren-like, self-bemused birds of the first island.[46] Their exotic appearance and hedonistic singing are suggestive of a solipsistic, artificially held existence that can only sustain itself in solitude and dream. Indifferent to Oisin's human grief, they stand like "drops of frozen rainbow light", pondering "in a soft vain mood/ Upon their shadows in the tide" (*TWO* I, 183-185). Like the Sirens, the birds on Aengus' island are characterised by motionlesness and what they sing is either remote from experience or experience in the abstract; it is merely a subject for song. As Oisin prepares to leave the island, the birds murmur at the injustice of time and mutability. "Like drops of honey came their words" (*TWO* I, 398), but the sweetness of their voice, which alludes to the "honey-toned" voice of the Sirens (*Od.* 12.187), lacks emotional resonance. The reality that their words convey testifies more to the fate awaiting Oisin than to the final dissolution of the natural cycle, of which they are part, and also accentuates their own remoteness. If the poetic performance of the Sirens depicts, as Segal notes, "heroic adventure as something crystallized into lifeless, static form",[47] the bird song presents the danger of entrapment by an equally lifeless and static, although enthralling, mode of existence that bears no relevance to the human condition.

The same deadly fate, implicit in the Sirens' song, awaits Odysseus should he succumb to the fascination it exercises. Both the Odyssean hero and the reader are repeatedly warned about the deceptive nature of the Sirens' song (*Od.* 12.39-46, 158-160, 183-194). As a magical incantation, the poetic act performed by the Sirens embodies, according to Charles Taylor, "the seductive attractions of feminine allure and poetic song".[48] The identification of femininity as an agent of destruction aside, a theme which, as Chapter Seven proposes to examine, found resonance in those of Yeats's poems expounding notions of beauty and violence, the Sirens' song is one that spells death. For the pleasure and wisdom it promises can be acquired at the cost of the listener's life. But it is also a death signifying obliteration from the living memory of future generations. For Odysseus, accepting the Sirens' invitation means foregoing his return to his homeland. The implications of this would be exchanging a life of action for one of passive reader, albeit one proffering delight and knowledge, and thus ending his days.

There is one other aspect of Oisin's encounter with Niamh which connects it to the Sirens episode in the *Odyssey*. When the Sirens address Odysseus by name, they

identify him, as Pucci remarks, as "the warrior at Troy rather than the hero of the *Odyssey*". Their song, with its celebration of the toils of the Achaeans during the Trojan war, appeals to Odysseus' "literary complacency and to his nostalgia for his glorious deeds".[49] In a similar note, Niamh initially charms Oisin and brings him under her spell of love by means of allusion to the songs that depict him as an important character around whose heroic deeds a significant body of poetic tradition has been woven. Her speech centres at first on the "rhyme" brought to her by "Danaan poets" of "all that wisdom and the fame/ Of battles broken by his hands" and subsequently "Of stories builded by his words" (*TWO* I, 64-65, 66-68). It thus defines Oisin in his dual aspect as warrior and poet or storyteller.

Unlike Homer's Sirens, who claim ability to offer joy to their listener by singing the deeds of war in their unsuccessful attempt to seduce him, Niamh makes no such promise of heroic celebration to Oisin, although her invitation has the opposite effect. Yet, like the Sirens' song, Niamh's melodious speech has a similar function. By succeeding in its purpose to entice the hero to embark on his three-hundred-year journey, it exposes Oisin's awareness of and pride in being the character portrayed in it. It also constitutes an invitation to him to disengage himself from and ultimately abandon the present. The threat Niamh poses, and which becomes clearer as Oisin travels on, consists in its revelation of an irresistible but self-destructive longing in the hero. The fulfilment of his desire drives him on a quest beyond the bounds of nature. But at the same time, it compels him, as Pucci notes, "to dwell in the memory" of his "splendid" past.[50] Lacking Odysseus' knowledge of the dangers of such a temptation and despite the warnings of his fellow-warriors, Oisin seems to fall prey to his nostalgia for glory and his yearning for immortality.

The allusion to the Sirens elucidates one aspect of the poetic quest in *Oisin*, that of poetic allure viewed as an activity that stands in polarised opposition to heroic action. The comparison between Niamh and Calypso elucidates another, equally threatening; one which Calypso's name – she who conceals – suggests more explicitly than Niamh's, which means beauty and brightness. In the episode of the Homeric hero's departure, Calypso addresses Odysseus in a farewell speech of praise as well as of covert reprehension (*Od.* 5.203-209). Implicit in her statement, as Pucci points out, is her criticism levelled against what she perceives as an act of foolishness on the part of Odysseus: the fact that his longing for his homeland and his return have blinded him to

the implications of his decision.[51] His choice to depart will necessarily entail the abandonment of a divine companion and the loss of a life of peace and immortality, and this is pitted against the perils of the homeward journey.

Calypso never reveals to Odysseus the nature of the tribulations that he is destined to face as a result of his action. However, her allusion to them is a last, albeit futile, attempt to persuade him of the folly of his undertaking after her beguiling words have failed to charm Odysseus to "forget Ithaca" (*Od.* 1.56-59). At this point, words prove ineffective in inducing forgetfulness even though the alternative they intimate is eternal and untroubled life or sublimated aesthetic and sensuous pleasures. They have lost their magical power to enchant their listener, much as the words that Yeats's sad shepherd utters have lost their potency and as Niamh's exuberant singing, bereft of its magical charm, has gradually faded into melancholy silence.

Calypso's warning of a journey fraught with danger hints at the truth of the human condition, a truth that both the Homeric and Yeatsian text communicate. Eternal youth and immortality, although the constant object of human desire, lie beyond the scope of mortal experience and therefore cannot be attained. Odysseus will reach his fatherland and the end of his journey. Oisin will be granted the day of his return. But wisdom and illumination will be gained at a great price: through suffering and grief, through the toil and restlessness of life, and ultimately through acceptance of mortality.

Odysseus' answer to Calypso, "I shall bear it in my breast, with a long-grieving heart" (*Od.* 5.222), epitomises the cornerstone of the human experience within the epic tradition: endurance enhances or even ensures survival. Although it may bring no new glory because it implies a degree of passivity in attitude and a tolerance for injuries suffered, it can initiate poetic conception. A new poem will celebrate the hero's perseverance. The recital of this tale, which the anonymous poet of the *Odyssey* begins after the invocation to the Muse (*Od.* 1.1-10), will restore his name to memory. Similarly, Oisin will in part learn the same lesson, his fame and glory as poet-warrior re-instated, but it will take him a voyage to three supernatural islands and three hundred years of seeking and yearning.

The episode of Calypso's last verbal exchange with Odysseus is analogous to that between Niamh and Oisin. With the three-hundred-year journey to the Otherworld reaching its end, Niamh arrives at the realisation that she can no longer keep Oisin and addresses him in similar terms: "O wandering Oisin, the strength of the bell-branch is

naught" (*TWO* III, 123). The epithet "wandering" that she uses to describe him qualifies Oisin since it evokes his journeys, his incessant quest for contentment, and the futility of his search. Niamh's recognition that "the fluttering sadness of earth" still stirs in Oisin's heart incites her to accede to his yearning that drives him back to his homeland and the sorrows of human life so that he can "see what the mortals do". The allusion to mortal activities implies the imperfection of human existence in relation to what Oisin will gain if he chooses to remain with Niamh: a changeless life of perfect serenity and of immortality.

Niamh's dignified gesture is reminiscent of Calypso's words of warning against Odysseus' departure. That his present action is perceived as reprehensible becomes evident in the comparison Calypso draws between herself and Penelope. One a goddess, the other a mortal woman inferior in beauty and stature but for whom Odysseus longs "always every day" (*Od.* 5.210). For the much suffering hero of the Homeric epic, the decision to return home, once materialised, is irreversible. His choice between guarding Calypso's house and being immortal, on the one hand, and his desire for his wife, on the other (*Od.* 5.208-210), will determine his fate irrevocably. Departure from Calypso's island will initiate his fall from eternal life back to the strife of mortal existence.

In the case of Oisin, however, Niamh's utterance, inviting the hero to rejoin her "over the tops of the tide" (*TWO* III, 126), suggests otherwise: the possibility that the experience of earthly reality will convince Oisin of the error of his choice and will bring him back to her side. The introduction of divine ban, prohibiting Oisin from touching "earth's pebbles" (*TWO* III, 127-128), is the single fundamental condition imposed for the reunion of the two lovers to be made possible. Crossing the border of mortal life to the transcendent realm necessarily precludes any participation in the physical world and in human affairs. Her wishful expectation, however, will remain unfulfilled and Niamh herself is aware of the incompatibility of the two modes of existence. Her parting words to Oisin are a lamentation that "We shall mingle no more" in embrace, "nor our gazes empty their sweetness lone" (*TWO* III, 132). Being the possessor of unearthly wisdom, Niamh already knows what Oisin will only learn through a painful process of self-discovery: that no rest awaits him at the end of his journey. This is the implication of her second, epithetic address to him as "flaming lion of the world" (*TWO* III, 129). The image both anticipates the conclusion of the poem and links it to its opening section via

the association with Oisin's warrior nature and the destiny of fulfilling such nature.

At this point, a parallel can be drawn between Yeats's poem and the Greek tradition. The motif of divine prohibition links *Oisin*, by means of allusion, to related aspects of the *Odyssey*'s adventures in mythical lands. It also provides a parallel to the story of Orpheus with regard to his descent to the Underworld for the purpose of recovering his dead wife. For Odysseus and his companions, the ban is against opening Aiolos' gift of the sack in which the winds are trapped (*Od.* 10.19ff) and against sacrificing the herds sacred to the Sun (*Od.* 12.271ff). For Orpheus, the ban is against looking back or, according to a variation on it, against speech.[52] Similarly, in Celtic tales, a prohibition (*geis*) is placed on the hero. Its violation usually signifies death and the hero's safety can only be ensured while the prohibition remains inviolate. Breaking the *geis* thus spells the hero's own undoing in the way that Greek heroes, finding themselves in a similar situation, are forsaken by gods.[53] By underlining the boundaries between mortal and immortal, which essentially cannot be crossed, these stories dramatise the ambiguity of the relationship between the two realms.

Only in myth or dream can perfection be attained and unity sustained, and even then reality always encroaches upon those who attempt to surpass its limitations. Poetic utterance is also seen to observe the same canon. The magic of Orpheus' singing can persuade the chthonic gods to grant him his wish but does not secure its realisation. Conversely, Odysseus' wanderings are brought to an end with his homecoming, effected through the power of his storytelling in the episode with the Phaeacians. Yet, his fate, even with his name and position restored, remains undetermined. Only the Sirens promise to impart knowledge of Odysseus' future but their song is silenced, its promise unfulfilled, and the *Odyssey* leaves us with the intimation that new toils and the constant menace of death await its hero (*Od.* 23.248-250). Similarly, Oisin the poet attains his goal of immortalising Niamh's name and his own in the act of recounting, and thus recreating, his adventures to St. Patrick but only by returning to a fragmented, antinomial world that affords mere glimpses of eternity as in a cracked mirror.

There are, however, certain fundamental distinctions to be made between Yeats's hero and the two Greek mythological figures. Whereas in the case of Odysseus and Orpheus, the prohibition serves to guarantee safe passage from the supernatural realm back to the human world, for Oisin, it will ensure the hero's return from the world of mortality to that of immortality. Furthermore, Odysseus bears no direct

responsibility for breaking the ban although, at each decisive moment, he fails to prevent disaster; it is his companions' choice that brings about their destruction and he too suffers its consequences. On the other hand, the failure of Orpheus and Oisin to observe the ban is attributed to their human imperfection and frailty, their failure, according to Fajardo-Acosta, "in the ultimate test of self-restraint".[54]

Karl Reinhardt points to the religious form of such adventures: the warning of misfortune, the temptation, then "the punishment of some kind of sacrilege" against divinity.[55] The stories thus function as a test sent by the gods to determine the moral qualities of the characters put to it. When Oisin stoops to help the mortals carrying their sack of sand, he does not deliberately break Niamh's edict but neither does he pause to reflect upon the consequences of his action (*TWO* III, 185-188). As Sidnell remarks, Oisin's "act of contempt [...] fixes him in the world he despises"[56] but also longs for, a world bound by time, strife, decay and the irrevocable loss of the heroic ideal.

Like Odysseus, Oisin must return home because he is mortal and because, within the context of the narrative, divinity and mortality are presented as irreconcilable. The aspiration to immortal existence proves illusory and can only lead to isolation from the human community. If Odysseus' return is necessitated by the composition of the poem, which would not exist otherwise, Oisin's return, which forms the subject of Yeats's poem about him, brings the journey to a natural, earth-bound conclusion. Were Oisin to remain with Niamh, the journey would have been a flight to fantasy land rather than an experience of self-realisation and self-awareness. Old age and death, not eternal youth and immortality of the body, are the inevitable consequences of mortal life. For both Odysseus and Oisin, acknowledgement and acceptance of this fact condition their affirmation of life. But even so, integration in human life and social activity is not fully achieved and the hero is not exempt from alienation.

V

The polarity between fusion and confusion, reconciliation and division, epitomised in the dialectic opposition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, is elucidated in Yeats's "Preface" to Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904):

> It sometimes seems as if there is a kind of day and night of religion, and

> that a period when the influences are those that shape the world is followed by a period when the greater power is in influences that would lure the soul out of the world, out of the body. When Oisin is speaking with Saint Patrick of the friends and the life he has outlived, he can but cry out constantly against a religion that has no meaning for him.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 24)

The tragic vision of *Oisin* lies in the final dilemma of its central character. The hero oscillates between the reality of a shattered world no longer recognisable and the knowledge that life brings no deliverance from the torment of unfulfilled desire, that, as Sidnell remarks, "immortal life is the immortality of desire". Fragmentariness intimates unreality: both the unreality of the Otherworld in terms of attainment of the condition it signifies, and the individual's perception of the unreality of the mundane world in that it lacks wholeness. Feeling excluded from both worlds, Oisin is confronted with a hopeless choice. Defiance may be the only means of asserting personal identity and creating a space to exist, but it casts the individual outside the boundaries of normality. Thus, the text imparts a sense of estrangement.[57] It is the narrative voice, however, that brings the hero back from the ambivalence of afterlife, which lies beyond the scope of the text, into the realm of experience and into recognition.

In both the *Odyssey* and *Oisin*, recognition is linked with cognition, for it implies a kind of knowledge attained through an act of interpretation. In this sense, Pucci sees Odysseus' return as "a re-cognition", the recovery of "one's former knowledge that becomes a rediscovery". Such a process, which involves characters and readers alike, operates through an act of reading some earlier experience in the light of a later one, adding to its meaning.[58] Thus, the text of the *Odyssey* effects recognition by revealing Odysseus' self-identity via the gesture of exposing the many disguises its hero has assumed, not least that of naming whereby Odysseus is granted fictional ontological status.

Analogously, for Oisin, recognition translates into cognition when his experience in the Otherworld enables him to achieve full understanding of the meaning of the phantoms. "And those that fled, and that followed, from the foam-pale distance broke;/ The immortal desire of Immortals we saw in their faces, and sighed" (*TWO* III, 3-4). Robert Graves reads the vision that the mythological character of Oisin has of the hornless deer pursued by a red-eared white hound as an image of the hero himself. The golden apple in the lady's hand, featuring in the second vision, he identifies with the

apple of immortality.[59] Viewed from this perspective, the vision of the phantoms discloses the hero's destiny through name association, Oisin as "little deer", just as we can read Odysseus' destiny in his name as "man of wrath".[60]

Oisin's wisdom only becomes complete, and the tragedy of his destiny revealed, when the daylight of his return forces him to recognise the strangeness of a seemingly familiar world, where the old gods and heroes have been superseded by "bell-mounted churches" and "a feeble populace" (*TWO* III, 163-164). As opposing aspects of the process of recognition, strangeness and familiarity interweave to define the polar terms of the quest as the dialectic of experience. The journey, moving outward and inward, upward and downward, from self to other and between contrary states of mind, progresses through a poetic and personal landscape at once known and unknown. It is a landscape reassuring in its semblance to normality but also disquieting in its detachment from it. Having travelled from West to East and from sunset through the night to sunrise, with the day spent recounting the adventures of the night, Oisin has come full circle to the beginnings of his journey. The point of convergence marks the moment of cognition and generates the ultimate transformation from poet to warrior.

This transformation, which seals Oisin's fate, is prefigured in as well as determined by the action of the second book, Oisin's inconclusive battle with the demon. The terms of description of the tower where the demon abides – dark and vast and surrounded by a turbulent sea – accentuate its subhuman nature and situate it at the heart of the Underworld and of the poem. The presence of an arid plain through which flows "a little runnel" with stony, bare edges (*TWO* II, 155-157) is reminiscent of Plato's depiction of Hades in Book X of the *Republic.* There the souls, awaiting to be incarnated, have passed into the treeless plain of Oblivion and seek shelter by the river of Forgetfulness. This is no Elysium-type island evoking the Hesiodic golden age of the human race[61] but the embodiment of primeval forces that have engendered exclusion from such a paradisal state.

The demon's Protean transformations, first into an eel, then a fir-tree and last a drowned body, are emblems of decay and death, and this is reinforced by the demon's apparent death at sunset. However, the association with water and the demon's resurrection on the fourth day suggest regeneration and the continuation of the natural cycle through the alternation of contrary states. Seen from this perspective, the images also underline the power of the poetic imagination to render the variable shapes of an

internal or external reality that is always elusive. Proteus-like, the poet seeks to transmute the ephemeral of human experience into the permanence of art but, in doing so, he assumes a mask and is himself transformed. Like Odysseus, whose many guises as hero, bard and beggar reflect his versatility according to the demands of the narrative, Oisin too meets his opposite in the demon. Their inconclusive encounter exemplifies the notion that "the poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat" (*Myth*, p. 337).

In the 1902 edition of *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats described the imagistic process, associating water with the generation of souls and of images in the mind and relating this notion to the Neoplatonic tradition:

> We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet. Did not the wise Porphyry think that all souls come to be born because of water, and that "even the generation of images in the mind is from water"?
>
> (*CT*, p. 100)

In his treatise "On the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs", Porphyry, with the authority of Plato, correlates water with generation, as when unembodied souls become incarnated, and reads "the deep, the sea, and a tempest" as "symbols of the constitution of matter". In agreement, Thomas Taylor, in his Neoplatonic interpretation of Odysseus' journey, also links Poseidon – the Greek counterpart of the Celtic Manannan, whose sword Oisin uses to combat the demon – to the perpetual cycle of generation. This is the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, in which "begotten natures" are "corrupted" and "corrupted" natures are "renewed".[62]

Oisin's battle against the demon remains indeterminate, just as Odysseus' struggle against Scylla does, because both supernatural creatures represent forces which can only be momentarily abated but not entirely subdued. Despite warnings about the futility of the battle, Oisin by the chained lady and Odysseus by Circe, the hero, true to his warrior identity, feels compelled to rise in action because passivity would imply stillness and therefore negation of life. In this respect, Oisin prefigures Blake, who held that "Without contraries is no progression",[63] but also Heraclitus and Empedocles. According to the former the natural world is in a state of flux and strife lies at the root of all creation (frs. 12, 80). Empedocles, on the other hand, posits an everlasting

recurrence of a state of unity and plurality dominated by the alternate activity of Love and Strife. In this cosmic cycle, which is repeated infinitely, unity is formed as Love increases but, as Strife regains its power, there is separation (fr. 17).[64]

The poetic terms in which the text of *Oisin* renders the notion of conflict of opposites anticipates the philosophical exposition of the interlocking gyres, the one expanding as the other is contracting, in the 1926 version of *A Vision*. In it, Yeats states that "we can explain much in Parmenides and Empedocles, but especially [...] in Heraclitus" if we regard the gyres as "expressing Man and *Daimon*" (*AVa*, p. 132). In the second version of this text, Yeats again refers to Empedocles' concepts of Concord and Discord as the two contrary principles operating in the cosmos and connects them to Heraclitus' notion of strife:

> It was this Discord or War that Heraclitus called "God of all and Father of all, some it has made gods and some men, some bond and some free", and I recall that Love and War came from the eggs of Leda.
>
> (*AVb*, p. 67)

Yeats sees both forces as the "changeless eternity" but, at the same time, as reflecting the human tendency to perceive "undivided reality" in terms of dividing "opposites" (*AVb*, p. 247). Earlier, in a journal entry of 1909, Yeats had approvingly quoted the above passage from Heraclitus (*Mem*, p. 216). Its fundamental principle seems to be the basis of Yeats's belief that "all creation is from conflict, whether with our own mind or with that of others" (*Aut*, p. 576). This belief not only constitutes an essential tenet of his poetics but also informs the dialectic of his poetry.

In the 1880s Yeats may have lacked the philosophical foundation allowing him to perceive the symbolism of the second island in terms of pre-Socratic notions of antithesis. However, the imagery of cyclic recurrence that Yeats employs to depict Oisin's encounter with the demon conveys the operation of such a principle of strife. A letter of 1903 to George Russell elucidates the terms of our understanding of the demon scene in *Oisin*:

> The Greeks said that the Dionysisic enthusiasm preceded the Apollonic and that the Dionysisic was sad and desirious [*sic*], but that the Apollonic was joyful and self sufficient. Long ago I used to define to myself these two influences as the transfiguration on the mountain and the incarnation, only the Transfiguration comes before the Incarnation in the natural order.
>
> (*CL* III, pp. 369-370)

Viewed from this perspective, the island of the Immortals and of the transforming demon can be seen in opposition as representing two impulses in man and nature – one to create form and unity, the other to break the limits of form and transcend boundaries. A year later, in his "Preface" to *Gods and Fighting Men*, Yeats would associate the former with solar influences and the latter with lunar. As expressions of emotion and the product of the folk imagination that loses itself "in some unbounded tidal stream", the stories derived from the Fenian cycle were perceived as belonging to lunar influence. The opposite tendency brought in art the expression of joy and "of the individual soul turning itself into a pure fire" as well as the imposition of discipline according to the soul's own pattern (*Ex*, pp. 24-26). The interplay of the two principles Yeats deemed as crucial in the process of artistic creation.

Although, for Yeats, great art must spring from the synthesis of sun and moon, Apollonian and Dionysian, the text of *Oisin* displays not so much the convergence as the conflict of the two influences. In his capacity for transformation, for escaping out of bounds, the demon combines in his nature both Proteus and Dionysus. According to Plutarch in his discourse *On the E at Delphi*, Dionysus is the principle of manifold change and metamorphosis, Apollo of uniformity, purity and order (388e-389b).[65] In *Oisin*, the demon's "Bacchant and mournful" singing in a private language is contrasted to the Apollonian, joyous ecstasy and self-contained dancing of the Immortals. In the third island, characterised by the stillness of sleep and the suspension of all life activity, both conditions are brought into a temporary state of reconciliation and rest before the cycle is repeated anew.

VI

The theme of transformation as disguise, ushering the hero into a new cognitive and metaphysical state of experience, is operative in the symbolism of all three supernatural islands that Oisin visits. They share with Calypso's and other similar, Homeric islands the characteristic of being a place apart, situated as they are in the west at the end of the world and far from the human realm. Odysseus lands on Ogygia, this "navel of the sea" (*Od.* 1.50), shipwrecked and alone, whereas Oisin, passing "out from the human lands" (*TWO* I, 114), makes his arrival by mounting a Pegasus-like horse.

The islands' geographical inaccessibility emphasises their mythical, non-human status, which is also marked by the onset of unusual weather at the hero's approach.

