THE HEROIC PLAYS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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PREFACE

In presenting a new statement of theme for the heroic plays of William Butler Yeats, I know that a great debt is owed to many eminent scholars in the fields of poetry, philosophy, and drama. The stage productions that are investigated here are seen essentially as symbolist plays and as species of religious drama. The analysis of that vital area of the plays which may be designated as the "unseen world" has necessarily been attempted, first, upon the relatively stable ground of Yeats's aesthetic. The challenge that is offered, then, is in descriptively circumscribing Yeats's "religious dimension," best depicted as a non-paraphrasable content. The pattern that thus develops is best understood in relation to Yeats's Great Wheel, a symbol that is central to his prose myth, A Vision. Each play is built upon a symbolic series that is meant to suggest an emerging "Centre." To the extent, then, that a non-paraphrasable content is present in these three works of art, the ultimate determination of the theme that is offered, I am aware, rests primarily upon what a descriptive language will allow. Throughout the study the intent has been to do justice to the intriguing mind and the complex art of a major European poet.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The heroic plays of William Butler Yeats—The King's Threshold (1904, 1922), On Baile's Strand (1903, 1906), and Deirdre (1907)—are often viewed as uncertain theatrical "experiments" attempted by a poet in his middle period. Except for isolated studies their relevance to the larger design of Yeats's poetics is but vaguely suggested. In terms of development they are seen to evolve out of singular interests held by the artist—nationalism, Irish mythology, drama, or poetry—rather than from an eclecticism that strove to unify significant elements of each. The striving for a unity was the main criterion of Yeats's aesthetic: "a unity delicately balanced between opposites."[1] In the heroic plays this unity is cosmically oriented and metaphysically obscure. Its terms purposely set in motion a vague crosscurrent of symbolic meaning that speaks essentially in a language not of communication but of communion. The "Centre" of things is affirmed, meaning that which is "real" in a world which is "unreal." In the heroic plays, therefore, an individualist concept is made the resolution toward which all lesser parts gravitate. As such the heroic plays constitute a vital chapter in what one critic has termed Yeats's "Search for Reality."[2]

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[1]Edward Engelberg, The Vast Design (Toronto, 1964), p. xviii.

[2]Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality (New York, 1954), p. 429.

Such a view takes cognizance of Yeats's belief that "philosophy and theory were not merely desirable for the artist but necessary: he must work conceptually as well as perceptually."[1] In Dramatis Personae, Yeats declares that he begins his plays with "something that can be stated in philosophical terms." These terms, Yeats says, are "eliminated" until the play becomes "a mere story."[2] That which is "instructive" in the "story," however—its values, its point of view—resides more in the supposedly "eliminated" terms, thoroughly philosophical, than in any mere unfolding of events which may or may not be termed "tragedy." Ecstasy, for example—whatever its ultimate ambiguity—has a place in Yeatsian drama. Therefore, an attempt is made in this study to include these lesser or greater elements—that is, to state an inherent and terminal value for the heroic plays. In this chapter the attempt is made first from the relatively stable ground of Yeats's aesthetic and secondly from the less certain ground of Yeats's metaphysics.

Divergent evaluations in Yeatsian scholarship, of course, are not uncommon. Professor Richard Ellmann writes that Yeats's dramas of the first decade "show the effect of much theorizing."[3] Yeats in this respect is conceivably at fault, although it is also true that the correctness of Professor Ellmann's remark must be weighed somewhat against that which is significantly theorized. It is the latter precisely that is open to question. Attempts at classifying or labeling the heroic plays, nevertheless, underscore Ellmann's remark. Critics give Yeats's Abbey plays

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[1] Engelberg, p. xviii.

[2] Autobiographies; Dramatis Personae, 1896-1902 (New York, 1953), pp. 316-317.

[3] Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948), p. 183. Hereafter cited as Man and Masks.

a variety of designations, but, again, this fact in itself points to a lack of agreement as to the literary elements involved. Are these plays primarily lyric or primarily drama? Professor Edward Engelberg suggests that it is rather a trilogy at work, "a marriage of the three great elements in European literature: epic, drama, and lyric."[1] The suggestion at least makes possible another dimension for the heroic plays. It helps, in fact, to explain a world that, according to one noted scholar, "appears to border on the innermost limits of the human consciousness."[2]

Professor Engelberg's suggestion also offers one solution to the use of descriptive terms. Where art moves toward a middle ground, or assumes, seemingly, an unstable blend of literary elements, it at least requires some discernible change or response on the part of language tools that are applied to that art. In this study, therefore, the author's terms are not subservient to the theatre nor wholly those of traditional poetry. Professor Thomas Parkinson, for instance, lists "the swan and the sun and moon as examples of Yeats's iconographic practice."[3] The word icon, he writes, has "a wider connotation than either symbol or image and can be used to include both."[4] The word, nevertheless, is used with caution. Yeats's icons in the first decade of the century were still in a formative state. The developmental process from an earlier period was slow. The icons gradually became "more fully structured and weighted,"

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[1] Engelberg, p. xxiii.