Jean-Pierre Vernant remarks that Odysseus' rejection of Calypso's seductive offer constitutes "the heroic refusal of immortality" and his return to "his career as an epic hero", which, had he agreed to remain on the island, he would have had to renounce. The implications of the latter choice would have been to sever all ties with his life and with humanity, his memory and fame obliterated from the minds of humans. Instead, he would have had to accept "an obscure, anonymous immortality"[66] and the effacement of his heroic identity. In effect, Odysseus would have had to contend with a life of seclusion and of exclusion, hidden in a state of suspended existence, arrested between the living and the dead and being of neither.

Similarly, Oisin's fate of oblivion alongside Niamh is also suggested through images of concealment evoking a sense of entrapment. At the beginning of the journey, Niamh binds her "triumphing arms" around Oisin and, murmuring what could well be perceived as words of charm and love, she enfolds and enwinds him (*TWO* I, 106-108). As they approach the first island and Niamh's singing rises to an expression of joyous celebration and "unhuman sound", she again winds her "white arms" around Oisin's "human sorrow" (*TWO* I, 136-138). The trees of the first island and the "dark towers" of the second also serve a similar function: they envelop and displace Oisin from the reality of his existence – the necessity and the futility of the quest – but cannot altogether eliminate it. In the stark realm of the second island, vapours and mist operate as mediums of both concealment and revelation. While they reveal the miraculous and supernatural aspect of the hero's experience on the island, the battle of opposing primordial forces, at the same time they impede attainability of fulfilment.

In the later poem from the sequence *A Woman Young and Old* entitled "Her Vision in the Wood" (1929), Yeats presents the dramatisation of such conflict through the figure of an old woman bereft of sexual attraction. Her moment of ecstatic vision in the wood will go unnoticed by the procession of the god-like mourners carrying a wounded man upon a litter. They too, "drunken with singing as with wine", are caught in their own rapturous passion, oblivious to her suffering (VIII, 28-32). The brief intersection of the two worlds, although illustrating their interdependence, affords no essential communication between them. As Holdridge remarks, there is no "transcendent understanding" of the divine drama unfolding; the woman "cannot

achieve that, she can glimpse it only because she is still alive".[67]

To return to *Oisin*, the sense of entrapment via concealment is again communicated in the terms of presentation of the third island. The description of the sleepers, with their feathered ears and owls nesting in their hair, evokes that of the songbird-swarmed trees of the first island. The symbolism of the tree imagery underscores the concealing power of sleep that the bell-branch represents. This "sleep's forebear" has the power to induce a state of reverie as unhuman, and therefore as unattainable, as the immortalised aspects of mortal life signified by the previous two islands. It is the same bell-branch as that in the poem "The Dedication to a Book of Stories selected from the Irish Novelists" (1891). There the magical branch can turn men's minds away from the world of normality but it can also, if only briefly, create a sense of harmony realisable in time and space.

In *Oisin*, the power of the bell-branch is more ominous and threatening. It resembles in its effect not only the lotus, which induces forgetfulness in Odysseus' companions, but also Hermes' wand. The latter is of particular significance, for in the *Odyssey* (24.1-5) it marks the god as the psychopomp, the mediator between the upper world and the world of the dead. Insofar as we read Oisin's journey as a journey to the Underworld, the bell-branch has chthonian associations similar to those of the Sirens and Hermes.[68] Dreams evoke visions of beauty, greatness and heroism as well as of artistic craftsmanship; they transcend the boundaries of time, binding past and present in a single reality. Yet, the nature of this reality is ambivalent, for it never translates into action and leaves the dreamer precariously balancing between a state of being and of non-being: "So lived I and lived not, so wrought I and wrought not" (*TWO* III, 95). Ultimately, it is a state that proves as utopian and unattainable as that of eternal joy on the first island and of eternal strife on the second. It is, nonetheless, the state sought by the sleeper of "The Hour before Dawn" (1914), for whom the sleep of "another century" becomes a means of escaping from the restraints of time, a flight into an a-temporal condition of passivity that can only result in the negation of life.

As he leaves one island for another, passing from a landscape of perfect harmony to one of endless strife before reaching that of perpetual solitude in sleep, Oisin moves further beyond the boundaries of the human condition into a superhuman and subhuman world. From the dancing figures of the first island, who appear human but are not, just as Calypso and Circe do in the *Odyssey*, to the gloomy, swaying demon

of the second island, whose transformations allude to his elusive nature. Oisin's last sojourn on an island inhabited by a race of giant, bird-like slumberers ushers him into a state of temporary forgetfulness, in which all memory of his life and of his companions that he had retained during his previous travels vanishes. "Gone like a sea-covered stone/ Were the memories of the whole of my sorrow and the memories of the whole of my mirth" (*TWO* III, 70-71). Life and fantasy so mingle as to become images of one another, mirroring each other's reflection but yielding no single, identifiable image.

For Plato (*Phaedr.* 248c; *Rep.* X 620e-621a) and the Orphics, the notions of memory and forgetfulness are associated with the doctrine of immortality and the journey of the soul in the afterlife. For the impure or weak soul being prepared for a new incarnation, its lot is forgetfulness. The pure soul, however, is blessed with memory of its divine origin and passes into a state of communion with divinity.[69] Yeats may have encountered the Platonic notion of transmigration of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, as he was already familiar with the dialogue in 1888.[70] In the metaphysically qualified dream-world of the third island of *Oisin*, forgetfulness and memory also seem to mark the transition from the human condition of strife and mortality to the realm of the Ideal, but the attempt remains thwarted and frustrated. Oisin is neither dead nor has he disentangled himself from the desires of physical existence. Although the text of *Oisin* leaves open for its hero the possibility of immortality, its conception of an afterlife is rather an extension of the sensuous pleasures of earthly life than Plato's world of Ideas.

As Oisin emerges out of the sea at the approach to Ireland, the mist and dreams which confounded his perception disappear with the shattering of illusion in the morning brightness. By renouncing the possibilities they offer, Oisin can never acquire the unhuman knowledge Niamh had promised him and Fergus possessed from the Druid in "Fergus and the Druid" (1892). In this poem, having given up his identity as King for the Druid's "dreaming wisdom", Fergus discovers that he has "grown nothing, knowing all". Existence in the excess of dream induces a state of transcendent communion with all forms of creation. But ultimately, it amounts to the dissolution of boundaries and of the self.

For Oisin, the immortal love of a goddess also incurs a kind of death which negates his identity. In order to reclaim this identity the hero must embrace his human nature – its sweetness, its sorrow, its precariousness – and accept physical death. Sitting on the shore of Calypso's isle, lamenting and bemoaning his lot, Odysseus sheds tears

of regret and longs for death, for his return to what Vernant describes as an "existence in life as a creature destined to die".[71] So too, Oisin, standing by the edge of the sea, remembers his mortal life and his companions – the battles waged, the moments of tranquillity, the days of hunting– and weeps for their loss. As with each island he sinks further into oblivion, the "ancient sadness of man" grows stronger in his heart, asserting its inescapable force. In refusing immortality, Oisin refuses a kind of non-death that is also a kind of non-life. In this respect, both the *Odyssey* and Yeats's poem establish a connection between love and death.[72] Thus, the hero's adventures in a mythical land can be seen as a poetic exploration of two interrelated themes, death-in-life and life-in-death. In this respect, there is a parallel between Niamh, the goddess who guides Oisin through his journey of life and death, and Graves's White Goddess in her aspect of chthonian divinity.[73]

The correlation between the two themes of life and death also underscores Heraclitus' allegorical interpretation of the loves of Eos (Dawn) and the hunter Orion, to which Calypso refers in her dialogue with the god Hermes.[74] In his *Homeric Problems* (fr. 68.5), Heraclitus views the death of a young man of noble descent and great beauty as resembling a state in which he, being the object of Eos' erotic passion, has been abducted by the goddess. Such a perception seems to me concordant with his concept of the Unity of Opposites, according to which all contraries are interconnected in that they form successive stages in a single process:

> The same thing is living and dead, and what is awake and what sleeps, and young and old; for these, having changed about, are those; and those, having changed about, are these.
>
> (fr. 88)

Heraclitus is propounding here that there is no clear distinction or division between such contrary states as being awake and asleep, or between life and death; for all opposites exist as continuous and thus can be understood as forming a unity.[75]

Oisin's sorrowful remark to St. Patrick that his one-hundred-year sleep on the third island was a state of being and non-being, of living and non-living, contains an implicit allusion to the Heraclitean notion of unity. It also elucidates Yeats's concept of the perpetual cycle of life and death, which he later expressed, quoting Heraclitus, in terms of the antinomy of opposites as "living each other's death, dying each other's life".[76] As Oisin progresses through the different stages of his journey, the states of joy

and sorrow, motion and stillness, fantasy and reality succeed and are succeeded by each other as an image of the alternation of life and death. Between these conflicting poles, Oisin lives and completes a cycle of symbolic incarnations. The knowledge he acquires is not experience of Unity of Being as exemplified by Yeats in what he terms Condition of Fire, with its reconciliation of contraries. Rather, it is a painful realisation of lack of unity as a condition of mortal existence; for knowledge implies an on-going process of self-realisation, "man's combat with himself" or with "circumstance" (*AVb*, p. 8).

As hero and poet, Oisin is both part of the eternal cycle of generation and its embodiment. Like the hero of the *Odyssey*, he embarks on a metaphysical and poetic quest that carries him from reality and back by way of the world of myth and fiction. Turning from warrior to lover to poet, until he ultimately resumes the identity of warrior, Yeats's hero extends the movement of the journey beyond and after his return to Ireland. This figure of wandering hero-poet will reappear in Yeats's poetry as Fergus, Hanrahan, or as Cuchulain, and always with the same heroically defiant stance. But the experience, and with it the journey, can only come to a close when the wanderer has learned to renounce what alienates him from the world of physicality and exclaim, "Everything we look upon is blest".

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Seamus Deane, Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 155-156.

2. John S. Kelly, "Aesthete among the Athletes: Yeats's Contributions to *The Gael*", in *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, Vol. II, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 91.

3. Ibid., p. 88.

4. According to Mary Thuente, these sources were derived from recent traditions rather than ancient manuscripts and provided little more than "names, places and atmosphere" (*W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981; first publ. 1980), p. 25).

5. Michael Comyn's poem, written in Irish Gaelic in 1760, was printed in Bryan O'Looney's translation in Vol. IV of the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* (1854-1863), from which Yeats derived much of the material for his own poem: in Vol. I appears a translation by Nicholas O'Kearney of an account of the Battle of Gabhra, a narrative from the Fenian Cycle; Vol. III contains "The Lament of Oisin after the Fenians", translated by Standish O'Grady, and in Vol. V is John O'Daly's treatment of the "Dialogues of Oisin and Patrick" (*CL* I, p. 176, note 2).

6. The story in *Silva Gadelica* is "Teigue mac Cein's Adventure", ed. Standish Hayes O'Grady and publ. in Vol. II (1892).

7. Throughout this discussion, the abbreviated title *Oisin* will be used interchangeably with the full title, *The Wanderings of Oisin*. The poem will be cited parenthetically as *TWO*.

8. Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the 'Odyssey' and the 'Iliad'* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1995; first publ. 1987), p. 52.

9. D.H. Lawrwnce, "Chaos in Poetry", in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 234.

10. Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 39.

11. From a letter to Ezra Pound, cited in Roy F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vol. II: *The Arch-Poet, 1915-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. xx.

12. From a lecture entitled "The End of Yeats's Life", given at the Yeats International Summer School, August 2004.

13. Yeats's poem has invited a variety of readings into the symbolism of its three islands. Morton Seiden sees Oisin's journey as an expression of Yeats's view on the cyclical movement of human life and of civilization (*William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 56). Thomas Whitaker also reads the poem in terms of Yeats's dialogue with history. He thus interprets Oisin's journey as a symbolic analogue between the revolving progression of the universe and "the microcosmic cycles within man" (*Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History*, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989; first publ. 1964), pp. 25-27). For John Unterecker, the islands represent the progression of life as experienced by three types of man – the lover, the man of action, and the man of thought (*A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959; repr. 1982), p. 65). Daniel Albright relates the islands to unfulfilled desire – sex, aggression, and sleep (*YP*, p. 398). Harold Bloom reads the myth of Oisin's journey within

the context of the Romantic tradition as the thwarted quest of the imagination (*Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 101). Finally, P.Th.M.G. Liebregts associates Oisin's islands with three Homeric islands: the superhuman paradise of the god-like Phaeacians; the island of Pharos near Egypt, the abode of the shape-changing sea god Proteus; and the island of the Lotus-eaters (*Centaurs in the Twilight: W.B. Yeats's Use of the Classical Tradition* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 43-46).

14. Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Homeric Sirens", *TAPA*, 101, (1970), pp. 215-216.

15. Colin Meir, "Twentieth-Century Anglo-Irish Epic", in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture*, ed. Birgit Bramsbäck and Martin Croghan, Vol. I (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1988), pp. 93-95.

16. Published in 1885, *The Island of Statues*, a verse drama opening in a pastoral setting, has the shepherdess Naschina cast aside the peaceful serenity and blissful innocence of Arcady, with its singing shepherds and human joys, out of desire for a world of heroic deeds and superhuman enchanters, and the thirst for "truth./ And elvish wisdom, and long years of youth" (*VP*, pp. 46-47). In a similar note, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1885), which Yeats had intended as the Epilogue to *The Island of Statues* and another rejected poem, "The Seeker", proclaims the death of the "woods of Arcady" and of "their antique joy". This notion, in its more devastating implications, is carried forth in the song of "The Sad Shepherd" (1886). Here the poetic word, which the previous poem pronounced as being "certain good", is now reduced to "inarticulate moan".

17. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the *Odyssey* are taken from Albert Cook, *The Odyssey: A Verse Translation, Background, Criticism*, 2nd edn (New York; London: Norton, 1993; first publ. 1967). The line numbers of citations refer to the Greek text as reprinted in *Homer: Odyssey*, 2 vols, trans. A.T. Murray, rev. George E. Dimock, The Loeb Classical Library, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998; first publ. 1919). References to the *Iliad* are from *Homer: Iliad*, 2 vols, trans. A.T. Murray, rev. William F. Wyatt, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2001; first publ. 1924). Yeats's treatment of Helen will be the subject of a more extensive study in Chapter Seven.

18. It is worth noting that, on a textual level, the description of Niamh as "pearl-pale" and "high born" (*TWO* I, 20) is analogous to that of Helen. For her, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* also reserve the epithets "of white arms" (*Il.* 3.121; *Od.* 22.226) and "from a noble father" (*Il.* 6.292; *Od.* 22.226). That both women are presented in terms of echoing words may be a striking coincidence but it is one that strengthens their connection.

19. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, p. 25.

20. Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos*, pp. 127-128.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969; first publ. 1961), p. 234. This reading of Nietzsche's principle has been brought to my attention by Dr. Stephen A. Hall.

22. Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos*, pp. 14, 149-150.

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 234.

24. Stephen Scully, "Doubling in the Tale of Odysseus," *Classical World*, 80 (1987), p. 403, cited in Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Hero's Failure in the Tragedy of Odysseus: A Revisionist Analysis* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Meller Press, 1990), p. 34.

25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the*

Early 1870s, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (New Jersey; London: Humanities Press, 1993; first publ. 1979), pp. 84, 96, 29.

26. Ibid., *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 38.

27. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Hero's Failure in the Tragedy of Odysseus*, p. 35.

28. George E. Dimock, *The Unity of the 'Odyssey'* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 148.

29. Harold Bloom, *Yeats*, p. 102.

30. Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", in *Untying the Text*, p. 38; "The Death of the Author", trans. Stephen Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1990; first publ. 1988), p. 171.

31. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 38.

32. See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Land and Sacrifice", trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak, in *Reading the 'Odyssey': Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. Seth L. Schein (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 47.

33. Thomas Taylor, trans., *Select Works of Porphyry* (Somerset: The Prometheus Trust, 1994; first publ. 1823) p. 214.

34. In terms of locality, however, Yeats's island of Dancing comes closer to Calypso's island as a figure of the Otherworld since the goddess's abode too lies outside human space. A further similarity between Scheria and Yeats's island of Dancing can be detected in their description of landscape. Both are wooded and in both the natural cycle of seasons is absent. Instead, the west wind blows always in Alcinous' garden, where trees perpetually yield their unspoilt fruit and green grows in "unceasing abundance" (*Od.* 6.128, 7.114-128). On the island of the Immortals no wind blows but there is eternal summer and ever blossoming plants (*TWO* I, 223-224, 320-321). Interestingly, the *Odyssey* presents the abode of the Olympian gods in similar terms to Oisin's description of the first island: there are no winds or seasons and the gods live in a state of perpetual enjoyment (*Od.* 7.43-46).

35. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Land and Sacrifice", in *Reading the 'Odyssey'*, p. 52.

36. Michael J. Sidnell, *Yeats's Poetry and Poetics* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1996), p. 167.

37. Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the 'Odyssey'* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2001; first publ. 1994), p. 123.

38. Pietri Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos*, p. 227.

39. All references to Hesiod's texts are from *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1995; first publ. 1914).

40. Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text", in *Untying the Text*, p. 32.

41. Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 102-106, 112-117.

42. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1951), p. 68.

43. Michel Foucault, in his *Madness and Civilization*, examines the relation of art with

madness in the modern world and remarks: "Madness is the absolute break with the work of art; it forms the constitutive moment of abolition, which dissolves in time the truth of the work of art; it draws the exterior edge, the line of dissolution, the contour against the void" (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (trans. Richard Howard (London; New York: Routledge, 2004; first publ. 1967), p. 273). I shall return to the views of Yeats and Foucault on the issue of madness and art, in their connection with society, in Chapter Seven.

44. According to Dodds, ecstasy, which was the aim of the cult of Dionysus, could range in meaning from freedom from the bounds of the self to "a profound alteration of personality" (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 77).

45. Thomas Taylor, *Select Works of Porphyry*, p. 153.

46. According to one body of classical tradition, the Sirens were women of birdlike form. For the issue of the Siren's appearance see Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. Sir J.G. Frazer, Vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1989; first publ. 1921), pp. 290-291, note 2; J.R.T. Pollard, "Muses and Sirens," *The Classical Review*, n.s 2:2 (1952), pp. 62-63; Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Homeric Sirens", pp. 210-214; and Gregory Crane, *Calypso: Backgrounds and Conventions of the 'Odyssey'* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenaum, 1988), pp. 43, 57-58, note 84.

47. Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the 'Odyssey'*, p. 100.

48. Charles H. Taylor, Jr., "The Obstacles to Odysseus' Return," in *Essays on the 'Odyssey': Selected Modern Criticism*, ed. C.H. Taylor, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 91.

49. Pietro Pucci, "The Song of the Sirens", *Arethusa*, 12:2 (1979), pp. 122, 125-126.

50. Ibid., p. 126.

51. Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos*, pp. 34-35, 39.

52. W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; first publ. 1952), p. 31. For the story of Orpheus and Eurydice also see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, Vol. 2 (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; first publ. in one vol. 1993), pp. 722-723. For the treatment of the story in Virgil and Ovid see Charles Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; first publ. 1989), pp. 36-94. Although Yeats was familiar with the two Latin poets, it is uncertain whether he had read their poetic rendering of Orpheus' descent. Plato in the *Symposium* offers a different version of the story's ending through the mouthpiece of Phaedrus. Orpheus, he claims, failed to bring his wife back to the upper world. Instead, he was presented a phantom of her by the gods as punishment for not dying for the sake of love but contriving to enter Hades with his singing while still alive (179d).

53. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995; first publ. 1961), p. 327.

54. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Hero's Failure in the Tragedy of Odysseus*, p. 35. In this respect, the critic establishes a connection between Odysseus and Orpheus and remarks of the former that, in his capacity as poet, he has been able "to overcome the obstacles posed by death and chaos". The reversion, however, to a condition of savagery in the killing of the suitors subjects him once again to "the forces of death" and threatens "the newly-gained paradise" that his reunion with his wife has granted him.

55. Karl Reinhardt, "The Adventures in the *Odyssey*", trans. Harriet I. Flower, in *Reading the 'Odyssey'*, pp. 100-101.

56. Michael J. Sidnell, *Yeats's Poetry and Poetics*, pp. 47, 175.

57. Edward Larrissy links this sense of alienation to "the Anglo-Irish identity in Ireland and England" (*Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 41).

58. Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos*, pp. 86-87, 101.

59. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, 4th edn (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1961; first publ. 1948), pp. 216, 254.

60. In the scene of Odysseus' recognition by his old nurse Eurycleia, we learn that Odysseus was named by his maternal grandfather, Autolycus, because the latter was himself much hated or hating (*Od.* 19.405-409).

61. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod enumerates five generations of mortal men: a golden race, which lived "like the gods" and was free from toil or sorrow; a silver race, followed by a race of bronze, which sprang from ash-trees; a race of noble heroes, which was "god-like" and in death enjoyed "honour and glory" on the islands of the blessed; and a race of iron, which was the generation of Hesiod's times. For this race, life is the experience of constant "labour and sorrow" and the pain of death (110-180). Because Oisin is a mortal, whose life is a perpetual struggle between the desire for fulfilment and the frustration of failure, his human fate would cast him among the race of iron. But insofar as he displays traits of nobility and bravery, in freeing the chained lady and engaging in a never-ending battle with the demon, he comes closer to the race of heroes.

62. Thomas Taylor, *Select Works of Porphyry*, pp. 150, 153, 160, 219.

63. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "The Argument", Plate 3, in *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York; London: Norton, 1979), p. 86.

64. Heraclitus uses the river-image and the ebbing and flowing movement of the waters to support the doctrine of continuous change in the world. For a more detailed discussion of the notions of flux and strife in Heraclitus, and of Love and Strife in Empedocles see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; first publ. 1957), pp. 193-195, 287-289; Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, rev. edn (London; New York: Routledge, 1996; first publ. 1979), pp. 60, 65-68, 308-311, 315.

Although the river in the second part of Oisin suggests stillness, except for the "bubbling strain", cyclical motion is expressed via the use of other images: the swaying and swinging of the demon that parallels the "passing to and fro" of his hand over imaginary flowers; the vigorous waving of the sea and the flowing of vapours; the shifting of the demon's eyes and his transformations; and finally the passage of time periods in a day corresponding to the four-day cycle of battling, feasting and the demon's rising.

65. All references to Plutarch's texts are from *Plutarch: Moralia*, Vol. V, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1993; first publ. 1936).

66. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Refusal of Odysseus", trans. Vincent Farenga, in *Reading the 'Odyssey'*, pp. 187-188.

67. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the*

Sublime (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p. 164.

68. For the Sirens' association with the Underworld see Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991; first publ. 1903), pp. 203-204; J.R.T. Pollard, "Muses and Sirens," pp. 62-63. For Hermes as psychopomp see Gregory Crane, *Calypso*, pp. 16, 24, note 11.

69. For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of memory and forgetfulness in the Platonic and Orphic theology see W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, pp. 176-177; Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 574-582.

70. The reference to Plato's dialogue appears in the "Introduction" to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), pp. xvi-xviii; see Chapter Two, note 63.

71. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Refusal of Odysseus", in *Reading the 'Odyssey'*, p. 189.

72. In the *Iliad*, death and love are presented in similar terms, via images of concealment, as wrapping mortals in a dark cloud or covering them (5.68, 16.350 and 3.442).

73. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 98.

74. When informed by Hermes of the gods' judgement that she must release Odysseus, Calypso mentions the myth to justify her situation. The accusation, that her love for a mortal is begrudged by the male gods, stresses the impossibility of their union both in terms of the poem's structure and its metaphysics. In contrast, Niamh, on the way to the second island, sings of the happy marriages of immortals with mortals in ancient times, "before God was" (*TWO* II, 8-13). But her song, troubled by tears, foreshadows the fate of her own union with Oisin. Its time frame points to a lost golden age, when men lived in communion with nature and gods. The depiction of a life untouched by sorrow or decay provides a parallel to the mode of existence Oisin glimpses on the first island and one he could potentially enjoy with Niamh. But her reference to a remote past *in illo tempore* renders the relevance of such existence in the present tenuous. It suggests a utopian alternative to the reality of mortal life.

75. For the Heracletean Unity Thesis see G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 188-190; also see Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 69-75.

76. The passage from Heraclitus reads "Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living their death and dying their life" (fr. 62). Scholars have pointed to its connection with the doctrine of opposites but have also interpreted it as suggesting the "deification of some souls" (G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 208). Yeats's first reference to it appears in a journal entry of 1909, in which he quotes it in full (*Mem*, p. 216). In a letter of 1938 to Ethel Mannin, Yeats stated that "all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. That is true of life and death themselves" (*L*, p. 918).

CHAPTER SIX

The Begotten Image:
Narcissistic Elements in the Poetry of Yeats

I

Surveying the literary achievement of his generation and commenting on the connection between the artist and society, and between art and life, Yeats wrote in his essay "J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time" (1910):

> The imaginative writer shows us the world as a painter does his picture, reversed in a looking-glass, that we may see it, not as it seems to eyes habit has made dull, but as we were Adam and this the first morning; and when the new image becomes as little strange as the old we shall stay with him, because he has, besides the strangeness, not strange to him, that made us share his vision, sincerity that makes us share his feeling.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 339)

The passage offers an exposition of Yeats's conception of the artistic process as well as of the function of art in a cultural context. The comparison of poetry to painting does not merely reveal Yeats's concern with the interrelation of literature and the visual arts[1] but also the significance that the image and its generation holds in his poetics. As both an aesthetic principle and a metaphor for poetry, the mirror carries associations with the notions of reflection and reflexivity. It is these associations and their translation into poetic terms that the present chapter proposes to discuss and evaluate.

Far, however, from reflecting the generative world of Nature with its laws of finitude and necessity, Yeats's mirror, applied to art, holds up an ideal image of reality that evokes a condition of perfection. Such a mythical apprehension of art posits the existence of a non-material, transcendent world, the imperishable substance of which is unveiled through the process of artistic creation. The poet, Yeats intimates in the passage quoted above, gazes into the looking glass of the phenomenal world not to retrieve its self-same image but its eternal countenance. Art, Yeats had maintained in

Plotinian fashion almost a decade earlier in "At Stratford-on-Avon", "brings us nearer to the archetypal ideas themselves, and away from nature, which is but their looking-glass" (*E&I*, p. 102). Thus, by virtue of being a symbolic representation of an unchangeable mode of existence, art is elevated to the status of truth and acquires metaphysical implications with regard to its aesthetic and social function.

Yeats had already postulated in his essay "William Blake and his Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*" (1897) that the sensory world is merely a distorted reflection of immortal essences, which the imagination, being of "'the world of eternity'", reveals as the measure of reality (*E&I*, p. 117). Three years later, in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", Yeats, invoking his romantic predecessor, again associates reflection with the evanescence of human life mirrored upon the waters of Shelley's river-symbol of the archetypal mind (*E&I*, pp. 85-86). Linked with such notion of the mirror is the antithesis between the shadowy substance of Nature's opaque glass and the visionary clarity of the divinely inspired poetic mind. In this sense, the artist is viewed as a creator in his own right and the images he generates are vested with a symbolic quality. Their validity rests on the premise that they function to pierce the veil of materiality and temporality, which obscures perception of the spiritual element lying beneath, and thus to mediate between the apparent and the real, the visible and the invisible.

In the early poem "The Indian upon God" (1886), the image generated in the water-reflection of the living creatures enumerated in the poem has such a mediating power. It reveals a transcendent, divine presence, in whose liking the physical world is construed to have been created. The poem renders the notion of imitation and generation, the latter being associated with the element of water, in Platonic and neo-Platonic terms. It presents a dualistic view of the world that rests upon the hermetic premise often quoted by Yeats of "'The things below are as the things above'" (*E&I*, p. 146). It posits the existence of an ultimate principle as supreme creator, with the physical realm "in His image made" and disclosing the eternal and the permanent via pictures of temporality and transience. At the same time, by means of the poetic image, the poem itself also functions as artifice in the construction of which the artist reproduces the primal act of creation.

However, the multiplicity of images, incarnating the ideal of the godhead in a diversity of forms, points to the ambiguity of the Indian's theological perspective. The imagistic plurality appears neither to challenge nor endorse the principle of diversity

with which the physical world is invested. But its very neutrality undermines the certainty of the poem's metaphysical intimations. As reflections, God's images are subjective representations projecting an individualistic perception of the qualities of the divine. For Nietzsche, such an attitude betrays a narcissistic tendency to force one's own meaning upon the world: "Man really mirrors himself in things, that which gives him back his own reflection he considers beautiful"[2], or, as in the case of Yeats's Indian poem, divine. Read from this viewpoint, the water surface functions as a trope for poetry, which, entangled in its reflecting capacity, seizes upon the outer world, postulating its own truths as eternal realities. No longer the repository of a fixed message externally imposed, poetry is itself the creator of meaning and the standard of reality.

In the cosmology of *Timaeus*, Plato posits the idea that the natural world, being an object not of thought and logic but rather of opinion aided by the senses, is in a state of becoming. Its origin therefore is attributed to a cause and, as a creation, it is a copy generated in the image of what is eternal and unchangeable (28a-29b). For Plato, then, the universe and all it contains must be perceived as an emanation from an ultimate reality, which encompasses paradigmatically all the Ideas. In his treatise "On the Intellectual Beauty", Plotinus also expresses a similar idea in considering the universe to have sprang from the divine world, of which it is an image, and to exemplify in its "mingled" beauty the "unmingled" beauty of the creating principle. For Plotinus, it is this ideal unity and beauty, rather than the beauty inhering in nature, that is imitated by and may be revealed in a work of art.[3]

Such is the premise of "The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart" (1892), although here it is in the semblance of the beloved's image that the poet-speaker attempts to re-construct the world "like a casket of gold". The reflective quality of the metal recalls the shimmering surface of water in "The Indian upon God" but, in contrast, reflection points to an inverted process of mimesis. The image, and not a transcendent reality, provides the model upon which the temporal world is to be re-shaped. However, the association of the image with the rose reveals a tension in the poem's attempt to reconcile the physical and the spiritual. As emblematic of eternal beauty perceived as the unifying principle, the rose elevates both image and the world that incarnates it to the realm of the ideal. It thus salvages them from the taint of imperfection by making the image a vehicle of the immaterial truth via the act of poetic

creation. Yet, the poet places its blossoming "in the deeps of his heart", thus suggesting not only the descent of the rose into the realm of physicality but also that the external world of appearance mirrors the images grown in the poetic mind.[4] Such a notion of reflection, whereby physical reality is shaped by the image-making power of the imagination, anticipates much of the later poetry. It also indicates a movement towards a conception of art as a reflector of values to be projected upon and emulated by life.

II

Yeats's attitude to the connection of the mirror with both art and life by no means remained unequivocal throughout his poetic career. Often, even in the early poems, the aesthetic and metaphysical associations of the mirror are laden with ambiguity. The symbol is thus employed to intimate the poet's oscillation between his yearning for the permanence of the Ideal, which must relentlessly lie beyond his reach, and the alluring deception of the image that the gaze in the mirror casts off. In a letter of 1888 to Katharine Tynan, Yeats ascribed to his poetic endeavours while engaged in the composition of *The Wanderings of Oisin* the metaphor of "a mere dead mirror on which things reflect themselves" (*CL* I, p. 94). Yeats's remark projects a dissociation of art and life, the artist standing aside in contemplative isolation as a passive vessel for the creative energies expressed through the medium of his craft. A few years later, in his exposition of Blake's "Symbolic System" in *The Works of William Blake*, he was to modify this view and, as already discussed in the second chapter, to hypostasise the mirror both in Blake's "Divine Imagination" and in the Platonic realm of Ideas.

In contrast to such an affirmative conception, the poetry presents the symbol of the mirror in its more sinister connotations. Thus, in "The Sad Shepherd" (1886), the use of the shell image denotes a solipsistic state of mind that perceives Nature not as harmonious with man but as indifferent to the human quest for articulation and meaning:

> And thought, *I will my heavy story tell*
> *Till my own words, re-echoing, shall send*
> *Their sadness through a hollow, pearly heart;*
> *And my own tale again for me shall sing,*
> *And my own whispering words be comforting,*
> *And lo! my ancient burden may depart.*

In a manner comparable to the silent, "trumpet-twisted" shell described in Book I of

The Wanderings of Oisin as being narcissistically immersed in a vision of its own glorious beauty, the "sad dweller" encountered by the sad shepherd offers no companionable reiteration of the artistic dream. Poetic language fails to construct a viable medium through which to render meaning and is instead reduced to an "inarticulate moan" that resounds its own hollowness. It recalls the empty shell in "Ancestral Houses" (1923), which, although reflecting outer beauty, is divested of any real signification and connotes sterility. The association of both shells with the distortion that poetic utterance suffers as a result of its displacement either from tradition or the realm of physicality signifies art's failure to impose its own semantics upon an external world it seeks to convert into a reflector of its inner mood. The world, no longer an image of Logos, challenges the latter's centrality and frustrates poetic activity. In "The Sad Shepherd", the poet's attempt to transform the private word into the permanence of transcendent beauty resembles not "that joyous praise as though a bird watching its plumage in still water had begun to sing in its joy" (*E&I*, pp. 57-58). It becomes a lament over the loss of potency in overcoming the limitations of artistic expression as well as of historical time.

This is the pervasive mood in "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" (1890), which links reflection with entrapment, a notion also underlying the thematic exposition of "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water" (1903). Both poems offer a reverse treatment of the Narcissus myth with speakers who, in the passivity and decrepitude of old age, are engaged in a reflexive activity which, rather than recreating or restoring beauty, generates a reminisced caricature of it. As Jahan Ramazani observes, the narrative voices are "withered Narcissi fixated"[5] on images of selfhood:

> They had hands like claws, and their knees
> Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
> By the waters.

But as the later of the two poems exemplifies, the images of reflection employed deconstruct the reflected object by giving back a degraded representation of it. Beauty "drifts away". Even its recollection, bitterly defended in the Old Pensioner poem, proves an ineffective conciliatory agent, unable to redeem the transience and imperfection of the temporal world. Time, like water, functions as the distorting reflector that reproduces a fragmented and twisted reality, contrasted with the perfection of images of "the beauties that I loved", buried in the Pensioner's mind.

Their evocation notwithstanding, both the speaker as creator and the aesthetic product he creates project a fallen world, which is more shadow than reflection of an eternal act of creation. What both poems intimate is that the incarnation of beauty in physical form taints its image with the very element of corporeality that the imagination seeks to transcend via its creative activity. The defiant proclamation, "I spit in the face of Time/ That has transfigured me", in the earlier of the two poems accentuates the inaccessibility of ideal beauty, which is either cast away into the recesses of memory or subject to the same law of decay as the material realm.

Yeats carries the development of this theme in another poem of the same period, "The Two Trees" (1892). The speaker opposes the beauty and goodness of innocence that springs from the heart to a vision of ugliness and evil associated with self-consciousness. The beloved's gaze in "the bitter glass" brings not a revelation of the holiness of life experienced in its totality, as both a physical and spiritual mode of existence. Rather, it reflects the divisions and limitations which, for Yeats, are projected by the human mind when its conceptions are perceived as the only reality. The material world, presented as the last emanation from the Tree of Life, is here invested with an element of unreality produced by the function of the mirror. Activated by the female gaze as it passes from blissful ignorance to intellectual affectation, the mirror becomes, as Edward Larrissy points out, "a dead reflector of life".[6] Equally beguiling as the demons who hold up the mirror, the images originating therein are agents of corruption, for they displace the nature of spiritual truth onto the plane of abstract thought.

In his essay "Anima Mundi", which appeared as part of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), Yeats wrote in a note added in 1924 that "the repose of man is the choice of the Daimon, and the repose of the Daimon the choice of man". The essay proposes the existence of two realities, "the terrestrial and the condition of fire", the former being associated with evil conceived as the strife of all antinomies. Between these two realities Yeats interpolates a Heraclitean "condition of air", where images dwell and acquire their existence either via memory or the reflected projection upon them of symbolic associations. This Yeats calls "the place of shades who are 'in the whirl of those who are fading'" (*Myth*, pp. 356-357). Anticipating the essay, the "Two Trees" also attributes to images a shadowy substance and presents the mirror as the locus of antithesis between the benign and malign forces of Nature, embodied respectively in

the divine and the demonic.

It is this connection between the image in the mirror and the discord brought by intellectual activity, which dissociates both from beauty, that also informs Yeats's apprehension of a "devil in the looking-glass" in "Beggar to Beggar Cried" (1914). "The Two Trees" expresses a similar idea. The "fatal image" generated in the mirror is offered as a negation both of the fullness of life and of the poetic activity dwelling exclusively on such an image:

> For all things turn to barrenness
> In the dim glass the demons hold,
> The glass of outer weariness,
> Made when God slept in times of old.

The poem presents the phenomenal world as a fallen world, one in which meaning is deferred to the level of externality. The barrenness of the reflected images corresponds to the kind of art that is engaged in reproducing the shadowy substance of this world and that itself becomes another hollow image. Rather than functioning as God's clear image and affording a reflection of the divine act of creation, both the natural and the artistic creation are, to apply Thomas Whitaker's remark, "the dark yet glittering inversion of God",[7] the adversarial serpent of division in "Ribh denounces Patrick". The sleep of God is the sleep of the imagination divested of its creative vitality and turning the creative act into an abstracted, and therefore deadening, projection of the mind. The "glass of outer weariness" brings no profundity of the experience of life, no wisdom of the heart, but only knowledge of its own limitation and fragmentariness.

III

In the short story "Rosa Alchemica" (1896), Yeats returns to the notion of reflection as suggestive both of a type of ego-conscious, artistic activity and the illusory nature of the mind's ideas. To the speaker's emphatic pronouncement, that "a man is great just in so far as he can make his mind reflect everything with indifferent precision like a mirror", the voices in the dream-like state retort: "'The mirror is broken in two pieces,'" upon which is heard "another voice answer, 'The mirror is broken in four pieces,' and a more distant voice cry, 'The mirror is broken into numberless pieces'" (*VSR*, pp. 134-135). Through the vehicle of the speaker, Yeats equates the reflecting quality of the mind engaged in the intellectual process with imaginative sterility and the

rejection of the spiritual dimension of life. Distancing himself from the world he desires to experience, although without its "bitterness and without satiety", and yearning for "the transmutation of life into art" (*VSR*, pp. 127, 126), the narrator oscillates between what P.Th.M.G. Liebregts describes as "the flux of life and the stasis of art".[8] Thus, the speaker's "mirror of polished steel" (*VSR*, pp. 127-128) affords a critique of the divorce of art from the experience of life in its fullness – its passionate intensity, its tragic joy, its ecstatic revelry.

This scene intimates that only the shattering of the mind's mirror and the surrender of the will can lead to visionary revelation, to the perception of the Platonic beauty of the divine powers and the attainment of the Plotinian union with eternal reality. But even such an artistic model, although escaping the dangers of abstraction and mechanical rhythms of purely contemplative art, does not embrace physicality. For Nietzsche, who advocated a Dionysian art originating in the abundance of life and affording a "tragic insight" into it, into its creative as well as destructive forces, a metaphysical art is as much a denial of life as that promoted by Yeats's speaker. It offers not only a distorted perspective of reality as "through tinted glass" but also a "saviour" god who promises peace and redemption. It is an art which, always desirous "to fix, to immortalise", privileges a state of "being" over that of change, of "becoming".[9]

In Yeats's story, the state of trance, to which the speaker is induced and which shatters the illusion of the thought-images elaborated in the mind, is mediated by the persona of Michael Robartes. Liebregts reads the character of Robartes as a Dionysian figure bearing a close resemblance to the god as presented in Euripides' play *Bacchae*.[10] In its publication as part of the collection of stories entitled *The Secret Rose* in 1897, "Rosa Alchemica" was preceded by an epigraph taken from the *Bacchae*:

> O blessed and happy he who, knowing the mysteries of the gods, sanctifies his life, and purifies his soul, celebrating orgies in the mountains with holy purifications.
>
> (*VSR*, p. 125)

In his capacity as mediator between the human and the divine, and as reconciler of the irrational forces of nature and the creative impulses of the imagination, Robartes performs for the narrator the role of initiator into the Bacchic-like mysteries of his Order of the Alchemical Rose. At the same time, he serves as Yeats's model of the

spiritual artist as aesthete, for whom life in the "imagination and in a refined understanding" (*VSR*, p. 133) brings the ultimate revelation: the communion of man not with a singular divinity but with a plurality of gods functioning as the embodiment of the immortal Moods.[11] Robartes's assertion that these transcendental beings have an existence independent of the human mind and that they "'are always making and unmaking humanity, which is indeed but the trembling of their lips'" (*VSR*, p. 133), projects the notion of the material world being the reflected shadow of the spiritual order. Through the persona of Michael Robartes, Yeats invests art with emblematic qualities. He presents the artist, allied to the magician, as contemplator of a Platonic Form of Eternal Beauty, in whose resemblance he creates his own poetic images communicated to him via the imagination and the incarnate shapes of the Moods.

In his notes to the collection of poems *The Wind among the Reeds*, Yeats describes Robartes as "the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or the adoration of the Magi" (*VP*, p. 803). He thus represents an aspect of the poetic imagination and an attitude to its image-generating process which Albright terms the imagination "hoarding its images" (*YP*, p. 452). As such, he encompasses Narcissistic elements that function as an aesthetic principle. Robartes appears again as a character in a number of poems incorporated in the 1921 volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. But there, although he has retained some of the earlier, unworldly associations of his persona, especially with regard to artistic expression through ritual, he functions more as a mouthpiece for Yeats's conception of art in terms that would affirm physical experience.

In the poem that gave the title to the collection, the speaker, Michael Robartes, employs the symbol of the mirror to elaborate the contrast between abstract thought and bodily wisdom. He invests the mirror with distorting qualities, especially if viewed in the context of his attitude to beauty in its female incarnation, unity and the art inspired by such aesthetic ideals. Seen from a male perspective, female beauty operates as an agent of transformation – inspiring the heroic feat of dragon slaying in the lover, rousing society to the enactment of the heroic ideal, or engendering Homer's art. It is thus praised because it carries the potential to effect unity in both art and culture, but only if it remains divorced from intellect:

> blest souls are not composite,
> And that all beautiful women may

> Live in uncomposite blessedness,
> And lead us to the like – if they
> Will banish every thought.

Although presented in its spiritual dimension as the expression and affirmation of life, but without acquiring any moral or metaphysical signification, beauty still retains its physical aspect. Far from being identified as an intellectual incarnation, it is itself an image not of God's thought but of his "mere body".[12] What corrupts its subliminal unity, altering it into awareness of division and the experience of suffering, is the reflection of beauty's lineaments in the mirror. Her eyes turned "upon the glass", the dancer "on the instant would grow wise", conscious of the separation between the beholding self and the self beheld.

In 1906 Yeats had favoured "the heroic discipline of the looking-glass" (*E&I*, p. 270) and had associated it with beauty as bodily grace and self-possession. But in this poem, the beloved's gaze in the glass threatens to challenge romantic idealisation by returning an image that refuses to cast female body and beauty into a passive object of visual male fantasy. Informed by thoughts of intellectual accomplishment, the image will provoke the lover's "rage/ At all that is not pictured there", at the acquisition of what diminishes the perfection and harmony of corporeal form as the incarnation of beauty. For all its emphasis on physicality and its evocation of Yeats's equation of beauty with Dante's concept of a perfectly proportioned human body, the ideal image offered by the poem's speaker is still an image of the ideal.

In "The Statues" (1939), Yeats again expounds the notion that "knowledge increases unreality" by establishing cognition of the illusory nature of the phenomenal world. It thus deepens, as Holdridge remarks, the chasm between appearance and "reality in the higher ideal sense",[13] between physical and spiritual truth or between nature and art. As the bodily self-possession of the Phidian sculptures, with their empty eyeballs "gazing at nothing" (*AVb*, p. 277), and therefore reflecting nothing, lapses into the vacuous passivity of the Indian statues of Buddha, measured proportion gives way to undisciplined form. Ultimately, the "looking-glass" which Phidias gave to dreams, that clear mirror of perfect unity and ideal beauty, is altered into the self-reflecting mirror of modern intellectual abstraction and frustrated desire; whether the desire for artistic and cultural synthesis or for sexual regeneration, both modelled upon the Greek standard of perfection.

Like "Byzantium", this too is an expositional poem on the process of image generation whereby art is created and culture is in turn shaped. Its underlying precept is the opposition between image as synthesis and image as division. In the first part of the poem, Yeats casts the image that engenders and incarnates civilisation, such as is embodied in the unifying, plastic form of Phidian Greece. This is also the image that, in its reconciling of Dionysian energy and Apollonian definition, the poet desires to restore to modern Irish culture. Cuchulain's image, summoned to the side of Pearse, incarnates the ideal of another image of perfection, the "plummet-measured face", with its power to animate passion and channel sexual energies. By contrast, the second part of the poem moves around the image that, by an emphasis on its own unreality, shatters artistic integrity and cultural coherence, such as is manifest in the dispersing, formless abstraction of modern artwork, the "formless spawning fury" of "this filthy modern tide".

For the poem's speaker, intellect renders human action or historical process and even artistic creation a vain, narcissistic exercise in self-absorption, self-exaltation and self-consciousness, a mere "mirror on mirror mirrored". Consequently, any engagement in its reflections becomes an entrapment in a multiplicity of hollow images. Although, Yeats affirms in *A Vision* (1937), "only one symbol exists, [...] the reflecting mirrors make many appear and all different" (*AVb*, p. 240). What, then, is cast off is no longer a single image encompassing the physical and the intellectual, the boundless and the measured, passion and restraint; instead, man experiences the bitter diversity and heterogeneity of the reflected multiple.

This is also Ribh's message in "Ribh denounces Patrick" (1934). Renouncing the philosophical abstraction of the Trinity tenet, which forms the basis of Christian theology, the speaker juxtaposes the simplicity of divine unity to the multiplicity of the Godhead's degenerated image as reflected in the corporeal world. The Platonic notions of imitation, on the one hand, as well as of unity and plurality, on the other, inform the dialectic of the poem, for "things below are copies". And yet, "all must copy copies, all increase their kind". The earthly process of emulation, being temporal and imperfect, results in the creation of a multiplicity of simulations and further removes Nature from the original state of unity.

Expounding his theory of the creation of the material world in the *Timaeus*, Plato ascribes to God the wisdom and power to unite the many into one and also to

resolve the one into a multitude (68d). This notion of the one and many informs the philosophical exposition of the *Parmenides* and comes up again in the *Philebus*. The latter proposes the existence of Ideas as unities which can be present in many particulars, thus accounting for the diversification and multiplicity of the sensible world (15b, 16c-e). Similarly, in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, Thomas Taylor also construes generation as intimating "the *procession* of things from their cause" and as elucidating the progression from unity to wholeness to multitude.[14] For Plato, true knowledge consists in perceiving reality not as plurality, which characterises existence in the physical realm, but as unity, such as abides in the pure being of the divine. Thus, as the *Phaedrus* proposes, man's goal is to attain communion with the deity and therefore pass, by means of reason and memory, from "the many perceptions of the senses" to the perception of a unity (249b-c). In a letter of 1927 to Joseph Hone, Yeats also sanctions "the ancient hierarchy of beings from man up to the One" (*L*, p. 728).

However, in the Ribh poem, although the speaker concedes the notion of copy, his perception of imitation, rendered in sexual terms, differs from both the Platonic and the Christian idea, which he ultimately rejects. He offers the suggestion of what Hazard Adams terms "a supernatural, self-begetting sexuality"[15] set against the failed effort of earthly couples to imitate the divine act of procreation; an effort which, rather than attain the self-reflecting unity of God, produces multiplicity. "We come at birth into a multitude", Robartes proclaims in *A Vision*, and not even death solves the antinomy of life, for we are forever pulled back into the world of generation (*AVb*, p. 52). For Ribh too, the "coil" of Nature thwarts the divine fulfilment of earthly passion and generates instead the "mirror-scalèd serpent". In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we can read the snake in Zarathustra's vision as associated with individuation, with the alienation of the individual from life perceived as dynamic continuity. This fragmentation of the totality of experience into separate parts disrupts the unity of life and the flow of its energy. It is only in the symbolic act of the biting off of the snake's head by the young shepherd, which transforms and regenerates him, that unity is reinstated and the joy of life re-affirmed.[16]

Yeats's poem, although retaining the snake parallel to the vision of Nietzsche's character, offers no ultimate celebration of the continuity of life energy and no Dionysian regeneration. Rather, through a series of multiplying reflections that shatter the wholeness of the divine body, it records the descent from the unity of the one to the

division of the many. In the course of emanation, "undivided reality" is translated, on the plane of physicality, as that "which human experience divides into opposites", the condition of strife. Essentially, in the poem, Ribh appears to function as the vehicle of expression for the Yeatsian proposition of *A Vision* that in this condition of alternating contraries originates "the Platonic doctrine of imitation – the opposing states copy eternity" (*AVb*, p. 247). In its countless reflections that trap the individual into awareness of limitation and opposition, Yeats's snake represents a force of deception and corruption, both physical and spiritual. Physical, because the energy and vitality of the mortal body is spent not in an act of self-affirmation and self-celebration but in futile multiplication. Spiritual, because no resurrection of the body is achieved and the wholeness of divine love forever escapes the grasp of the human lovers.

At the same time, the symbolism of the snake also has implications for the kind of art it engenders. It is an art that reflects not the unified nature of an eternal reality but the limited, and therefore limiting, perception of the human mind and the fragmentation of physical experience. In *A Vision*, Yeats compares this art to "a vine whose tendrils climb everywhere and display among their leaves all those strange images of bird and beast, those forms that represent no creature eye has ever seen, yet are begotten one upon the other as if they were themselves living creatures" (*AVb*, p. 281). Because it lacks the organic rhythm of life, its sense of fullness and continuity, the unity of such art is artificial and it creates a sense of multiplicity and unreality.

IV

The element of heterogeneity forms the basis for Yeats's criticism of modern art, with its preoccupation with abstraction and generalisation, which, as he expressed in 1904, are mere "reflections in a mirror that seem living". As in the Ribh poem, Yeats here is employing the symbol of the reflector and its capacity for inverting our notion of reality to suggest a movement in art away from "the centre", from unification, towards "somewhere in that whirling circumference", towards division and dispersal. In effect, it is a movement whereby the "immortal and imperishable" is supplanted by "an image in a looking-glass" (*Ex*, 149-150, 151). Ultimate reality, perceived as the transcendence of the temporal and the ephemeral, becomes confused with its distorted reflection in the mirror of historical change.

Some thirty years later, this theme of distortion and deception, rendered in more

oblique terms, is pursued in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" (1932). Read against "Tom the Lunatic" and "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus" (1932), the Coole poem offers a negative, non-redemptive perspective of the mirror. In the two poems from *Words from Music Perhaps*, distorted eyesight dims "Nature's pure unchanging light" and impedes perception of the physical world as God's image, but this is ultimately overcome by an affirmation of divine perfection. In the Coole poem, the mood is that of dejection permeating through the entire natural world. The latter affords no glimpses of eternity or redemption from the transient and the accidental but is instead reduced to mirroring the speaker's despondent thoughts:

> Upon the border of that lake's a wood
> Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,
> And in a copse of beeches there I stood,
> For Nature's pulled her tragic buskin on
> And all the rant's a mirror of my mood.

The image of the swan,[17] mounting into the sky in all its glorious beauty of inhuman white, introduces the possibility of transcendence, as does the comparison to the soul's upward movement. But the inaccessibility of the potential it offers, suggested in the arrogance of its purity, its indifference to human concerns, frustrates the effort. The contrasting images of decay and degeneration pull the speaker back into the realm of physicality, in which glittering surfaces are either distorted or appear ominous. Dry sticks break the watery stillness and the darkness of the flood, upon which the swan finally drifts, its song reduced to silence, intensifies the predominant sense of mortality.

In *A Vision*, Yeats employs the image of dry sticks "tied into a bundle" to suggest the arriving of civilisation at a point of decline and degradation because it will have exhausted all its creative energies and its unity will be artificial (*AVb*, pp. 301-302). Because *A Vision* perceives modern Christian culture as primary, the "dry sticks" in the poem carry such associations of the approaching end of the current era. For the early Nietzsche, the destruction of a decayed and feeble culture can only be effected by the operation of the Dionysian principle, which functions as an agent of creativity in that it transforms fragmented life into a new, dynamic unity:

> A storm seizes everything decrepit, rotten, broken, stunted; shrouds it in a whirling red cloud of dust and carries it into the air like a vulture. In vain confusion we seek for all that has vanished; for what we see has risen as if from beneath the earth into the gold light, so full and green, so luxuriantly alive, immeasurable and filed with yearning.[18]

Yeats's poem presents such a vision of decay but offers no prospect of regeneration. Its glass no longer clear, Nature both conceals and reveals. It conceals those forces of vitality and creativity which, in "Ancestral Houses", had realised themselves in the "abounding glittering jet" that had engendered Homer's poetry and the greatness of a tradition founded upon a unified sense of culture. Such forces, had they retained their transforming potency as life-infusing principles, would allow the speaker to carry on this tradition and create an art as the ideal exemplar of unity. Nature's revelation, which is also the revelatory implication of the poem, lies not in the transmutation of the temporal into the eternal via the activity of the creative impulse but in the failure to achieve spiritual and even imaginative transcendence and regeneration.

The progression from the natural to the artistic to the transcendental ends at the point of departure: in the mirror of mortality. Here, the "darkening flood", which yields no reflection of the swan, carries the dead body of Dionysus without the prospect of its imaginative resurrection. It casts off the Apollonian mask, laying bare the tragic reality of life as it is filled by "the turbulent stream of time"[19] and of historical necessity. Here, as a tragic figure, Narcissus gazes into the mirror and beholds not the image of his exultant face admiring its own beauty, not a transcendental vision of perfection and reconciliation. Instead, he sees the gaping abyss of the mirror surface itself revealing nothing except the inevitability of its force and the terrifying finality of the illusion it creates. His is the parrot's rage "at his own image in the enamelled sea" that shatters the inhuman stillness of the artificial paradise of "The Indian to His Love" (1886).

Yet, we can argue that perceiving the natural world as illusory signifies in itself a kind of fall not from Edenic perfection but from generative imperfection. The personal tragedy of the Yeatsian figure, mirrored in Nature pulling "her tragic buskin on", lies in the very desire and need for transcendence from temporality; in a reluctance to acknowledge that the concept of the "vegetable glass", with all its implications of the existence of a higher reality hidden beneath it, is in fact the illusion (or, to reverse the notion, that the glass is the actual reality); and that resurrection can be achieved not in a spiritual or ideal form but in the body proper, restored to its condition of sensuous glory. Nietzsche's thoughts on the subject, as expressed in the notes forming the text of *The Will to Power*, offer an interesting perspective from which to evaluate Yeats's outlook.

For Nietzsche, the "old antithesis" between the notions of apparent and true,

applied to our perception of the world, leads to the formation of the prejudice that the "apparent world is not counted as a 'valuable' world" on the premise that "appearance" can be assigned no value. Accordingly, only "a 'true' world can be valuable in itself". Nietzsche sees the positing of the concept of "the true world" as "the great inspirer of doubt and devaluator in respect of the world *we are*", and as a means of eluding this world by regarding it as "untruthful, deceptive, dishonest, inauthentic, inessential". Such a belief, far for being an affirmation of life, is symptomatic of "the instinct of life-weariness", which "has created the 'other world'".[20] In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche reverses traditional theological conception by proposing that the physical world of becoming is the only reality. To embrace it in its wholeness, to affirm even what is "questionable and terrible in existence", is a mark of Dionysian art.[21] Because Nietzsche places the origin of the dichotomy between a "real" and an "apparent" world in the prejudicial outlook of philosophy, religion and morality, he dismisses all three as "*symptoms of decadence*".[22]

Yeats would probably have agreed with Nietzsche on the issue of morality and shared his conception of art as "freedom from moral narrowness and corner-perspectives". He would also have accepted that the artist, apprehending life through his senses, has retained "the scent of life" and has "loved the things of 'this world'". But he would certainly have objected to Nietzsche's position on art as "flight into nature",[23] although recognising at the same time that experience of the natural world must be at the root of all artistic expression. In a letter of 1903 to John Quinn, Yeats remarked that "Nietzsche remains to me as stirring as ever, though I do not go all the journey with him" (*CL* III, p. 335).

Yeats's ambivalence towards Nietzsche is also discernible in a diary entry of 1909, in which Thomas Dume reads an allusion to *The Will to Power*.[24] Yeats speaks here approvingly of both Blake and Nietzsche's privileging of "a happy thoughtless person" over "any man of intellect". He attributes their preference to their perception of the intellectual process as an act of will, of self-consciousness, and therefore of life-denial, in that it engenders abstraction.[25] Indeed, Nietzsche speaks of the "'childishness'" in artists as "their ignorance about themselves, their indifference to 'eternal values,' their seriousness in 'play'",[26] a notion echoed in Yeats's own remark about the childlike nature of Nietzsche's "Superman". Yeats then proceeds to distinguish between the artist and the man of action on the premise that the former

expresses in his work the wholeness of life "at peace with itself and doing without forethought what its humanity bids it" (*Aut*, pp. 474-475). He sees, as Nietzsche writes, "nothing as it is, but fuller, simpler, stronger", his art being "an excess and overflow of blooming physicality into the world of images and desires".[27]

But whereas, for Nietzsche, the artist who engages in the reflective process of self-understanding "would misunderstand himself" and "ought not to look back, he ought not to look at all" but "ought to give", expend himself,[28] for Yeats, the artist is presented as a man of intellect "compelled to think and express". He is thus engaged in an intellectualised, monologic relation with life whereby he "confess[es] to Life" and tells it "all that we would do if we were young, beautiful and rich" but without eliciting an adequate response. Consequently, Yeats pronounces, if seen from the perspective of life, the artist is "an artifice, an emphasis, an uncompleted arc perhaps" but those he cherishes and celebrates "are complete arcs". For Yeats, personal accomplishment, as typified by the man of action, entails preoccupation with self-construction at the expense of the experience of life in its totality. It therefore results in a fragmented perception of it (*Aut*, p. 475).

It is in the context of such an assertion that we can read images of reflection in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1921). Here, the artist's involvement in social activity, effected via the formative function of his art, brings no sense of communion with the life-affirming forces of nature. Rather, it traps the artist in a labyrinth of self-reflecting, contemplative isolation that counteracts spiritual transcendence. As an emblem of "the solitary soul", seeking redemption from a world of imperfection and transience, the swan appears again as the embodiment of fulfilment via the powers of imagination. At this point, Nature can still yield an image of the swan's "state", the nobility of its defiance and pride against the winds of destruction, albeit it is a "troubled mirror" that surrenders the reflection:

> The wings half spread for flight,
> The breast thrust out in pride
> Whether to play, or to ride
> Those winds that clamour of approaching night.

Troubled either by the flux of time or by the vortex of the artist's labyrinthine meditation, the mirror functions as yet another distorting reflector that threatens to shatter the revelation it purports to bring: that art can confer meaning and coherence

upon the forces of irrationality and chaos. But content though he may be with the act of revelation, the artist must eventually acknowledge the futility of the poetic exercise – "that brief gleam of its life" gone – and that it is into "the desolate heaven" that the swan leaps.

> That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
> To end all things, to end
> What my laborious life imagined, even
> The half-imagined, the half-written page.

The "troubled mirror" of temporality is now showing an apocalyptic vision of violence and terror that half begins in the solipsistic, mirroring world of the mind but ends in, if not with, the poetic text. The failure of art to project and enforce an ideal of unity and spiritual fulfilment signifies the illusory nature of the attempt as well as the failure of life to sustain such an ideal. The rippling mirror that had revealed the swan image as a symbol of the potentiality of transcendence has now altered into the "crack-pated" surface of the dreaming imagination that has in vain sought to transform and transfigure life via the potency of its creations.

Indeed, not only art but also civilisation itself is an illusion, a mere reflection in the mirror of corporeality that projects the human desire for transcendence. The oscillation between these two opposing tendencies – renunciation of the worldly and engagement in temporality – informs the dialectic of the final poem in the sequence of *Supernatural Songs*, "Meru" (1934). It is a poem which also expresses, in terms of the Niezschean opposition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the willed but frustrated need for the reconciliation of the finitude of image and the infinity of ultimate reality:

> Civilisation is hooped together, brought
> Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
> By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
> And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
> Ravening through century after century,
> Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
> Into the desolation of reality.

The poem reiterates the already familiar notion that recognition of the fragmentariness of the physical world leads to tragic awareness of its transitory and thereby illusory nature. In 1909 Yeats associated the notion of Incarnation, which he equated with Nietzsche's Apollonian principle, with individuation and modern scientific abstraction, and concluded: "All civilisation is held together [...] by

artificially created illusions. The knowledge of reality is always in some measure a secret knowledge. It is a kind of death" (*Aut*, p. 482). Images, whether created via the artistic or the historical process, are a means of sublimating the phenomenal world. But inherent in the process of their generation is an emphasis on their distinctiveness, which separates one from the other. Consequently, they must be perceived not as constituting reality as a whole but its "manifold" reflected projection, which must be overcome if one is to glimpse reality. For the early Nietzsche, such dissociation is attributed to the operation of the Apollonian, opposing itself to the Dionysian:

> Metaphysical delight in the tragic is a translation of the image: the hero, the supreme manifestation of the will, is negated to our gratification, because he is only a phenomenon, and the eternal life of the will is left untouched by his destruction. "We believe in eternal life" is tragedy's cry [...]. The purpose of the plastic arts is quite different: here Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by means of the luminescent glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*; beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life.[29]

This is the "secret knowledge" that Yeats speaks of, and which, in "Meru", he ascribes to the Tibetan monks. It is the knowledge that "before dawn/ His glory and his monuments are gone"; that human creations, art and culture alike, are transitory and fragmented records of man's repeated attempts to capture the spirit of eternal life.

V

In his second essay on Samuel Ferguson (1886), Yeats praised a type of poetry that would function not as reflector but as the translucent medium through which the world could be apprehended. This he contrasted to the solipsistic, self-conscious poetry of his era, which treated the natural world as a mask for the expression of the self. For Yeats, the dissociation of art from nature and the ensuing loss of innocent wonderment on the part of the artist, as he beheld the outer world through the diminishing lens of experience and introspection, have resulted in the dimming of the textual pane. So much so that the richness of nature has been supplanted by the contrariety of individual perception and we can now "scarcely see what lies beyond because of the pictures that are painted all over it" (*UP* 1, p. 103). Paradoxically, given his emphasis on personality and his later critique of modern literature for relinquishing the author's presence, Yeats is here calling for an art which submerges authorial voice into the objectified authority

of the text. The latter is rendered as both that neutral space upon which impersonal reality impresses itself and as the locus of universal wisdom.

In his later essay on Synge, Yeats returns to the same issue of impersonal art. He postulates the idea that by means of the image personal experience itself, which, nonetheless, constitutes the basis for imaginative creativity, is translated into the universals of the human condition. It forms "a projection through a burning-glass of that general to men" and attains to a state of transcendence beyond what is accidental or transient:

> There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 322)

The "burning-glass", a symbol of the realisation of passion and tragic joy, does not serve as a mimetic representation of the artist's personal drama but as the medium for directing our attention to the elemental predicates of life. It points to the identification of oneself with mankind as well as the surrender of the self to the inhuman and supernatural forces present in physical existence, Nietzsche's Dionysian revelling in "the eternal life that lies beyond the phenomenal world, regardless of all destruction".[30] It does not so much reflect as deflect. The epistemological and aesthetic significance of this is very important, for the work of art becomes the locus of knowledge or wisdom and the revelations it imparts, as reflections of eternal truths, have a formative effect on society.

In Yeats's critical writings and some of the poetry, the mirror functions as a potent symbol signifying a return to an evocative and imaginative art that fuses the personal and the private into the impersonal and the collective. Speaking of the need for poetry to cast out scientific observation or moral judgement so that it might be vested again with a religious feeling for the profusion and sanctity of life, Yeats wrote in "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900):

> We should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window. With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that

> the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style.
>
> (*E&I*, p. 163)

As a reflector, the beryl stone gives access not to some external reality, validated by the limited, individual perception or objectified in the illusory phenomena of nature, but to the transcendent reality it contains within itself. Through the metaphor of the reflecting, mystic stone Yeats allies art to a numinous as well as aesthetic experience of life. For the artist's mind, gazing "upon some reality, some beauty", perceives pattern and rhythm as the embodiment of a spiritual essence that becomes incarnate in the forms of poetry.

Such a notion is in keeping with Yeats's belief that art communicates the existence of an ideal and divine world manifesting itself through the workings of the imagination by means of the images generated therein. Jacqueline Genet remarks that "this predilection for mirrors" is correlated with "a tendency towards idealism". The attraction that the reflection held for Yeats must consequently be sought in its "disembodied, therefore purer" nature, which also constitutes an analogue of "the inner universe of the dream".[31] In his 1896 review of Fiona Macleod's *From the Hills of Dream: Mountain Songs and Island Runes*, Yeats employed the metaphor of the mirror to delineate his artistic intentions of writing such a symbolic art:

> We no longer wish to describe nature like the "nature poets," or to describe society like the "realists," but to make our work a mirror, where the passions and desires and ideals of our own minds can cast terrible or beautiful images.
>
> (*UP* 1, pp. 421-422)

The passage presents Yeats's developing aesthetic of art as encompassing its own intrinsic values, being "a law to itself" (*CL* I, p. 97), in that it offers no critical evaluation of life but rather conveys an emotional response to it. It is an art of feeling and vision, not of reformist ideas or materialism. The opposition to the naturalist or the social realist stems from an apprehension that he projects onto his work a mechanical representation of the world as it appears to the senses or is codified by a social or moral system. The symbolic artist, on the other hand, reverses the image of reality to reflect the depths of his own soul or mind, its dreams and aspirations. This is still a solipsistic conception of art but at its base lies a conviction that the truths it transmits are eternal truths, reaching beyond the ephemeral nature of earthly experience.

In the poems discussed in the previous section of this chapter, we saw that reflection and the predominance of the image casting off its own emptiness signify not the return to a primal condition of union but a lapse into temporality and multifariousness. In an effort to imitate the original act of creation and reinstate its unitary perfection, man creates history as a reflection of his own image. In such a realm of constant changeability and ambiguity, the Narcissistic act of beholding one's semblance can result either in nihilistic or solipsistic expression. The generated image may yield no meaning except its own hollowness or it may perpetually entrap one in a series of reflected simulations that afford delight at their own illusory existence. As Whitaker remarks, "only in the unfallen or completely regenerated world could a happy solipsism exist" and there "Narcissus might find his beautiful reflection unsullied".[32] This regenerated world Yeats sees the artist as attempting to re-create through the medium of his art.

Such a notion is expounded in "Before the World was made" (1929), which develops around the idea of Mask as the inverted mirroring of the self, an idea already explored in the eponymous poem "The Mask" (1910). In a journal entry of 1909, Yeats presented an early formulation of his Mask doctrine in terms of sexual love:

> In wise love each [lover] divines the high secret self of the other and, refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life. Love also creates the mask.
>
> (*Mem*, p. 145)

Here the mirror functions as a benign force, projecting an image that not only permits self-realisation, understood as the attainment of a vision of an ideal counterpart or anti-self, but also provides a model of selfhood to be imitated in life. Such a perception of the mirror informs both poems with the female speaker in each postulating the notion that belief in the reality of the reflected image constitutes no form of deception or distortion. Unlike the illusive mirror of malicious eyes, which in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1929) casts a "defiling and disfigured shape" upon the eyes of the beholder, in these poems it is the created, simulated self that carries a degree of authenticity.

The refutation of the search for the natural self lying behind the mask underscores Yeats's emphasis on the shaping effect of art which privileges the truth of its own imaginative creations over the evanescence of ordinary life. Thus, in the earlier of the two poems, "It was the mask engaged" the lover's mind and set his heart "to

beat", whereas, in the later poem, the face shaped in the mirror evokes an image of impersonal beauty existing "Before the world was made". But the unsettling question in the same poem, "Why should he think me cruel/ Or that he is betrayed?", which echoes the anticipation, suggested in "The Mask", of finding "Love or deceit", undermines the innocence of the ideal offered by the mask. It rather introduces an element of uncertainty and ambiguity as inherent in the double function of the reflector: revealing and affirmative as it is concealing and illusory.

For Nietzsche, wearing a mask is desirable, if not imperative. "Everything profound loves the mask" and "every profound spirit" needs one, he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*. With the identification of reality with appearance, whereon communication lies, the adoption of a mask is necessitated by the "*shallow* interpretation of every word he speaks, every step he takes, every sign of life he gives".[33] In *The Will to Power*, wearing a mask is the mark of a great man. It "requires more spirit and *will*", but it also stems from knowledge that there is no deep essence to be communicated and that the self remains unknowable, if not a fabricated entity.[34] In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the mask was vested with symbolic significance, for it revealed, beneath "the celebrated characters" of the Greek drama, such as Prometheus or Oedipus, the "original hero, Dionysus". But this appearance of Dionysus in "a multiplicity of figures", of masks, as the suffering individual on the stage is enabled by the activity of the illusion-desiring, image-generating Apollonian principle.[35]

There is, however, a distinction to be made between mask and mirror. Nietzsche associates the latter with "the objective man", whose spirit is depersonalised to the extent that, rather than develop his own mask, he effaces himself into a mask of something other. He becomes "an instrument", a mirror, "lacking any other pleasure than that provided [...] by 'mirroring'"; he is "a passage and reflection of forms and events not his own".[36] In a diary entry of 1909, Yeats's critique of the Paterian ideal of culture founded upon aesthetic values is presented in Nietzsche's terms of the mirror: such an ideal creates "feminine souls. The soul becomes a mirror not a brazier" (*Aut*, p. 477). It reflects something other than its own truth.

The notion of mask informs the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1917). Its argument is that the truth of identity lies either in the faithful representation of the actual self or in the construction of an image of the self's opposite. Essentially, the poem is concerned with the creation of two types of art: one that centres upon the

external world, which is a deceptive reflection of reality, and divorces feeling from thought and one that affords a unified image of life, for it entails both the natural and the transcendent, the mundane and the ideal. *Hic* proclaims that the search for an image is driven by enthralment by "the unconquerable delusion", by what lies beyond this world and perforce remains phantasmal because unattainable. To this, *Ille* retorts that the poetic vision of reality, that "which comes as complete" (*Myth*, p. 325) in that it fuses all opposites, originates outside the poet's normal self and the realm of ordinary, physical experience, in the anti-self, who "of all imaginable things" is the "most unlike". This anti-self or "antithetical self", Yeats claims in his essay "Anima Hominis" from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), comes "to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality" (*Myth*, p. 331). And it is the nature of reality, via the creation of an image for both personality and art, that forms the basis for the poem's argument.

In the first version of *A Vision*, Yeats, describing the soul's journey into beatitude, writes of the spirit's passage after death through a state of purgation to one in which it must relive a mirror-image of its life. This life is the opposite of what was experienced in the incarnate world (*AVa*, p. 229). The poem explores a similar process undergone by the poetic genius for the purpose of creating an ideal Mask that will reveal not the particulars but the universals in the human personality. It is a process whereby the self, liberated from the constraints of normality, becomes unified to its opposing counterpart and finds artistic incarnation. But, in a manner recalling the adoption and subsequent abandonment of myth as a mask in "A Coat', this poem defers attainment of the anti-self image, tentatively contained in the uttering of the closed "whisper". This raises again the initial issue of the real versus the illusory, which Yeats will attempt to reconcile in later poems dealing with the formative power of art.

VI

The interplay between reality and unreality identifies the artistic process. It is by proceeding through the imperfect images of the physical world, and thus by placing oneself within time, that the artist can hope to break away from the fallacy of reflected form and move towards reconciliation with the creative forces of life. In Nietzschean terms, this reconciliation, which effects an affirmation of joy, is the union of the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle. Arguably, it is the point at which the self-image begetter (Narcissus) meets the temperate creator of lucid form (Apollo) on the

soil of the nature impulse which sustains continuity of life (Dionysus). For Nietzsche, the dream images, notwithstanding their illusory nature, provide the necessary means by which the person can interpret and experience life so that he can attain a state of universal harmony. In this condition, man as creator not only merges with the created product but himself becomes the work of art. Thus, through the convergence of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, "the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness".[37]

On the level of human, artistic development, Nietzsche propounds the notion of the artist as "'imitator'" in that he must either create in response to one of the two creative impulses of nature – as Apollonian "dream artist" or Dionysian "ecstatic artist" – or else realise both powers at once. But for their reconciliation man needs to arrive at an understanding that "his Apolline consciousness" functions as a veil hiding the "Dionysiac world from his view".[38] In the context of the Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic, then, the realm of image, in its beguiling perfection of individuated form, both conditions and is impossible to exist without the spirit of unity, by which the self merges into a unified community and all personal will and desire is suspended.

"The Tower" (1927) articulates such an attempt on the part of the artist at effecting unity and the reconciliation of antinomies through the medium of his craft. The poem presents the mirror as a trope for the function of the poetic imagination, which fashions the outer world according to an inner vision of "an heroic and passionate conception of life" (*Mem*, p. 185). Although at the time Yeats was expressing in the journal entry above serious doubts not only about the prospect of modelling Irish life upon such a conception but also about the possibility of its very creation, the poem carries more positive overtones of the dialectic of art and life:

> I have prepared my peace
> With learned Italian things
> And the proud stones of Greece,
> Poet's imaginings
> And memories of love,
> Memories of the words of women,
> All those things whereof
> Man makes a superhuman
> Mirror-resembling dream.

The entire range of human activity, the highest achievements in philosophic thought and artistic creativity, are discerned as the material out of which man constructs

a dream that, mirror-like, reflects the visions, passions and aspirations of mankind. Both the natural and the supernatural, empirical and spiritual reality find their origins in this mirroring world of the imagination. Man's spirit here becomes the primal creative force which creates the world by reflection. "We perceive the world", Yeats wrote in 1893 in his Blake commentary, "through countless little reflections of our own image" (*WB* I, p. 276) and it is to this image that the poetic genius approximates external reality. With its internalisation of the artistic process and production, this is a solipsistic conception of art that sets the imagination as the standard of reality. With his gaze upon "a fading gleam," the swan's flight over the glittering surface of the stream yields both his reflection and his last song of glory. And it is this song, as the poet prepares his soul in accordance with the paradigmatic images of the imagination, that is reflected, finds embodiment in, but also embodies the text of the poem. As poetic testament bequeathed to the future generations, the poem will in turn function to project its own ideal, the poet's "faith and pride", for life to emulate.

The paradigmatic images that guide man's progression to fulfilment, which finds realisation in the attainment of perfect beauty, had already appeared in "The Phases of the Moon" (1919). Through the persona of Robartes, who represents an aspect of the imagination seeking expression in images, the poem describes the Fifteenth Phase of Yeats's Wheel as one in which

> All thought becomes an image and the soul
> Becomes a body: that body and that soul
> Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
> Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
> Body and soul cast out and cast away
> Beyond the visible world.

The notion of reflection is here rendered in terms of the dialectic of body and soul in a manner which anticipates the generation of poetic images in "Byzantium". The imagistic incarnation of thought is mirrored in the sensuous embodiment of soul, the spiritual and the sensible existing in complete unity that only reflects its own perfection. Yeats offers a description of this phase in *A Vision* (1937) as the congruence of "contemplation and desire, united in one" and inhabiting "a world where every beloved image has bodily form, and every bodily form is loved" (*AVb*, p. 136). Such a perception of unity is less congruent with Platonic Idealism and closer to Yeats's understanding of the Nietzschean union of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as

Incarnation and Transfiguration.

In "Under Ben Bulben" (1939), Yeats invests art with the power to provide ideal images that would fill the cradle and give visible form to the imperceptible, thus bridging the gap between imagination and reality. But in "The Phases of the Moon", although the realisation of beauty can ultimately be accomplished "in a beautiful man's or woman's body" as well as in artistic creation, the process is presented as tentative since the experience of the union is displaced beyond the phenomenal world. As Helen Vendler remarks, "the visible image and the visible world cannot co-exist"[39] and therefore their reconciliation remains in the sphere of the ideal as a condition to which art and art-inspired life aspire but can only approximate. Were such a condition to be realised, "the poem, the painting, the reverie" would be "sufficient of itself" (*AVb*, p. 135), reflecting the self-sufficiency of the self-begetting unity of ideal beauty. But in the physical world, generation translates self-sufficiency into the imperfection of the cradle and wholeness into the multiplicity of image.

The separation of images from one another, with the image generated in imagination being divorced from that which reality actualises, also informs the poem "Solomon and the Witch" (1921). Here "the bride-bed" effects not the completion of the lovers' attempt at union, not the restoration of the pre-lapsarian state of the fusion of object and image, and the cessation of antinomies, "Chance being at one with Choice". Rather, it brings the "despair" of Heraclitean discord that coincides with the beginning of the historical process. Determined by the cyclical movement of history, all human activity is destined to repeat man's thwarted effort to achieve the perfection of unity.

A "symbol of the solved antinomy", the marriage bed can essentially achieve what all symbols do: it can reveal the ideal condition to which the human subject aspires but defer attainment in a superhuman realm. For, admits Yeats, if it "were more than symbol", a man could "there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the same as the sleep of death" (*AVb*, p. 52). The tension of desire renders the world of experience a mere reflected projection of a transcendent reality of perfection. Unlike the saint or sage, who renounces experience to shoot "his arrow at the centre of the sun" (*Myth*, p. 340), the poet, as does the lover, finds his lot, as Robartes pronounces in "The Phases of the Moon", cast "betwixt/ Deformity of body and mind". What he can only hope to attain, via his imitative act of artistic creation, is a constituted

image of ideal beauty in the knowledge, afforded by the explorations of "The Tower", that both image and the ideal are themselves mental constructs.

In "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" (1937), images "permanent or impermanent" afford the artistic means by which the poet can incarnate timelessness and restore coherence and meaning to a fragmented and alienating world. The poem, as its title indicates, attempts to traverse the space that death and the progress of history have generated between the time past, in which the Gallery portraits originally belong, those "images of thirty years", and the time present of artistic composition. Re-visiting entails re-reading, and the world summoned before the speaker's eye does not cast a reflection of some historical reality, of

> The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland
> The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.

The artist's gaze at the paintings transforms the visual images into poetic metaphors for the creations of his own imagination. As Ramazani remarks, Yeats, in refusing "the eye's dominion over the imagination", refutes the "limitation of the visual image" and ultimately of death itself.[40] But the poem establishes the relation between the imaginative faculty and the transformed image as one of reciprocity. For it is also the image that, in the act of being reflected upon and evoking a response, projects its own meaning onto the spectator, who performs the double role of reader and craftsman. The poet's "friends' portraits" that "hang and look thereon" both conceal and reveal. As artistic productions seeking no external source of meaning, they occupy a space where the visual artefact and reader meet, entering into a dialogic relation whereby the language of representation is endlessly deconstructed and reconstructed. As reconstituted, poetic images, the paintings display what Nietzsche terms "the delight, wisdom and beauty of 'illusion'",[41] the Apollonian creation of form.

What, however, they stubbornly refuse to disclose is "the brush" that could show the "pride" and "humility" which, as poetic qualities, the speaker suggests, inform his artistic output. For the speaker, the absence of the personal element from a work of visual art, its ineptitude to reflect the passionate life of its creator, constitutes its limitation. But at the same time, it is this perceived inadequacy that constitutes its greatest freedom and allows the image to be encoded by a multiplicity of meaning. As Roland Barthes proposes, artistic production, whether of a written or visual text, "ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic

exemption of meaning". In such intersection of meaning, it is with the reader, not the author, that a text's unity lies.[42]

The disappearance of the author allows the poet-speaker of Yeats's poem to invent the paintings' meaning and read them as the embodiment not only of "Ireland's history" but also of his own "glory". The transmutation of the physical object into the poetic picture signifies the projection onto the mental canvas of the latter of the speaker's vision of the intertwining of his personal history with that of the nation. When the speaker looks upon the images he has generated or created anew, he looks upon a reflection of his "own form" as it "might appear in a room full of mirrors" (*AVb*, p. 214).[43] But such projection can only be made possible by an act of poetic appropriation and only in the speaker's capacity as reader, the artefact beheld thus casting off the mirroring of the beholder's gaze. With the visual image providing an analogue for the poetic text, the absence of "the brush" challenges the author's presence despite the attempt at his reinstatement via the invitation to judge not by "this book or that" but by the company of "such friends". However, even this judgement ultimately remains an open reading.

The interplay between mirror and image also underlies Yeats's earlier poem "Byzantium" (1932). It affords an exposition on the image generation process as a means of attaining both to the condition of transcendent reality and to the creation of the aesthetic product that attempts to reveal this reality. In this sense, the poem performs two roles. In the first, it serves as mediator between two planes of existence, the natural and the supernatural, which it attempts to render in terms of contrasting interaction, the one being the complementary counterpart or mirroring of the other. In the second, it functions as reflector projecting its notion of ideality via the transforming activity of the imaginative faculty. The aesthetic and metaphysical proposition of the poem rests on the premise that the "unpurged images of the day" are, by virtue of being borne out of the profane domain, fragmentary and imperfect. Therefore, they are inadequate to convey that which lies beyond immediate, physical experience and even verbal utterance. In the realm of natural existence, reflection generates the division of multiplicity. The mirror, whether it is the created image itself or the shining surface of a " starlit or a moonlit dome", reveals not the unity of the eternal but the contrariety of the human condition, "The fury and the mire of human veins".

But it is these images, tainted as they are with the blood of generation and torn

by a human yearning for purity and perfection, that guide the poet in his attempt to summon the suprasensual and supernatural:

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

The conjuring of images comes out of the poem's struggle to glimpse, through the veil of material sensibility, into the chaotic and as yet ineffable matter of the human mind. This constitutes an act of reflection in the sense of anamnesis, which, however, is the reversal of the Platonic notion of recollection. The poet traces the process of purification back to the state of generation, the "dolphin-torn" and "gong-tormented sea", with remembrance being performed on two levels: on the level of the departed spirit, still possessed of memory of earthly existence, and on the level of the poetic spirit invoking a vision of transcendence wherein it seeks its own origins.[44] But at the same time, the poem also intimates the forward flight from death to regeneration via the renewal of the poetic activity culminating in the imagistic assemblage.

The self-referentiality of the poem's images of eternity echoes the impenetrability of those "Powers whose name and shape no living creature knows", which the speaker of "The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers" (1892) invokes. It also recalls the self-engrossment of the painted birds on the first island of *The Wanderings of Oisin*. But, as Larrissy points out, although "the non-natural status" of these images is made clear both with regard to their creation and their refutation of temporality and mortality, Yeats makes no final assertion as to the priority of the spiritual over the corporeal.[45] In effect, it must be considered the latter's triumph that the poem offers a tentative reading of the immaterial in terms suggestive of the material. The multiple appears as much a condition of discarnate or re-generative life as it is of generative and the implication of "Those images that yet/ Fresh images beget" renders the transcendent an approximate reflection of the physical.

Yeats is here moving away from the Platonic dialectic of the One and the many, which had informed the Rhib poem, towards the concept of self-generation as manifested in the formation of self-begotten, spiritual entities and also of self-sustaining, poetic metaphors. Ultimately, however, it is the poetic activity that provides an affirmation of what constitutes reality. Holdridge remarks that "the way to ultimate reality, to the transcendence of the material world," is attained in "the act of aesthetic perception",[46] in the interrelation between the conceiving mind and the conceived

image. Art, as the locus of this interplay, is presented as a third reality, an "artifice of eternity", hovering between the unpurged material and the purged immaterial, copying neither but partaking of both and projecting on them its own truths.

If "Byzantium" can be read as offering a glimpse into the eternal via the function of the creative force of art, "Under Ben Bulben" (1939) elaborates the aesthetic implications of the poetic metaphor for life. The artist is presented as the creator of images, of paradigms of perfection which are to "fill the cradles right" and upon which life is to be modelled so that it can transform itself into "an artistic ideal".[47] For Pater, such an ideal consists in the perfect harmony between the physical and the intellectual or spiritual as exemplified in Greek art. Beauty as an aesthetic principle is perceived as one of the distinguishing features of a culture that had thus fused the natural condition with artistic expression. So much so that, Pater quotes from Winckelmann, "'the Spartan women set up in their bedchambers a Nireus, a Narcissus, or a Hyacinth, that they might bear beautiful children.'"[48]

This notion of art exerting shaping influence on life also lies behind Wilde's assertion that the Greeks

> set in the bride's chamber the statue of Hermes or of Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the works of art that she looked at in her rapture or her pain. They knew that Life gains from Art not merely spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art, and can reproduce the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of Praxiteles.[49]

For Wilde, as for Pater, in the dialectic of art and life, it is the former that is invested with an element of reality and of creative energy, and therefore with primacy. Life, on the other hand, is reduced to the function of mirror, whose reflection casts back on it the ideals of art. What, then, life imitates and attempts to reproduce from art are not only its spiritual dimension and emotional or intellectual basis but also its aesthetic appreciation. According to such an artistic ideal, to which Yeats also subscribes although not always unequivocally, beauty as the unity of body and thought, becomes art's cardinal truth, as that which alone affords access to the absolute.

Having rejected in "The Tower" the Platonic dictum that the material world is merely a shadowy and insubstantial copy of the realm of Ideas, "a spume that plays/ Upon a ghostly paradigm of things", Yeats, echoing Pater and Wilde, proceeds in "Under Ben Bulben" to reverse Plato's notion of imitation. From the measurement-

embodying statues of Phidias to the dream-like, albeit masculine, beauty of Michelangelo's Adam and to the visionary perfection of the artistic products of the Italian Renaissance,[50] art is the supreme model of creative activity. It inspires and animates life, bearing

> Proof that there's a purpose set
> Before the secret working mind:
> Profane perfection of mankind.

These lines point to art's relation with life. By assigning to the artist the role of bringing "the soul of man to God", the poem projects a conception of art as reflection of some ultimate, metaphysical reality inhabiting the space outside human experience. But while it acknowledges that art is informed by the parameters of antinomial existence, springing as it does out of strife and "the quarrel with ourselves" (*Myth*, p. 331), it stresses the need to transcend what constitutes a necessary basis for it, the world of profane desires and empirical realities. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche, rejecting the notion of art for art's sake, also supports that art is not purposeless. But what, for him, constitutes art's purpose is not moral reformation, not Yeats's "profane perfection", but the celebration of all life energies in a heroic spirit of "bravery and composure". This is an outward looking art that, acting as a stimulus of life, transfigures subject and reality alike.[51]

In Yeats's poetry, so that transcendence can be achieved, the gaze of the perceiver is often directed towards and within the artistic product itself. But the process, rather than convert the work of art to passive object of aesthetic contemplation, affords it the power of initiating transformation. Thus, the speaker of "Long-legged Fly" (1939) can issue a similar injunction with regard to the interrelation between art and life. The beauty and vitality of Michelangelo's art, uniting the profane and the sacred, the mundane and the ideal, can arouse the passions and sexual desires of "girls at puberty", in whose thoughts they "find/ The first Adam". And so can they stir the same life-giving energies in "globe-trotting Madam" of "Under Ben Bulben", whereas in "The Statues" the sculpted image, whose purity of form has supplied women's dreams, also generates the desire for pressing "Live lips upon a plummet-measured face". As the embodiment of the creative impulses of nature, which become incarnate in the plastic form of the image, in other words, as the locus of unification of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles, art incarnates and shapes life by imbuing it with

the very forces that bring it into being.

Reading Yeats's poems in this light, the function of art is conceived of as moulding life in its ideal image so that the re-created object can attain to the state of perfection Yeats terms Unity of Being and Culture – all expressions of life as one, imitating art's organic unity. In political terms, it is an unattainable ideal, uncomfortably close to the fascistic, but in artistic terms, such a notion has significant implications for the artist himself. In "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937), Yeats states that the poet, no matter how personal his utterance may be, "is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast". Being "part of his own phantasmagoria", he "has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete". He is "more type than man, more passion than type" (*E&I*, p. 509). "Under Ben Bulben", like "Long-legged Fly" and "The Statues", exemplifies this idea of the artist as both creator and creation, projector of values and projected image embodying these values. In this sense, the poems both define internally and articulate the transforming and shaping power of art, which is elevated to the status of primal exemplar of the creative process.

VII

The notion of reflection or deflection largely informs Yeats's approach to poetry as the creation of simulations which replace ordinary reality not as its appearances or equivalents for it but as productions of independent existence. In *Rosa Alchemica*, Michael Robartes affirms "the independent reality of our thoughts" as "the doctrine from which all true doctrines rose" (*VSR*, p. 142). Although Yeats's theory of art posits some higher, transcendent realm as the preferred object of artistic representation, a realm to which access is afforded by means of the imagination, the autonomous status of the creations of the latter does away with the division between the real and the imaginary. The imaginary is as real and as valid, if not more so than the real; the text as self-reflexive activity supersedes and replaces the actual world. Rather than being perceived as that which can be reproduced, simulation generates the real and collapses the boundaries between the true and the false. It rewrites and recreates myths of origin and authenticity.

In this respect, the illusive nature of the poetic image challenges the issue of fixity and solidity of truth in the text. Truth, no longer determined by extraneous forces outside and beyond the text, is perceived as a mirage, itself another semblance

produced by the creative action of the imagination and projected onto its literary output. Rendered in the terms of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, appearance, with the beguiling power of its image and its arousal of sympathy, deludes the individual, tearing him away from the dynamic continuity of life into apprehending the beauty of a single representation. What makes artistic creation possible is the acknowledgement that in the conflicting interplay between the two impulses,

> the Dionysiac predominates once again; its final tone could never echo from the Apolline realm. And in this process Apolline deception is revealed for what it is, a veiling of the true Dionysiac effect, which lasts for the duration of the tragedy. Such is its power that it finally forces the Apolline drama itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysiac wisdom, and where it denies itself and its Apolline clarity.

Ultimately, art is perceived as the embodiment of the reconciliation, of the union of the two powers: "Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but Apollo finally speaks the language of Dionysus".[52]

In the early Nietzsche, the interaction of these two principles has mainly aesthetic implications for the artistic work. But when Yeats, quoting Shelley, who "calls our minds 'mirrors of the fire for which all thirst,'" poses the question that Irish authors and critics have asked after him, "'What or who has cracked the mirror?'" (*Myth*, p. 364),[53] he also attaches a spiritual as well as psychological dimension to the mirror symbol. The answer for remedial action lies in self-knowledge. For Yeats, this intimates a process by which the individual acknowledges what lies in the depths of his soul – its passions and creative vitality that unite one to mankind, the aspiration to transcendence – and renders their expression as poetic truth. To perfect the mirror so that it reflects the energetic flow of life, of which the imagination partakes and which it communicates, and to "wind the thread upon the pern again", Yeats begins "to study the only self that I know, myself" (*Myth*, p. 364). Rooting art in personality is a contention that Yeats held throughout his poetic career. In this respect, the poetic image functions as both reflection and reflector of identity, personal as well as national. Journeying through a landscape of mirrors, in which the outer and the natural correspond to, but also blur the boundaries with, the inner and the absolute, the Yeatsian persona embarks on a venture that aims at realising the unity of opposing impulses in life and art. Vacillating between "the reflecting and the reflected",[54] the poetic voice actualises the quest for expression and synthesis in the terms of the artistic product.

Notes to Chapter Six

1. In a 1910 lecture on poetry, Yeats explained that his use of analogy from painting originated in that "I began my own life as an art student and I am a painter's son, so it is natural to me to see such analogies" (cited in Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 1).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1968), p. 78.

3. Plotinus, *The Enneads* (2nd edn), trans. Stephen MacKenna, rev. B.S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1956; first publ. 1917-1930), V.8.7, 1.

4. An earlier title of the poem was "Aedh tells of the Rose in his Heart". According to Yeats's notes to *The Wind among the Reeds*, Aedh is "the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves" (*VP*, p. 803). He thus represents an aspect of the poetic imagination which, as Albright explains, identifies itself with its own images (*YP*, p. 452).

5. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy and the Sublime* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 4.

6. Edward Larrissy, *Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 69.

7. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989; first publ. 1964), p. 6.

8. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs in the Twilight: W.B. Yeats's Use of the Classical Tradition* (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), p. 106.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 240, 328-329.

10. P.Th.M.G. Liebregts, *Centaurs*, p. 106.

11. Yeats was later, in both *A Vision* texts, to develop this idea into the opposition between Christian monotheism and pagan polytheism rendered in terms of the conflict between primary and antithetical impulses. For Nietzsche, such an opposition would translate into the antithesis between Dionysus and the Crucified, between life-affirming and life-negating forces (*Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004; first publ. 1979), pp. 103-104).

12. In his essay "Certain Noble plays of Japan" (1916), Yeats affirmed that "the Deity gives us, according to His promise, not His thoughts or His convictions but His flesh and blood" (*E&I*, p. 235). This Eucharistic incarnation of the Godhead, perceived by Yeats in terms of carnality, develops into his notion of the thinking of the body.

13. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p. 210.

14. Thomas Taylor, trans., *The 'Cratylus', 'Phaedo', 'Parmenides' and 'Timaeus' of Plato* (London: Benjamin and John White, 1793), pp. 270-271.

15. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990), p. 216.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. with an Introduction by R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969; first publ. 1961), pp. 179-180.

17. In the Platonic dialogue *Phaedo*, the swan is presented as being sacred to Apollo and as having prophetic powers. The sweetness of its last song is therefore attributed not to grief at the approaching moment of death, but to joy at its impending union with god (84e-85b). In the *Republic*, we are told that the swan was the life form into which Orpheus' soul chose to be reincarnated (X, 620a). This story points to Orphic links with Apollo, who is thus allied to Dionysus in the figure of Orpheus.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 98. Yeats also associated destruction with creation. In an unpublished proof note for *A Vision* (1925), he wrote that "every act of war is an act of creation" (*CEAV*, Notes, p. 66).

19. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, p. 220.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first publ. 1967), pp. 313-314, 320- 322.

21. Ibid., *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, p. 39.

22. Ibid., *The Will to Power*, p. 322.

23. Ibid., pp. 435, 434.

24. Thomas L. Dume, *William Butler Yeats: A Survey of his Reading* (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1950), p. 208.

25. Yeats's interpretation of "will" here differs from that of Nietzsche as "the will to power", as "willing to be stronger, willing to grow" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 357). Ofelia Schutte reads Nietzsche's principle from a philosophic standpoint as a metaphor about "the nature of reality", the aim of which is "the cancellation of boundaries between self and world". In this sense, the principle is posited in order to transform "the connection between self and world from a condition of alienation and self-deceit to a condition of integration and truthfulness". Thus, it can be seen as an attempt at unification, the unification of "the nature of human reality" and its correlation with "the whole of reality outside of human nature" (*Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 77, 93). In the passage from *Autobiographies* under discussion, Yeats is closer to Blake and his notion of despotic reason, identified with Urizen, as that which is divorced from the full experience of life and constrains energy and imagination by generating conflict and abstraction.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 432.

27. Ibid., pp. 422, 421.

28. Ibid., p. 429.

29. Ibid., *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 80.

30. Ibid.

31. Jacqueline Genet, "W.B. Yeats: The Poetics of the Visible and the Invisible", in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture*, ed. Birgit Bramsbäck and Martin Croghan, Vol. I (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1988), p. 51.

32. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow*, pp. 6-7.

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003; first publ. 1973), pp. 69-70.

34. Ibid., *The Will to Power*, p. 505.

35. Ibid., *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 51-52.

36. Ibid., *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 134.

37. Ibid., *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 17.

38. Ibid., pp. 18, 21.

39. Helen Hennessy Vendler, *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 21.

40. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, p. 50.

41. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 16.

42. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", trans. Stephen Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1990; first publ. 1988), p. 171.

43. For Nietzsche, one of the compelling forces conditioning artistic creativity is the artist's "inner need to make of things a reflex" not of national or personal history and glory but of "one's own fullness and perfection", the enhancement of power and strength that Nietzsche terms "intoxication" (*The Will to Power*, p. 428).

44. In his essay "Swedenbogh, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" (1914), Yeats, quoting Swedenbord on his notion of the after-life, tells how spirits pass after death into a state of reliving their earthly life. "This earth-resembling life", Yeats writes, "is the creation of the image-making power of the mind, plucked naked from the body, and mainly of the images in the memory" (*Ex*, p. 35). In the poem "The Cold Heaven", written two years earlier, Yeats expounded a similar Platonic notion of the soul's remembrance of its past life, the stage called in *A Vision* the *Dreaming Back* (*AVb*, p. 226). Like the "Swedenborg" essay, the poem links memory to the generation of images but invests them with an element of entrapment which, in the "Confusion of the death-bed", can impede the soul's progression to union with the divine, thus condemning it to a state of perpetual incarnation.

45. Edward Larrissy, *Yeats the Poet*, pp. 183-184.

46. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, p. 181.

47. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 131.

48. Ibid., pp. 132-134.

49. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying", in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994; first publ. 1948), p. 1083.

50. In *A Vision*, Yeats identifies the period of the Italian Renaissance as the attainment of a condition of highest perfection and beauty, "intellect and emotion" as one, and compares its artistic achievement to the age of Phidias, which had also witnessed a similar state of unity (*AVb*, pp. 291-293).

51. Friedrich Nietzsche, *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, pp. 81-82. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche stresses how art as "an organic function" is not merely a human capacity but can also be seen unfolding in the animal kingdon, resulting in the production of "new weapons, pigments, colours, and forms; above all, new movements, new rhythms, new love calls and seductions" (*The Will to Power*, p. 426). Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari view art in terms of sensation, as the "emergence of pure sensory qualities" that become expressive in "an outpouring of features, colours, and sounds" (*What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London; New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 183-184).

52. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 102-103, 104.

53. In Irish literature, the mirror has often been employed as a metaphor for Irish art and its relationship to national identity. Thus, Declan Kiberd views the mirror – cracked or perfect – as emblematic of the growth of self-awareness in a decolonising nation as it progresses "from occupation, through nationalism, to liberation". In this respect, it serves as the means by which Irish authors such as Wilde or Joyce challenge the imposition of colonial self-images (Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; first publ. 1995), pp. 184, 280). Bruce Stewart, on the other hand, interprets literary mirrors as signifying the elemental role of "self-awareness and identity" in "the imaginative conception", although identity is nor specifically colonial. He thus sees them as functioning to suggest that art should not be a mimetic representation of the "national self-image" ("'The Bitter Glass': Postcolonial Theory and Anglo-Irish Culture – A Case Study", *The Irish Review*, 25 (2000), pp. 32-33, 42).

54. Jacqueline Genet, "W.B. Yeats; The Poetics of the Visible and the Invisible", in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature*, p. 51.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Lydean Body:
Images of Transformation

I

Contemplating the function of poetry with regard to life, Yeats early on contended that art aims not to cultivate a sense of euphoria in men but to bring an awareness of the deeper reality of existence. This reality was meant to be understood not merely in its physical but also spiritual dimension and in terms of the tension between these two conditions. Implicit in this is also the conception of the artist as a persona, as part of the phantasmagoria he creates, not to be identified with the ordinary self who experiences life as a series of accidental or incoherent events:

> 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.
>
> (*Aut*, p. 87)

Yeats's utterance encapsulates a fundamental precept that characterises his approach to art: that the creative impulse seeks to fashion the world rather than be fashioned by it. In the artistic process, both the contemplating subject and the object of contemplation undergo a Protean metamorphosis, a transfiguration, so that the artistic product is elevated to a status of autonomy as the expression of a multiplicity of "truths" inherent in it. Admittedly, Yeats never quite repudiated his early belief in "those invisible beings" that he had "learned to trust" (*Ex*, p. 301), his faith in the existence of an eternal, divine reality as a form of external authority, which the work of art imitates or embodies as truth. However, it is possible to read Yeats's poetry, especially when concerned with the articulation of what William Bonney calls "meditations-in-progress about temporal transmutations-in-progress",[1] as itself constituting a textual authority, beyond or behind which nothing lies as a measure of its

veracity. In this, I am in agreement with Hazard Adams, who regards Yeats's poetic oeuvre as "both a text and an act". The latter is perceived as "a literary act which must be seen as the product of an authority located intrinsically *as* the text's being, uncontrolled by a power outside it regarded as its source of meaning".[2] It is in this sense that I propose to read the notion of transformation in Yeats as forming not only the poetic subject matter but also the principle which realises the independent existence of the poetic text as discursive narrative.

For Yeats, art postulates its own values, according to which historical reality is shaped, and its capacity to move people is contingent on the reintegration of "the human spirit in our imagination" (*E&I*, p. 264), which is the supreme creative faculty. Yeats's emphasis on the shaping power of the imagination points to the notion that art seizes upon the accidents of experience, reconfigures and transforms them into a vision of unity in an attempt to render them meaningful and thus salvage them from the changes of time. "History", Yeats wrote in a diary entry of 1930, "is necessity until it takes fire in someone's head and becomes freedom or virtue" (*Ex*, p. 336). It is the privilege of art to conquer historical necessity by imposing order on its heterogeneity and by creating a view of the world that is made coherent and manageable. But what such a process of creation entails is the deconstruction and dissolution of the image, in terms of which the plane of phenomena becomes accessible to human perception, before this image can be reconstructed and articulated anew into an imaginative version of what, for the artist, constitutes reality. The Apollonian illusion shattered, even if it is the illusion fabricated on the surface of meaning, the artist enters the vast Dionysian realm of the surrender of form and the destruction of particular representation, by which the world of appearance can be comprehended.

Art becomes possible only when the two movements are temporarily reconciled in the linguistic structure that generates and frames the poetic synthesis; when the quest for unity leads from the transcendence of the image to incarnate transfiguration, to

> the mutual transformation, the drawing [...] together, of theme and thought, fact and idea; the dreamer creating his dream, the sculptor toiling to set free the imprisoned image; [...] the union of theme and thought, fact and idea, so complete that there is nothing more to do, nothing left but statue and dream; the sculptor has gone, the dreamer has gone.
>
> (*E&I*, pp. 476-477)

For Yeats, it is via the mythical method, namely, the employment "as a truth" of that for which "there cannot be sufficient evidence" (*W&B*, p. 101), and therefore cannot be empirically substantiated, that art unites the temporal and the timeless. At the same time, mythic expression depersonalises and even effaces the artist by integrating the authorial voice into the discourse of the fictive narrative. It is such acts of transmutation of the personal and the historical into the artistic universal, as they are articulated in the context of Yeats's prose and poetry, that the present chapter purports to examine. Notably, Nietzsche's position on the existence of an agent, manifesting its presence in the action attributed to it, refutes the Yeatsian dichotomy of personality-impersonality, of subject-activity:

> There is no "being" behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; "the doer" is invented as an afterthought – the doing is everything. […] All our science, in spite of its coolness and freedom from emotion, still stands exposed to the seduction of language and has not ridded itself of the changelings foisted upon it, the "subjects".[3]

Yeats's poetic work renders the transformative process from two different perspectives. The first affords no concrete vision of incarnation and signifies the mutable mode of the imagination, a state of shapelessness of being which continually dissolves the boundaries of selfhood and of experience. The poetic persona who thus attains transcendence is caught in a self-repeating cycle of metamorphic transitions whose elusiveness subverts stable patterns of coherence and threatens to annul both existence and the very creative process of art. Here, meaning is discovered and lost in what Yeats calls "the Path of Chamelion", an endless, Protean-like procession of image calling up and changing into "some other image", which the more it shifts in shape, the more it diminishes in "intensity" (*Aut*, p. 270).

The second perspective is the poetic attainment of a vision of unity via the translation of forces of violence and destruction, which inhere in nature and art, into tropes of ideal beauty and harmony. Such "articulation of the Image", which Yeats perceives as the opposite of the artist's ordinary self and of the nation (*Aut*, p. 274), redeems the ephemeral of personal experience and of the historical process by transposing it into the permanence of the artifice. The latter is thus vested with an element of validity that even surpasses that of the experiential or historical fact. This is treated as no more than a mere linguistic analogy of the Nietzschean type described above and functions to furnish the tropes by means of which the poem constructs its edifice.

If we read Yeats's poems discussing the idea of transformation as interconnected episodes or parts in the fictional drama of his poetic corpus, the two perspectives employed signify the oscillation between plurality and oneness, between fluidic substance and fixed representation, between Dionysian surrender and Apollonian realisation. In metaphysical terms, this would translate into the duality of being and becoming, which Nietzsche attacks on the premise that it misleadingly posits a reality beyond and above that of the physical world. For Nietzsche, existence is a process in perpetual flux. Becoming must therefore be understood not as an unfolding towards an ideal or fixed essence. Rather, it is a constant process of transformation which affirms difference and multiplicity, and celebrates the continuity of life; it is what Nietzsche later terms "the will to power".[4] In Yeats's poetics, the conflict between opposing elements informs not only the processes of life and history but also of art. The latter is seen as seeking to interpret the antinomial world of flux by constituting it as an object of imaginative rendition in an attempt to order and stabilise it. In a diary entry of 1930, Yeats describes the terms of the struggle:

> I think that two conceptions, that of reality as a congeries of beings, that of reality as a single being, alternate in our emotion and in history, and must always remain something that human reason, because subject always to one or the other, cannot reconcile. I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is surrender to God of all that I am. [...] Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one could prevail, all life would cease.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 305)

Yeats's remark denotes his ambivalence about the attainment of reconciliation even within the poetic structure, which, being a linguistic construct, is subject to the same limitations of ambiguity and "controversy" (*AVb*, p. 279). Although five years later, in his essay "The Mandukya Upanishad", Yeats would speak more confidently of the union of "fact and idea" as leading to a final stage in which the mind "unobstructed, can transform itself, dissolve itself, create itself", this constitutes a passage "beyond generation". Its attainment involves the fusion of "Self", as subjective cognition, and "Not-Self", as objective reality (*E&I*, p. 477). Whereas Nietzsche sees unity in art primarily as an aesthetic principle, for it is located in beauty, in which "opposites are tamed" and tension is suspended as "everything follows, obeys, so easily and so pleasantly",[5] for Yeats, it has metaphysical connotations. In the imperfect realm of

temporality, which art attempts to interpret and ultimately transcend by employing the very means that qualify it as ephemeral, unity remains a tentative realisation, if not the negation of life. The artistic product itself can at best articulate the effort, at worst frustrate and even subvert communication.

II

In his essay "Magic" (1901), which lays forth the basic principles of symbolic art, Yeats pronounces that the boundaries of the mind as well as of memory are indeterminable and thus many minds can flow into one another to reveal one single mind, the memory of Nature or *Anima Mundi* (*E&I*, p. 28). This communion of mind and image, which can be evoked by the medium of symbol, is posited in the third book of *The Trembling of the Veil*, entitled "Hodos Chameliontos", as the doctrine of Unity of Image, which functions as a binding force for the intellectual achievements of a nation:

> Seeing that a vision could divide itself in divers complementary portions, might not the thought of philosopher or poet or mathematician depend at every moment of its progress upon some complementary thought in minds perhaps at a great distance? Is there nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another [...]. Was not a nation [...] bound together by this interchange among streams or shadows; that Unity of Image, which I sought in national literature, being but an originating symbol?
>
> (*Aut*, pp. 262-263)

Yeats's notion of the archetypal Image, from which originate the plethora of symbols that each embody the cultural integrity of a nation manifested in individual expressions of creativity, is perceived as a principle of unity. It points to the familiar antithesis of the one and the many, and functions to bridge the gap between wholeness and multiplicity by ascribing diversification to a confluence of minds and the latter to a singular, ultimate source. Yeats, it appears from the extract above, links flow and fluidity with the circulation of the creative energies of life. But the dissolution of boundaries often encroaches upon the dissipation of selfhood and the suspension of any meaningful act of self-realisation. This is to be understood, in the context of Yeats's theory of Mask, not as the expression of the ordinary self operating on the plane of physical reality but as the articulation of the whole of being, the self striving to realise

an image of its opposite.

In much of the poetry that centres on the notion of transformation, the narrative sequence describes the imaginative journey of the experiencing self from the concreteness of image and the clarity of outer limit to the annulment of shape definition and the fluidity of unbounded form. If we read *The Wanderings of Oisin* as a kind of prototype text containing the themes elaborated in subsequent poems, the transforming demon of the second island becomes the Protean figure *par excellence*, whose many textual and symbolic metamorphoses inform the dialectic of the poetic struggle for articulation in later works. This thematic interconnectedness in Yeats's poetic corpus is also suggestive of a constant movement of thought and attitude from poem to poem and from one narrative voice to another. Although each text asserts its independence in that its authority lies internally, at the same time it remains open, continually shifting its boundaries, in the sense that it constitutes no closed totality but a perspective from which the poetic vision is to be rendered and interpreted.

The poem "Fergus and the Druid" (1892) presents the discourse of transformation in terms of the opposition of two modes of the imagination – incarnation and transcendence – represented by the mythic characters of Fergus (as king) and the Druid (as poet). Renouncing his identity, Fergus abandons the domain in which myth translates into action, articulation of the universal into realisation of the particular, to enter the bewildering realm of the Druid's imagistic multiplicity:

> *Fergus*. I see my life go drifting like a river
> From change to change; I have been many things –
> A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
> Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
> An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
> A king sitting upon a chair of gold –
> And all these things were wonderful and great;
> But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.

Transformation via the regenerative processes of dream or art, both of which are states that Yeats equates with one another,[6] entails fusion and the integration of elements. The "dreaming wisdom" Fergus seeks from the Druid is the acknowledgement that the search for coherence beyond the limits of the self often ends in confusion. Yeats would later concede in his essay "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1902) that "excess is the vivifying spirit of the finest art, and we must always seek to make excess more abundantly excessive" (*E&I*, p. 184). But in the poem, what Fergus

ultimately discovers is that excess of identity and the experience of "unbounded emotion" is no comforting truth. The shift from the finitude of shape, which identifies Fergus, to the infinity of conceptual perception, which marks the Druid and which Fergus desires and eventually adopts, does not "cast away" sorrow. It merely, as Adams suggests, brings "recognition of the existence of the cloak sorrow wears".[7] For Adams, the cloak is frustrated sexual desire – the Druid has not experienced love – but it also denotes the removal of the poet from society, from the world of ordinary activity.

The artist, Nietzsche writes, is "necessarily a sensual man". Nonetheless, he is

> under the pressure of his task, of his will to mastery, actually moderate, often very chaste. His dominant instinct demands this of him: it does not permit him to expend himself in any casual way. The force that one expends in artistic conception is the same as that expended in the sexual act: there is only one kind of force.[8]

Here Nietzsche sees casual expenditure, the kind which is not directly related to the performance of the artistic task, as a sign of decadence, for it displays a lack of will. But for Yeats, the artist's dilemma, as voiced by Nietzsche, raises existential and metaphysical questions, and becomes part of the larger issue of the dialectic of art and life. In the later poem "The Choice" (1932), the dialectic translates into the choice between "perfection of the life, or of the work". That of the latter necessarily entails the renunciation of a "heavenly mansion" and the artist's engagement in the realm of physicality, which he seeks to redeem, although at the peril of his own soul.[9] Ultimately, what the artist is compelled to reject is the Plotinean dictate to turn away "from the material beauty that once made his joy", to regard corporeal forms as mere copies, as shadows of the eternal beauty of "the Intellective-Being".[10] But the rejection brings no joyous celebration of physical experience. Rather, it leaves the artist in a schizophrenic predicament, "raging in the dark" and forever desirous of an inaccessible vision of perfection.

For the Yeats of the 1880s and 1890s, still very much involved in theosophical and occult studies, art remains vested with a spiritual, almost mystical quality as the expression of a hidden, transcendent reality, which it aims to reveal via the mediating force of symbol. But when vision, much to Yeats's apprehension, loses its concrete shape, when it fails to articulate itself in the specificity of form endorsed by tradition, it becomes vague and protean-like. It displays "a hand too bewildered by the multitudinous shapes and colours of visions", an art which "changes with the changing

of the dream", images "perpetually changing" and melting into one another "as in the changes of a hashish dream" (*UP* 2, pp. 111-112). Yeats is here charging A.E.'s poetry with this element of mutability of shape but his critique of this kind of art is also implicit in the Druid's poetic vision.

In effect, the Fergus poem lacks the increasingly corporeal overtones of the poetry after the turn of the century. But the Druid's choice of disembodied existence amidst a succession of shifting images illustrates Yeats's early concern with art losing its vigour and intensity if it is too far removed from the earthly domain, too filled with the substance of dream and fantasy to be contained by pattern. In his 1894 review of Ibsen, "The Stone and the Elixir", Yeats comments on the two ways of the transformative process by comparing them to alchemical reactions: the stone that "transmutes everything into gold" and the elixir that "dissolves everything into nothing". Like Fergus, Ibsen's character Peer Gynt exemplifies the latter of the two ways, for he

> lets sheer phantasy take possession of his life, and fill him with the delusion that he is this or that personage, now a hunter, now a troll, now a merchant, now a prophet, until the true Peer Gynt is well-nigh dissolved.
>
> (*UP* 1, p. 344)

What Peer Gynt lacks, however, and the Druid possesses, Yeats intimates both in the passage above and in the poem, is tragic knowledge of the malleability and elusiveness of his existence.

The tragic implications of such knowledge also permeate the mutable world of fantasy that the speaker of Yeats's two Mongan poems has constructed for himself and is fated to live in, "He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World" (1897) and "He thinks of his Past Greatness when a Part of the Constellations of Heaven" (1898). Mongan, Yeats tells us in a note, was in Celtic mythology a famous wizard and king who remembers his past lives (*VP*, p. 177). Edward Larrissy traces in Yeats's poetic treatment of Mongan a link with the poet's own attitude to the Irish mythological and bardic tradition. He associates the wizard's feelings of "bitterness and weariness" with a sense of disillusionment with Celtic lore and reads his transformations from cosmic force, embodying the spirit of life, to man as evocative of the decline in potency of that tradition.[11]

But Mongan's shape-shifting qualities also provide another thematic link, in

particular one with the creative process of art and its intrinsic, transformative capacity. As with the Druid, the metamorphoses that Mongan undergoes deny him self-realisation in the physical realm, as he shifts from shape to shape, unable to confine the essence of his being to any definite form. In consequence, he is denied attainment of earthly love. Having partaken of the suprasensual and the wisdom it imparts, he has become all-knowing,

> Knowing one, out of all things, alone, that his head
> May not lie on the breast nor his lips on the hair
> Of the woman that he loves, until he dies.

Knowledge here increases not unreality but suffering, thus rendering the attempt at fulfilment, as well as the pursuit of love and beauty, hopeless and futile. This raises questions with regard to the function of art in redeeming the personal and temporal by translating it into the universal and eternal. But it also throws into dispute the efficacy of the artistic process itself since Mongan's failure of imagistic incarnation signifies the ambiguity of textual coherence rendered at the structural level via the generation of image. Mongan's shapelessness is a kind of death, the truth of which is borne out in the wisdom he possesses. But "to die into the truth is still to die" (*AVb*, p. 271) and one can also die into the image, whether it is a shifting representation of self, nation or eternal beauty. So too can art, caught up in its own metamorphic capacity.

Yeats's persona is not Nietzsche's Dionysian reveller, who, transcending the divisive boundaries of form, image and self, can celebrate the dynamic unity – the flow and universality – of life in which the distinctions between subject and object, time and eternity are suspended. Such overcoming of barriers is advocated by the Brahmin and carries the speaker's endorsement in "Mohini Chatterjee" (1929). The notion of transfiguration, which results in the annulment of identity via the experiencing of all life forms, is here linked to the doctrine of reincarnation and of cyclical recurrence that dispenses with the limitations of historical time. In 1885 Yeats had learnt that "all is a stream which flows on out of human control, one action or thought leading to another, that we ourselves are nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it reflects nothing; the stream will go on but we not know" (*TSMC*, p. 68). Here, transcendence of outer form counters the illusion of the reflected image and affirms the continuity of life as a creative force external to man and history.

But at the time he was writing the Mohini poem, Yeats was moving towards a

subjective approach to the notions of reality and truth. Rather than treating them as absolute values existing independently of human experience, he perceives them as conceptual attitudes offering a perspective of the world, which, however, does not deny the existence of a transcendental principle. Thus, in 1930, opposing himself to Plotinus' thought of "man as re-absorbed into God's freedom as final reality", Yeats proposes a conception of reincarnation that accommodates the element of personal freedom and interpretation: "If men are born many times, as I think, that must originate in the antinomy between human and divine freedom. Man incarnating, translating 'the divine ideas' into his language of the eye, to assert his own freedom, dying into the freedom of God and then coming to birth again" (*Ex*, pp. 307, 306). The poem on Mohini Chatterjee elucidates this idea by presenting reincarnation and the transformational process it initiates through the metaphor of man's "dance on deathless feet". Birth and death, temporality and eternity are entwined as two modes of existence, each embodying the other. But in the late 1890s, the Mongan poems afford no such acceptance of life's all-inclusiveness. Transfiguration leads not to unity but to detachment. The persona's despondent reaction to the elusiveness of both his images and goal attests to his displacement from existence as well as from art, although he becomes the subject of the latter in Yeats's poem, but only as a figure of exile.

The antidote to such a condition would seem to be offered in the earlier of the two Mongan poems, in which the process of transformation yields a single, fixed image, that of a hound. But the fact that the process is uninvited – significantly, it is Aengus, the Celtic god of Love, who initiates it – and that the chosen image connotes the frustration of desire points to an ambivalence towards the redemptive quality of art. It challenges art's ability to transcend linguistic and imagistic limitations in its effort to characterise reality and confer meaning on it. In Yeats's poetry, forces of destruction rise suddenly and with much violence and, within the context of his theory of cyclical history, they are heralded as precipitating the beginning of a new era. But here, the speaker is unable to reconcile his personal lot with necessary historical change, which he sees as a manifestation of his own tragedy. For, as Bonney states, "superhuman principles of order also denote tragic futility to an individual".[12]

In "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897), tragic futility is denoted at the level not of a transformed subject but of the object of his pursuit. Having abandoned the frozen realm of timelessness and immutability that characterises existence on the first

island of *The Wanderings of Oisin*, Aengus, functioning as the poet's persona, is here transposed onto the plane of temporality and mutability. With experience being informed by change and evanescence, the poetic quest for eternal beauty becomes as fragile and elusive. As the locus of fulfilment of desire, whether it is sexual desire or spiritual perfection, the poetic text attempts to determine and frame its referent in images that are continually shifting and thus continually defer meaning. Because desire is marked by absence and, as Yeats declares in his essay from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* "Anima Hominis" (1917), "the desire that is satisfied is not a great desire" (*Myth*, p. 337), consummation is always displaced into the realm of the inaccessible. It inhabits a place which, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, is "a *non-place*" and "an *other* world", a utopia existing outside nature.[13] The trout caught in the flowing stream of life metamorphoses into

> a glimmering girl
> With apple blossom in her hair
> Who called me by my name and ran
> And faded through the brightening air.

We are reminded here of the Heraclitean image of river, into which one cannot step twice, as a metaphor for the state of perpetual flux in which the physical world exists (fr. 12) and against which the Yeatsian figure battles endlessly. Oisin's struggle with the protean demon remains unresolved and Cuchulain is finally engulfed by the sea. Aengus's effort to master the forces of change is equally ill-fated, for his desire to seize by hook, image or word what essentially remains evasive only heightens the frustration of the attempt. As with beholding, to name is ultimately to kill, to exchange the plurality of existence with the word, for naming alters the nature of reality by the very means it employs in order to define and capture that reality. It is a process of exclusion whereby the preferred meaning obliterates and eliminates all others, presenting itself as the only possible way of rendering truth. But as the Yeatsian quester discovers, truth does not lie in the conceptual absolutes that language fabricates in the search for comprehension. Truth is the acceptance of the multiple and of the random, counteracting Silenus' advice that what would constitute man's greatest good is "not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second-best thing" is "to die soon."[14]

Art, as Yeats views it, is both an act of reconciliation with death as an agent of nullification and an attempt to transcend it via the mitigation of aesthetic principles. In

the earlier poem "Ephemera" (1889), the speaker, expounding his notion of eternal recurrence in the alternation of individual lives and historical cycles, had bid his beloved not to mourn, for other loves await them and their souls are "a continual farewell". "The Song of Wandering Aengus" explores the negative implications of this idea, with the mythic persona eternally repeating his futile search "till time and times are done". Locating fulfilment beyond the confines of temporality and its generation of mutability enhances the poem's sense of futility. The unappeased longing for the "silver apples of the moon" and the "golden apples of the sun" appears to displace consummation of desire via the transformative process to the mythic realm, to some Elysian-type garden where antithetical and primary forces are reconciled.

The poem points forward to a similar treatment of the theme of labour for the attainment of love, beauty and art in "Adam's Curse" (1902). Here the transformative process has been attempted at the level of personal realisation of an ideal vision of love and its articulation in the terms of the poetic text. The poet-speaker's employment of "the old high way of love" according to the tradition of "high courtesy" suggests the transposition of feeling into the objectified form of culturally accepted modes of courtly love behaviour in an effort to salvage human emotions from the ruin of time. It is a process comparable to the attainment of female beauty and its incarnation as an aesthetic principle in the stylised form of the poem. Both art and beauty are thus presented as the product of a laborious, imaginative activity that shapes the raw materials of physical experience into contrived articulation of "sweet sounds" and sublime images.

The kind of beauty, both physical and spiritual, which is the poem's subject is intended, as Jefferson Holdridge remarks, to function as an agent of harmony and unity in society, "to repair the divisivess of the Fall" into historicity and temporality.[15] For Yeats, this also constitutes the social function of art as the embodiment of the redemptive quality of beauty. But the process whereby art transmutes love and beauty into the permanence and homogeneity of the aesthetic product proves of inadequate power in effecting the recreation of society into a unified whole, in which culture and art function as complementary forces. In the society of "bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" the old, lofty way of love "seems an idle trade", the artist is considered "an idler" and his art can only convey the weariness of a life turned abstract, hollow and impoverished.

Despite the failure of the attempt to achieve his poetic vision, the artist does not abandon his notion of transformation via the artistic method as the example of "At the Abbey Theatre" (1912) shows. The poem identifies the protean element of changeability with the shifting boundaries of popular cultural taste, which "turns and changes" like the "draughty seas" of the shape-changing figure of Greek mythology. In this respect, it becomes the artist's responsibility to mould cultural attitudes in an attempt to realise his vision of unity and coherence. But the ambiguity of the recovery of "a bridle" that will harness the shapeless forces inherent in the imaginative life of the nation renders the poetic task of social transformation tentative and even futile. The poet remains in mocking isolation. Singing a cracked tune, he battles, on the one hand, as "At Galway Races" (1909) suggests, against the encroaching "timid breath" of "the merchant and the clerk", whilst pursuing, on the other, the attainment of cultural synthesis, of making artist and audience "of the one mind". Unlike "The Song of Wandering Aengus", this poem defers reconciliation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian to a time in future when an antithetical dispensation cycles in a transformed culture which will be attuned to the energetic rhythm of "the whole earth".

The underlying argument is that, in an age dominated by materiality and abstract thought, art fails to transform society because the latter is no longer receptive to the poetic ideal of cultural unification. As "power passed to small shopkeepers, to clerks," Yeats lamented in 1907 in "Poetry and Tradition", to "men who had risen above the traditions of the countryman, without learning those of cultivated life [...], immediate utility became everything" (*E&I*, p. 260). The detachment from social life signifies a crucial turn in the role performed by the artist. No longer seen as the accepted voice of the consciousness of the nation and the shaper of society's aesthetic values, he becomes an individual voice. This division between the public and the private persona of the artist also has implications for the achievement of transformation at personal level as "The Three Hermits" (1913) and "The Phases of the Moon" (1919) exemplify.

In the first of the two poems, transformation as a process conditioning reincarnation becomes the object of abstract philosophic speculation that enters into the discourse of the two hermits. Evoking the Platonic notion of the soul's nine incarnations, as expounded in the *Phaedrus* (248d-e) and according to which the soul that has failed to attain divine enlightenment may descend into generation as king or

artist, the poem proceeds to offer its own metaphysical position. To the suggestion that "holy men/ Who have failed" to retain self-possession and ascetic nonchalance are reborn either by taking on "some most fearful shape" or by changing into "a poet or a king/ Or a witty lovely lady", a third condition is juxtaposed:

> While he'd rummaged rags and hair,
> Caught and cracked his flea, the third,
> Giddy with his hundredth year,
> Sang unnoticed like a bird.

For Yeats, the metamorphosis into bird signifies the passage from corporeality and historicity to superhuman revelation and transcendence. The artificiality of the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) denotes the utopian nature of the speaker's flight to a de-materialised and abstracted mode of existence. For all its artistic splendour, the transformation effected is a strained process, suggesting the unreality of the metaphysical ideal. To reverse Yeats, it is an ideal which functions as an instrument "to win us from life and gather us into eternity" (*Myth*, pp. 300-301). In "The Three Hermits", we witness a similar transition. The bird's inarticulate cry, anticipating similar nonsensical phraseology in later poems, such as the "fol de roll de rolly O" response to the speaker's search for transcendental truth in "The Pilgrim" (1937), violates "linguistic coherence", to borrow Bonney's term.[16] It parodies and, in so doing, undercuts any notion of correspondence between verbal structures and their semantic referents, only to invoke a superior, metaphysical reality. At the same time, it can only be accomplished via the adoption of a stance of indifference, a detachment from the realm of worldly affairs. Remaining unnoticed by those caught in secular concerns or intellectual pursuits, the bird song not only constitutes a private utterance, despite its submergence into anonymity, but is also pushed beyond the boundaries of human experience.

In "The Phases of the Moon", detachment and the negation of desire lead to the kind of deformity that spells the annulment of form and its dissolution in "cook Nature", in the receptacle of amorphous substance. Effectively, they render both personality and culture "insipid as the dough before it is baked". For Yeats, such formlessness, which endows Nature with great plastic power, signifies a return to the world of generation, in the way that shapelessness in "The Pilgrim" characterises the soul's flight after death from corporeality into spirituality. There are underlying

Platonic notions of reincarnation, the reborn soul seeking to attain substantiation and embodiment through the vehicle of physical shape. In this state, it is the word, as indefinable as the bird song, but privileging logocentrism and the authorship of the voice as the centre of meaning, that signals the search for a shapely image via the transformational process.

Near the end of his poetic career, Yeats wrote of his desire "to plunge myself into impersonal poetry" and "to make a last song, sweet and exultant, a sort of [...] *geeta*, not doctrine but song" (*L*, p. 836). The song, like the dance in "The Cat and the Moon" (1918), is an image of sensual art; it embodies the Yeatsian ideal of unity of thought and feeling in the artistic work, a spirit of creative exuberance and overflowing energy. For Nietzsche, writing can communicate this richness of life if practised as a form of dancing, "being able to dance with the feet, with concepts, with words"; essentially, being "able to dance with the pen".[17] But if poetry is reduced to the level of incommunicative articulation and attains transcendence with the surrender of poetic utterance to "the irrational cry", "the scream of Juno's peacock" (*AVb*, p. 268), it inhabits a domain in which coherence and meaning collapse. The "changing eyes" that the cat of the poem "lifts to the changing moon", as they both undergo a series of cyclical changes "from round to crescent" to round, signify the ambiguity of the process of transformation. This can be the progression resulting in perpetuity of transmutation and ultimately in formlessness and disintegration of meaning. But it can also be the progression which yields the definite outline of image and form.

III

Expounding his theory of alternating historical cycles in the section of the second version *A Vision* entitled "Dove or Swan", Yeats remarks that "a civilisation is a struggle to keep self-control", an attempt to master and regulate the forces of "intellectual anarchy" (*AVb*, pp. 268, 269). For Yeats, such a conception of civilisation holds equally true for art, which also seeks to impose order and comprehensibility upon the diversity and chaos of the experiential world. This notion is similar to Nietzsche's perspective on art as the "*compulsion* to transform into the perfect". It is an approach that views the artist as one who, driven to create out of a "feeling of plenitude", irradiates and "transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection".[18] Admittedly, Yeats endows art with a transcendental quality so that,

rather than reflecting the artist's perfection, it reveals for all its acceptance of corporeality the perfection of an ultimate, spiritual mode of existence. But by transmuting the accidents of life into the metaphoric schemata of the poetic work, art has the power to alter and refashion not only empirical reality but also the experiencing self. Yeats epitomises this notion in the poem to *The Hour-Glass* (1914), in which artefact and artisan coalesce as objects of transformation:

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

This perpetual process of reconstructing and reshaping engenders a sense of symbolic renewal. It marks the separation of the self that crafts from the self that is crafted. By treating the latter as an artistic object to be reconstituted as an objectified reality immune to time's decay and to death, the poet ensures for himself the permanence and infinity of a continual present. He enters into mythical time, thereby depersonalising himself so that he can redefine both his past and the process of history. As Jahan Ramazani observes, "Yeats grants himself a metamorphic flexibility" that can seem to shield him from the finality of the temporal condition and allow him to "win ultimate authority over himself and over death".[19] In this respect, the artistic work functions as a mask for the revised poetic self, with which it is identified. "Helen could not be Helen but for beleaguered Troy" (*AVb*, p. 268). The poetic character is as much a fictive persona, subject to reconstruction via the artistic process, as it is a historical figure occasioning the poetic text. History and myth converge, dying each other's life, living each other's death.

Throughout Yeats's poetry, art is invested with a metamorphic capacity in order that it may surpass the irreversibility of historical time and confer the concrete unity of form upon the randomness of experience. At the same time, its mythopoeic activity aims at creating a poetic vision of eternal beauty. It is the beauty that, having been "won/ From bitterest hours" as suggested in "When Helen Lived" (1914), may afford a glimpse into a transcendent reality. The poem is concerned with the modern poet's failure to appreciate and articulate the ideal in Helen's beauty. Implicit in the conception of such an image is the recognition of its terrible aspect of violence, which had radically transformed the old heroic world. For as the second of "Three Marching

Songs" (1934) asserts, fostering this ideal, "Troy backed its Helen; Troy died and adored". In contrast, the failure recorded in the earlier poem is translated into a "word and a jest", which questions art's adequacy not only to impose a heroic ideal but also to transmute the historically conditioned into the aesthetic perfection of what "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) terms "the artifice of eternity".[20]

Strangely enough, to achieve such impersonality by way of artistic reconstruction entails "exchang[ing] life for a logical process". Yeats here is partially in agreement with Nietzsche, for whom the artist, being a victim of his own talent, expends his energy and squanders the "force which one calls passion" by representing it.[21] Such exhaustion of his resources, which negates the principle of self-preservation, manifests an act of self-overcoming, perceived as the drive towards life's wholeness.[22] "Neither Christ nor Buddha nor Socrates wrote a book" (*Aut*, p. 461), admits Yeats in his preference for orality. Inevitably, the remark begs the question: Did Christ, Buddha or Socrates, all of whom Nietzsche regards as representing nihilistic, anti-life forces, attain Yeats's vision of life despite their fashioning of a system of thought? Yeats's answer would appear to be in the positive. But even so, it would render the dialectic of desire in the terms of oscillation between life and art.

It is precisely the poet's book of verse, bearing testimony to his blood line in the "Introductory Rhymes" (1914) to *Responsibilities*, or justifying his choice of an aesthetic way of life in "Words" (1910), that is censured in two of the later dialogic poems.[23] Both Ille in "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1917) and Robartes in "The Phases of the Moon" (1919) seem to privilege an attitude that dispenses with the doctrinal exposition and abstract rationality of the written text, and to favour the search for the visionary, sensorial image. This they locate outside or beyond the written page, in diagrams on the sand or in the dramatic gesture of oral performance. But the poet's choice of perfection of the work rather than of life having been made, there remains the question of the actualisation, of the incarnation of the image via the transforming power of art.

In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1885), Yeats had asserted that poetic "words alone are certain good", for they counteract the ills effected by the "cracked tune" of Chronos. Admittedly, the shepherd's emphasis on the validity of words betrays, as Elizabeth Cullingford remarks, an adherence to "the masculine Logos, to the constitutive importance of language"[24] and thereby privileges presence. For Derrida, absence lies at the heart of writing. To write is to draw back "from one's language, to

emancipate it or lose one's hold on it", to "leave speech" in order "to let it speak alone" via its written form.[25] But in Yeats's poem, the absence of the voice denotes the failure of speech. The identification of art with a "twisted, echo-harbouring shell" intimates the process by which the redemptive quality of the former is to function. "Rewording in melodious guile" the "fretful words" to which the old dreaming world of Arcady has been reduced by the abstractions of history and science, art performs an act of transformation which is an act of re-creation. It reconstructs verbal utterance into melody, personal experience into beauty, history into myth. But the sense of permanence it affords is illusory and transitory, siren-like in the allure of the promise for imaginative regeneration.

Having undergone poetic transmutation, the private story embodied in the shepherd's song will fade and dissolve into "a pearly brotherhood" that appears to be a state of inarticulate absorption into primordial Nature. Because the shepherd's poetic act, offered as an alternative to the nihilistic collapse of meaning in the modern world, is, as Adams remarks, the "destruction of his own medium",[26] the negation of language signifies the annulment of poetry itself. It also challenges what Cullingford terms in Kristevan fashion "the language of the father, the language of desire and lack".[27] Although the poem provides an affirmation of the imagination and its transforming power, the latter holds little significance in restoring to the world what the poet valorises: the unity of poetic dream over the divisiveness of action, mythic utterance over empirical truth. Rather than operating as a revitalising force, poetry is instead presented as a utopia, as the locus of half-fulfilled desire, exchanging physical reality, with its acceptance of joy and sorrow, for an idealistic vision of artificial paradise. In effect, it is the poetry of displacement.

If the happy shepherd poem advocates a return to an elusive mythic past, "A Woman Homer Sung" (1910) marks a step in a different direction. It attempts to reconstruct the past in order to effect reconciliation between the real and the ideal, between temporal and eternal beauty. The tension inherent in the relationship between these opposing conditions, whereon the authorial voice "wrote and wrought", engenders the poetic struggle to create a form embodying beauty in both its positive and negative aspects: as a creative and destructive force. "Beauty", Yeats would later write in his essay "Anima Mundi" (1917), "is indeed but bodily life in some ideal condition" (*Myth*, p. 349). The process of transformation, whereby the poet seeks to

achieve such a vision of the beautiful, is twofold. On one level, the textual body functions as an incarnate vision of beauty, an imagistic reflector that "'shadowed in a glass/ What thing her body was.'" It recreates through the medium of language not beauty's physical lineaments but its inner energy and magnificence of force. On another level, such an ideal representation of beauty transforms the art that encapsulates its spirit so that "life and letters seem/ But an heroic dream." By becoming the verbal expression of beauty, its aesthetic embodiment, poetry relinquishes its claim to reality, and with it its shaping power, and is instead re-possessed, re-written by what it seeks to celebrate.

The beauty that Yeats's poem seeks to celebrate by transmuting it into an ideal is intrinsically connected to violence as the reference to "fiery blood" suggests. In his 1936 essay "Modern Poetry", Yeats expresses the idea that profound philosophy is derived from terror. "An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the pre-suppositions of our thoughts [...] drop into the abyss." Yeats deems that the metaphysical questions one is compelled to ask concern not only the nature of reality but also its connection to beauty. For Turner, whom Yeats quotes in the same essay, the answer lies in the association of horror with physical beauty, for the latter pulls us "under the machinery of Nature" and away from its spirituality. Thus, Turner sees human beings as "the reflections of a terrible Olympus" (*E&I*, pp. 502, 505). For Yeats, who would be sympathetic to such a view, especially with regard to the deceptive element in Nature, beauty for all its destructive effects can still be one of the creative and shaping forces of society.

In Yeats's poetry, an early discussion of such an aspect of "terrible beauty" occurs in "No Second Troy" (1910), in which evocations of violence point to the connection between beauty and social transformation. This is the kind of beauty that, having "taught to ignorant men most violent ways," can inaugurate a new antithetical age of turbulent energies and creative powers – the age heralded by "The Second Coming". It is also the kind of beauty that can potentially unite the corporeal and the transcendent, past and present. But the historical change thus effected requires a "Troy for her to burn". Beauty's violent rupture of existing patterns rewrites history, as it does poetry. Thus, the figure of eternal, albeit cruel, beauty *par excellence*, Helen, here identified with Maud Gonne, becomes the locus for the enactment of forces which Yeats regards as instrumental in the formation of civilisation as well as in artistic activity.

Violence as an aspect of beauty forms the basis of the creative act and is therefore a unifying force. "Love war because of its horror," propounds Yeats through the vehicle of Michael Robartes in *A Vision*, "that belief may be changed, civilisation renewed" (*AVb*, pp. 52-53). Destructive violence, which causes the breakdown of the old social order and mode of poetic expression, functions as an agent of creative violence, which transforms the ensuing chaos and flux into some new, viable form of permanence, whether of social structure or of aesthetic beauty. In this interplay of processes, the contemplated subject, "being what she is" and submitting to historical necessity, is viewed as a figure of destiny rather than of freedom.

However, in her poetic treatment, we can read Helen as the trope for the confluence of what Yeats terms the fated and the chosen image (*AVb*, p. 94); or, in Nietzschean terms, of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles, the former finding incarnation and utterance in the definite shape that the latter provides. This idea underlies the Greek mythological allusions of "Long-Legged Fly" (1939). The creative force necessitates the operation of violence, which gives birth to the form of the ideal: beauty as the embodiment of social harmony and cultural unity. "That the topless towers be burnt/ And men recall that face," Helen functions as an instrument of change, both historical and artistic. But at the same time, she expresses the forces of violence that inhere in her beauty in its positive and negative aspects. As Holdridge remarks, she "unites the deformed life of the subject and the objective reality of the ideal."[28] She is at once a figure of vulnerability, susceptible to historical circumstance, and an emblem of beauty exerting its shaping influence on the world: the influence to break and make civilisations, to reconcile antithetical and primary qualities.

As the subject of song, beauty also has the power to incite men to great passion. In "The Tower" (1923), Yeats presents us with an idealised form of eternal beauty, whose poetic rendering can have a transforming effect on life. Via his act of creation, Homer, a "blind man" and poet of the antithetical age of Greece, transcends the destructive violence of Helen's beauty that "has all living hearts betrayed." Yet, his song, we are to infer, has equally ruinous consequences. The poet-speaker's poetic endeavours, modelled on the example of Homeric art, "must make men mad" if they are to "triumph" in their aim of shaping society and restoring an ideal of passionate intensity and unity. This is the kind of madness whence inspiration comes and which Yeats sees as the mark of the poetic genius of "many-minded" Homer in "Mad as the

Mist and Snow" (1932), much as Michel Foucault sees it manifest itself in "the lighting-flash" of Nietzsche's works.[29] It is also the madness that, in its association with frenzied inspiration, Yeats invokes to transform the ageing poet of "An Acre of Grass" (1938) so that he can re-enact, with renewed vitality, the process of artistic creation. We are thus invited to view madness not as a negative form of violence but in positive terms as "an expression of the uncontrollable energy and daring of the great creators" (*VP*, p. 831).

There are underlying Platonic allusions in Yeats's text. In the *Phaedrus* (244a-b), Plato speaks of the type of madness ascribed to divine intervention and identifies poetic activity as the result of divine possession, of "inspired madness", whose source is the Muses. What therefore, for Plato, distinguishes a good poet and renders the effects of the instruction received from his compositions harmless is the acceptance that his inspiration is manic, that his "gentle and pure soul" is possessed and aroused by divine frenzy. The connection between poetry and god-sent madness stems from Plato's conviction that the poet, unlike the philosopher, can lay no claim to knowledge or understanding of his activities.[30] In the *Ion* (533e-534e), Plato compares the poet, who is described as "a light and winged and sacred" being, to the bacchants. Like the frenzied revellers of Dionysus, so too the poet can only compose if divinely inspired, possessed by the Muse, his mind "no longer in him". Plato here draws a picture of the poet as one who, bereft of his senses, is merely a vehicle through which the deity becomes articulate, a medium for the utterance of divine revelations. In W.K.C. Guthrie's terms, Plato offers a "mystical explanation of poetry on the lines of Dionysiac possession",[31] one which Yeats would have commended although, unlike Plato, he held the position that poetry imparts wisdom and truth.

In "The Tower", such is the maddening effect of beauty when translated in the terms of the poetic text. It was with Homer and his praise of Helen that "the tragedy" of artistic power, embodying the violence of desire, began. Raftery, a blind Gaelic poet, glorified the beauty of Mary Hynes in a song which so possessed the minds of certain men, driving "their wits astray", that it caused one of them to drown.[32] And in "Man and the Echo" (1939), Yeats's poetic persona wonders if a play of his – *Cathleen ni Houlihan* – was the driving force behind the uprising of Easter 1916, shaping the events that sent "out/ Certain men the English shot". He also wonders if the articulation of the poetic vision of cultural unification could have reversed the historical conditions

"whereby a house lay wrecked". In both poems, the rift between desire and the reality of decrepitude of age, and ultimately of death, threatens not only fulfilment but also the vitality of the "Excited, passionate, fantastical/ Imagination". Inevitably, the poetic search for an image that will transcend the physical and spiritual change brought on by the forces of temporality raises questions about the potency of artistic creation.

To elucidate the artist's lot, Yeats, in "The Tower", evoked one of his own creations, the fictive character of Hanrahan. His illusive quest for wisdom and poetic utterance "drove him drunk or sober" to the uttermost limits of physical existence in a twilight realm of imagination where expression fades and images dissolve, caught up in the poet's own "juggleries" of constant metamorphoses. Like Oisin, and like Hanrahan, the poet seeks to transmute the violent flux of the experiential world into the permanence of artistic form. Yet, the process of transformation brings awareness both of the shifting boundaries of image, the "great labyrinth" of the poetic mind, and of the dangers of the fixed, ideal image towards which the "horrible splendour of desire" is driven. Yeats's concern for the latter had already been expressed in a Senate speech on censorship in 1923:

> I remember John Synge and myself both being considerably troubled when a man, who had drowned himself in the Liffey, was taken from the river. He had in his pocket a copy of Synge's play, "Riders to the Sea," which [...] dealt with a drowned man. We know, of course, that Goethe was greatly troubled when a man was taken from the river, having drowned himself. The man had in his pocket a copy of "Werther," which is also about a man who had drowned himself. It has again and again cropped up in the world that the arts do appeal to our imitative faculties. We comfort ourselves [...] that there must have been other men saved from suicide by having read "Werther."
>
> (*SS*, p. 52)

Ultimately, Yeats concludes in his speech, art's measurement is not social morality but "the general conscience of mankind", the latter notion charged with familiar, metaphysical nuances. What, in Yeats's view, validates art is its capacity to shape the uncontrollable energy manifest in the individual or society into forms of beauty, into images of transcendence. For as the story "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye" recognises, like beauty, which "is not of the world", the poetic imagination too is a manifestation of divine operation. It is a "'gift of the Almighty'", functioning as an instrument for establishing communion with the imperishable reality and for acquiring "'knowledge of all the things of the world'". For Yeats, such wisdom can have

significant, transformative implications. It not only possesses the power to confer immortality upon the figures of Mary Hynes and Raftery by elevating them to "perfect symbols of the sorrow of beauty and of the magnificence and penury of dreams" (*CT*, pp. 49, 54-55); it also effects historical and cultural change.

"Leda and the Swan" (1923) enacts Yeats's idea of violent transformation connected to the cyclical movement of history and its mechanism of renewal operating within culture.[33] Mention has already been made in Chapter Four of the association, as formulated in *A Vision*, of Leda with the inauguration of the Greek antithetical culture. But Yeats projects the symbolic significance of such a connection into his vision of the future. With another turn of the gyres, the old primary dispensation, realised in Christ's figure, will give way to a new antithetical age, when "another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleaguer Troy" (*Myth*, p. 310) and thus effect social transformation.[34] This notion fundamentally points to the return of the same in difference as a conception of time that allows for the forces of civilisation to recur, reconstituting similar but not identical historical phases.

This recalls Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence, intended as a principle of life affirmation and perceived as the infinite repetition of the cycle of becoming. The life of an individual, as it has been lived and is being lived in the present, returns innumerable times, the "'eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust'".[35] Nietzsche's theory posits the recurrence of every feeling, thought and action, but this is conceived of, from an ontological standpoint, as the return not of separate events but of the energy powers gathered in "a great year of becoming". This cycle will "turn itself over again", recreating anew "this identical and self-same life," in whose continuous resurgence individual life is "entangled".[36] In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche associates his doctrine of eternal recurrence with the Dionysian element:

> For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian condition, that the *fundamental fact* of the Hellenic instinct expresses itself – its "will to life". *What* did the Hellene guarantee to himself with these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change.[37]

In both Nietzsche and Yeats, the idea of recurrence is linked with the thought of Heraclitus, a concession that the German philosopher makes in his late work *Ecce*

Homo.[38] Yeats's Leda poem contains the philosophic proposition that at the base of historical progression lies Heraclitean strife and that violence, in the form of violation of beauty, operates as a principle of destruction that precedes the act of creation. This is a reading also offered in *A Vision* (1925) in Yeats's pronouncement that civilisation advances through antithesis. Accordingly, Greek culture came into being via the interaction of the contending forces of Love and War, which sprang out of Leda's eggs (*AVa*, p. 181). At the time of the poem's composition, Yeats linked this idea of revolt to what he perceived as the conditions of political and cultural sterility prevalent in Ireland.[39] When the "'soil is so exhausted'" by the erosion of a common cultural foundation that unity can no longer be sustained, nothing is "'possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation'" (*VP*, p. 828). Yeats may have maintained that in the process of creative writing political considerations were overshadowed by mythological ones. However, the politics of power, the translation of which into poetics will be the focus of my reading, still runs the subtext of "Leda and the Swan".[40]

Yeats's comment points to a revelatory reading of the poem as signifying the incursion of the divine into the human as a means of precipitating and also of imparting knowledge of the historical process.[41] But in view of Yeats's notion of cyclical recurrence, the movement from above could also be construed as a movement from within, as the intrinsic force of necessity conditioning transformation. Thus, the poem can be viewed as the site of the contest of conflicting opposites that move, through antithesis, to a point of resolution and definition:

> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead.

As the embodiment of powers whose tension engenders the beginning of a new dispensation out of the collapse of the old order, the figures of Leda and the swan exist in dialectic opposition with both historical and aesthetic implications.

For Yeats, "'belief is renewed continually in the ordeal of death'" (*AVb*, p. 53). Regeneration, whether cultural or artistic, is conditioned by the operation of violence that aims at reshaping the chaotic materials of experience into new forms, thereby formulating a new vision and thus bridging the temporal and the infinite via the act of creation. In this sense, we can read "Leda and The Swan" in terms of the interplay of

the Dionysian and Apollonian principles. This is to be understood as the harnessing of the abundant energies of life, encompassing both productive and destructive elements, by the form-creation force. For Nietzsche, such an act leads not to purgation of terror, via emotional release, but to acceptance of all qualities of life and to affirmation of "transitoriness and *destruction*," of "antithesis and war".[42] This idea resonates in Yeats's "Introduction" to *The Resurrection* (1934). Its closing remarks can retrospectively elucidate the concept of terror that runs through the Leda poem: "It has seemed to me of late that the sense of spiritual reality comes whether to the individual or to crowds from some violent shock, and that idea has the support of tradition" (*W&B*, pp. 109-110). The shock will come in the unleashing of the forces of irrationality and in the advent of an antithetical era of multiplicity and conflict.[43]

Like Helen in "No Second Troy", Leda is not so much a victim of circumstance as the divine instrument, the vessel through which the terrible forces of destructive creativity can become incarnate and articulate. In surrendering her body to violation, she both lays herself open to and encloses the influx of the irrational and elemental springs of life, embodied in the swan, that the artist seeks to re-fashion into the lucid and shapely order of the artistic product. But at the same time, Leda contains within herself those forces of energy and vitality, that "shudder in the loins", which engender the death and resurrection not only of civilisation but also of humanity. For, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra teaches, "one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."[44] But regeneration can only take place in the act of surrender: in the swan's embrace or its abandon in the "protecting care" of Leda of "Lullaby" (1931), in the artist's emancipation from his language.

IV

The "resurrection of the body" that Yeats had prayed for in the last *Discoveries* essay, "The Holy Places" (1907), can, in the context of his poetry of the 1920s, be understood in terms not only of materialisation of the ideal – body and spirit united – but also of aestheticisation of the political – power as art. As "Two Songs from a Play" (1927) suggests, where "holy Dionysus" lies dead and the mystery of life is enacted in the ritualistic handling of his "beating heart", another cycle, historical and cultural, initiated by the dynamic flow of life begins; another "Troy must rise and fall". The concluding question in the Leda poem – whether, being so "mastered by the brute

blood of the air," she puts on "his knowledge with his power" – is thus as much addressed to Leda as it is to the artist. The transformation that Leda undergoes is also the way of the artist: a violent conjunction of destructive and creative powers whereby art is generated and chaos is mastered and unleashed anew.

With regard to art's relationship with chaos, the views of D.H. Lawrence, on the one hand, and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on the other, provide an elucidating parallel. In his 1929 essay "Chaos in Poetry", Lawrence remarks that poetry is not merely the linguistic patterning of images and ideas. Rather, it is the discovery of a new world, the unveiling of a new vision, won out of the poet's struggle with chaos and his victory over it. But as Lawrence affirms, man's inability to live in chaos, and consequently his horror of it, drives him to erect "an umbrella between himself and the everlasting whirl", intended to protect him from the encroaching chaos. It is such a tendency that the Lawrencean artist finds himself confronting:

> Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun. But after a while, […] commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens on to chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum.[45]

Offering a new vision, another glimpse of chaos, and not merely exposing man's desire for the latter, or his fear of it, would require a terrible act of violence: the shredding of the umbrella, Leda's ravishing by the swan-god, the artist's self-expenditure.

Relating to Lawrence's ideas, Deleuze and Guattari also argue that art is a battle with chaos, which it strives to confront and illuminate by offering us a new way of negotiating with it:

> Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes […] a chaosmos, a composed chaos – neither foreseen nor preconceived. Art transforms chaotic variability into *chaoid* variety […]. Art struggles with chaos but it does so in order to render it sensory.[46]

In Yeats's poetry, out of this struggle a "terrible beauty", foreshadowed in "Easter 1916" and conceived of Leda, is born: the "rough beast" of "The Second Coming", slouching towards Bethlehem and releasing the "irrational streams of blood" prefigured by "The Gyres". In its political implications, this is a utopian and even dangerous

conception of beauty, especially if linked to totalitarian views of purity, cultural unification and collective experience. And in the 1920s and 1930s Yeats was by no means immune to such modes of thinking. He writes in *On the Boiler* (1939):

> If human violence is not embodied in our institutions the young will not give them their affection, nor the young and old their loyalty. A government is legitimate because some instinct has compelled us to give it the right to take life in defence of its laws and its shores.
>
> (*Ex*, p. 441)

The ideal that enabled such justification of institutionalised violence had been furnished by the Byzantine worker of *A Vision* (1937). His artistic craftsmanship, a testament to cultural unity, could express in the beauty and perfection of outer form what "was an instrument of power to princes and clerics, a murderous madness in the mob" (*AVb*, p. 279). In "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1923), the collective violence which levels the ancestral houses also ruptures the unity afforded by tradition and art. The vision of ideal beauty surrenders to images of self-negating desire and of brutality. But in "Blood and the Moon" (1928), the ideal of violence is defended with renewed force although its attainment remains tentative, divorced from the reality of experience. Desired and abhorred, beauty's destructive force is cast away.

However, the conception of "terrible beauty" is also a conception of the genesis of art. The "Ledaean body" that the speaker of "Among School Children" (1927) dreams of is not merely the body of the beloved, ravished by time or historical necessity. It is not solely the body of radical revolution engendering ecstatic revelation. It is essentially the body of poetic text, forever in the process of becoming, where meaning is constantly contested and negotiated; where desire and consummation meet in the worship of images that yield a strained, almost impossible, vision of unity. Dance and dancer merge, the subject is absorbed into the act, but only in mockery of "man's enterprise" and in the absence of conflict. Yeats is too painfully aware that without conflict life is negated and that, despite the yearning for absolutes or the attempts at metaphysical flights, art must remain rooted in the domain of temporality and historicity if it is to have any relevance.

For the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, art and its imparting sense of Dionysian ecstasy, which abolishes all "boundaries of existence", can provide consolation for him "whose piercing gaze has seen to the core of the terrible destructions of world history and nature's cruelty".[47] In *Twilight of the Idols*, such

knowledge promotes not resignation but the realisation in oneself of "the eternal joy of becoming". The acceptance of life as a physical experience in its totality provides Nietzsche with the notion of "tragic feeling". Tragic art is Dionysian in that it communicates "the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types". It seeks not to purify or redeem but to affirm even that which is destructive.[48] Acknowledgement of this enables the tragic poet to sing with Zarathustra of "Joy – deeper than heart's agony", for "all joy wants eternity".[49]

For Yeats, consolation for the unalterable reality of the flux of physical existence is to be found on a different path. Yeats's poetry emerges out of the oscillation between the need to pattern chaos and that to be submerged in it. With the boundaries of history and myth blurred, what lies at the heart of his poetic activity is the politics of desire. Or rather, its poetics: the expression of desire – thrown in the face of the politicians who speak of "War and war's alarms" – and the desire for expression. Still, the admission that life "is no series of emanations from divine reason" but "an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall, a gyre" (*AVb*, p. 40) leads not to a rejection of the experiential realm but to a conceded celebration of its diversity and even transitoriness. The "foul rag", in which the individual's life journey begins and ends, is only a partial victory for the poet who sought, via his art, to bring man's soul to God and had to contend with the loss of his own and the inaccessibility of "a heavenly mansion".

Caught between time and eternity, the poetic struggle yields tragic joy. It is the joy that springs from "an acceptance of what life brings" and "what it takes away"; the "ecstasy at the approach of death" that transposes one "beyond feeling" into the dispassionate edifice of eternity (*E&I*, pp. 322, 523). It is the gaiety we see reflected in the Chinamen's "ancient, glittering eyes" of "Lapis Lazuli" as they behold the unfolding drama of the human condition, mankind's entanglement in history. And it is the joy that transmutes the fire of destruction into the light of a new, dawning age rising from the ashes of burning Troy in "The Gyres". Because he is able to "rejoice in the midst of tragedy" (*L*, p. 838), the Yeatsian hero feels content, if ultimately he wins the argument of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", to relive his life and

> follow to its source
> Every event in action or in thought;
> Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!

Notes to Chapter Seven

1. William Bonney, "He 'Liked the Way his Finger Smelt': Yeats and the Tropics of History", in *Yeats and Postmodernism*, ed. Leonard Orr (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 55.

2. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990), p. 4.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; first publ. 1994), p. 28.

4. Nietzsche's Zarathustra calls "evil and misanthropic" all notions of "the one and the perfect and the unmoved and the sufficient". Such an unchangeable world is postulated as being an image, whereas the world of transitoriness, which is the world of becoming, is acknowledged as the only reality (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969; first publ. 1961), pp. 110-111).

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968; first publ. 1967), p. 422.

6. In his 1906 *Discoveries* essay "The Subject-matter of Drama", Yeats, associating art with dream and with Dionysian intoxication, affirms that "all art is dream" and that "in the end all is in the wine-cup, all is in the drunken fantasy" (*E&I*, p. 285). This recalls Nietzsche's perception of the Dionysian impulse in terms of intoxication. Self-forgetfulness is made possible by the "narcotic potion" of the Dionysian experience and in these "paroxysms of intoxication" nature's artistic power is revealed as an expression of life's unity (*The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 17, 18).

7. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems*, p. 51.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 432.

9. In his 1898 review of A.E.'s poetry, Yeats identified two opposing tendencies in the artist: the choice of "'the shadowy beauty'" of earthly reality at the exclusion of the spiritual concerns of the soul and the choice of "the invisible beauty" of non-material reality at the exclusion of bodily concerns (*UP* 2, p. 113). The movement towards a bodily conception of art and the formulation of the doctrine of the "thinking body" – the unity of the physical and the spiritual – rendered the dilemma in the terms of the contrast between the artist and the saint. This was a familiar theme, for it had also informed the dialectic of *The Wanderings of Oisin* insofar as the poem articulates the vacillation between swordsman and saint. In the *Discoveries* essay "The Two Kinds of Asceticism" (1906), Yeats distinguishes the artist, who "identifies himself – to the neglect of his own soul, alas! – with the soul of the world" and is "an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers", from the saint, who renounces great passions and "seeks not an eternal art, but his own eternity" (*E&I*, p. 286).

10. Plotinus, *The Enneads* (2nd edn), trans. Stephen MacKenna, rev. B.S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1956; first publ. 1917-1930), I.6.8.

11. Edward Larrissy, *Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 73-78.

12. William Bonney, "He 'Liked the Way his Finger Smelt'", in *Yeats and Postmodernism*, p. 44.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London; New York: Routledge,

2004; first publ. 1978), p. 7. In a journal note of 1909, Yeats, linking desire to absence and transposing its actualisation onto a transcendent plane, quotes approvingly a visionary woman: "If we could only say to ourselves, with sincerity, 'This passing moment is as good as any I shall ever know', we would perish instantly or become united to God" (*Mem*, p. 210). For Nietzsche, however, such a validation of the moment does not signify a departure towards a metaphysical mode of existence but an affirmation of the totality of life. Because, as Zarathustra pronounces, "time itself is a circle", past and future converge in the present and "existence begins in every instant". Thus, acceptance of the moment denotes receptivity to life (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 178, 234).

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22.

15. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), p. 68.

16. William Bonney, "He 'Liked the Way his Finger Smelt'", in *Yeats and Postmodernism*, p. 41.

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987; first publ. 1968), p. 66.

18. Ibid., p. 72.

19. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy and the Sublime* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 139, 140.

20. Nietzsche describes this tendency in art as "the 'embellishing' power" whereby female beauty is perfected and idealised in that it becomes "a present of everything excellent," of everything that the artist "honours and esteems" (*The Will to Power*, pp. 424-425).

21. Ibid., p. 431. Roland Barthes opposes to the "bourgeois economy of repletion" an economy of expenditure, a "perverse economy of dispersion, of waste, of frenzy" (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1979), p. 85).

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 136-139.

23. I use the term "dialogic" both in a stylistic sense, in that the two poems are written in dialogue form between two personae one of which functions as the author's spokesman, and in the Bakhtinean sense of meaning being constantly negotiated and re-interpreted between different characters. This is truer, however, of "Ego Dominus Tuus" than of "The Phases of the Moon", in which Aherne merely reiterates and endorses Robartes's views. In his essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", Mikhail Bakhtin writes of " images of languages that are connected to one another and with the author via their own characteristic dialogical relationships". In this respect, the language of a literary text can be viewed as "a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other" (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996; first publ. 1981), p. 47).

24. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996; first publ. 1993, p. 18.

25. Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, p. 85.

26. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems*, p. 38.

27. Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History*, p. 19.

28. Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, p. 216.

29. For Foucault, madness and art appear irreconcilable, for "the work endlessly drives madness to its limits; *where there is a work of art, there is no madness*". And yet madness, to the extent that it engenders art, is the mediating force through which the world must perforce measure and order itself by art's language. Madness is thus coexistent with the work of art "since it inaugurates the time of its truth. The moment when, together, the work of art and madness are born and fulfilled is the beginning of the time when the world finds itself arraigned by that work of art and responsible before it for what it is." But the outcome of the experience is cast into doubt: no justification or social transformation can be assured (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London; New York: Routledge, 2004; first publ. 1967), pp. 264, 274).

30. Ruth Padel reads Plato's notion of divine madness with regard to love in the *Phaedrus* as associated with the true vision to which the philosopher attains via contemplation of spiritual reality. In this respect, the *Phaedrus* propounds the idea that "true madness may engender privileged, truer seeing" and also that "privileged seeing may *look*, to noninitiates, *like* madness". Thus, god-given madness offers access to truths imperceptible by the sane (*Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 85-86, 90). Yeats ascribes such visionary capacity not to philosophy but to poetry, which for him is a vehicle of transcendental truth.

31. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962-1981), Vol. IV: *Plato: The Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period* (1975), p. 207.

32. In his 1902 account of the story of Raftery and Mary Hynes in the story from *The Celtic Twilight* entitled "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye", Yeats records that the death by water of one of her admirers was attributed to the influence of drink rather than of poetry: "'There was a lot of men up beyond Kilbecanty one night sitting together drinking, and talking of her, and one of them got up and set out to go to Ballylee and see her; but Cloon Bog was open then, and when he came to it he fell into the water, and they found him dead there in the morning'" (*CT*, p. 52).

33. Yeats's poem has invited diverse readings ranging from the mythological and the feminist to the postmodernist and the epiphanic. Thus, Brian Arkins treats the poem as an imaginative rendering of the Greek myth of Leda's rape by the swan that elucidates Yeats's theory of historical cycles (*Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), pp. 98-101). For Cullingford, the poem can be viewed as the focus for the interplay of powers of sexuality, reflecting gender patterns of male dominance and female submission (*Gender and History*, pp. 140-164). William Johnsen offers an interpretation of the poem on the basis of a postmodern understanding of history ("Textual/Sexual Politics in Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'", in *Yeats and Postmodernism*, pp. 80-89). Holdridge, on the other hand, reads the poem as an instance of epiphany, of visionary revelation, whereby profound knowledge and understanding can be divinely imparted (*Those Mingled Seas*, pp. 121-132).

34. The reference to Leda appears in a section of "The Adoration of the Magi", which Yeats rewrote in 1925 (*VSR*, p. 166).

35. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 273.

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 237-238. Yeats would have encountered Nietzsche's exposition of the idea of eternal recurrence in the sections from *Zarathustra* entitled "On the Vision and the Riddle", "The Convalescent", "The Second Dance Song", and "The Seven Seals. In the section on *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche defines his doctrine of eternal recurrence as "the unconditional and endlessly repeated circular course of all

things" (*Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004; first publ. 1979), p. 51).

37. Ibid., *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, p. 109.

38. Ibid., *Ecce Homo*, p. 51.

39. Yeats described the Ireland of the 1920s as inhabiting the period of a post-"'individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution'" (*VP*, p. 828). In an interview in *The Irish Times* for February 1924, entitled "From Democracy to Authority: Paul Claudel and Mussolini – A New School of Thought", Yeats carried a similar line of argument. Envisioning a movement in Ireland towards authoritative government as an antidote to the anarchy created by libertarian and democratic political thought, he proclaimed: "'The centrifugal movement which began with the Encyclopaedists and produced the French Revolution, and the democratic views of men like Mill, has worked itself out to the end. Now we are at the beginning of a new centripetal movement.'" This movement, modelled upon the intellectual fascism of Mussolini, Yeats regarded as necessitated by the fact that "'the modern State is so complex'" that it must find a government "'tyrannical enough [...] to spend years in carrying out its plans'" (*UP* 2, pp. 434, 435).

40. For a discussion of the political and cultural context in which the composition of the poem is placed see Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History*, pp. 140-150.

41. D.H. Lawrence, who in the late 1920s also wrote a sequence of poems on the theme of Leda and the swan, views the latter, in its representation in the art of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, as a symbol of "divine corruption" in that it allows for the renewal of life via the destruction of consciousness and of will. Thus, he reads Leda's embrace by the swan as "mankind in the clasp of the divine flux of corruption, the singing death" ("The Crown" from *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, in *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works by D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (London: Heinemann, 1968), pp. 403-404).

42. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, pp. 50-51. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche identifies the Dionysian element with the feeling of the "unity of creation and destruction"(p. 539).

43. In *A Vision* (1937), Yeats delineates the antithetical dispensation as being "expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine". It is characterised by "freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war" (*AVb*, pp. 263, 52).

44. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 46.

45. D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 236, 234-235.

46. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London; New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 204-205.

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 39.

48. Ibid., *'Twilight of the Idols' and 'The Anti-Christ'*, p. 110.

49. Ibid., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 244.

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