[2] Morton I. Seiden, William Butler Yeats: The Poet as Mythmaker, 1856-1939 (Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 206. Hereafter cited as Mythmaker.

[3] W. B. Yeats, The Later Poetry (Berkeley, 1964), p. viii. Hereafter cited as Later Poetry.

[4] Ibid.

Professor Parkinson points out, up until about 1915:

> In the poems of The Rose (1889-1892) the sun and moon began to refer to more complicated psychological processes and were used to convey feeling more fully structured and weighted. From this point to about 1915, his [Yeats's] sense of their possible function in his poetry expanded so that they were now allegorical, now neutral and decorative, now conventionally romantic.[1]

The terms of Yeats's iconography apply perhaps to a lesser degree to plays written during this same period. The general pattern formed by these icons at least appears more or less regular in the heroic plays. In this respect it is to be noted that only Professor F. A. C. Wilson has remarked upon what he terms the presence of "secondary symbols" in the heroic plays.[2] Professor T. R. Henn accedes to a possible symbolic intent in On Baile's Strand, but he is finally content to view the play in the light of traditional drama.[3] Here, as so often, the question of classification obscures the function of Yeats's icons, which, in the final analysis, is to add (following Engelberg's suggestion) the "epic dimension." The "epic dimension," however, must be discussed only after a statement of theme.

Very often the theme of a work of art appears in retrospect as a mere platitude, whereas the subject matter which it describes is enormously alive. It is unusual, perhaps, if the theme constitutes something of an insoluble riddle in itself. The wisdom of spending much time with what is unexplainable or inexpressible is, of course, subject to question.

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[1] Parkinson, Later Poetry, pp. 150-151.

[2] W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London, 1958), p. 38.

[3] The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1956), p. 208.

There is the view of "modern linguistic analysts,"[1] for instance, who suggest that nothing profitable is to be gained beyond their "analysis of the uses of a word." Even such a philosopher as Bertrand Russell declares that in this "they are perhaps a little rash. For they fail to do justice to the wide and popular spread of some kinds of nonsense."[2] What is "nonsense," here, depends, of course, on the goals that are pursued. In this light it is not entirely applicable to the heroic plays, but the thought that whole races of people at various times once held a similarly absurd view, or such views, is worthy of note. With this in mind the author offers a theme for the heroic plays which, it is felt, is compatible with their intent. This theme, the author submits, is "we perish into reality."

"Reality" in the heroic plays is a value which, the author suggests, resolves the "unity between opposites." As a concept the implication primarily is that "reality is One." Necessarily, it must be added, the term also implies that "reality is Many." An intellectualized statement paradoxically makes this distinction, whereas an aesthetic one with any extra-empirical intent does not. The term involves, as though on one side of a coin, a principal cause traditionally associated with deity: "'So I say that likeness born of the One, leads the soul to God, for he is One, unbegotten unity, and of this we have clear evidence (Eckhart, Germany, 1300).'"[3] In a more cryptic manner, and perhaps in the same vein as a similar statement made by Parmenides, Yeats writes, "'Reality is a

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[1]Bertrand Russell, Wisdom of the West (New York, 1959), p. 92.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Quoted by R. B. Blakney, tr., The Way of Life, by Lao Tzu (New York, 1955), p. 29.

sphere.'"[1] That which exists in time, on the other hand, cannot be entirely meaningless. A religious philosophy is specific on the point: "'Here likewise in this body of yours, my son, you do not perceive the True; but there in fact it is. In that which is the subtle essence, all that exists has its self. That is the True, that is the Self, and thou, Swetaketu, are That (Chandogya Upanishad, India).'"[2] The statement that the Many exist, therefore, is the other aspect of "reality" and it ultimately justifies life in the actual world. Yeats expresses it by saying, "'Reality is a community of spirits.'"[3] The view that "reality is One" is a type of theism, which in individualist statements is termed mysticism. The view that "reality is Many," however, leads ultimately to pantheism.[4] Degrees of interpretation, as might be conjectured, are more usual than not.

Both views are clearly implied in the heroic plays, the author suggests, to the extent that Yeats makes use of "opposites." The "unity," therefore, as it is understood aesthetically, indicates "reality"—a "reality," however, which is more on the side of the One than the Many: in other words, it is comparable to Platonism. The distinction between the One and the Many and the "reality" of the heroic plays is pursued in this first chapter from the standpoint of Yeats's aesthetic and then in the light of Yeats's metaphysics. The two are not easily distinguished, but for an understanding of the heroic plays the division is a necessary

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[1]Quoted by Moore, p. 379.

[2]Quoted by Blakney, p. 30.

[3]Quoted by Moore, p. 378.

[4]The inference is based upon a remark made by Sidney Hook. Infra, p. 31 of this study.

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The theme as such ("we perish into reality"), this author suggests, resolves the inner structure of the heroic plays—that is, its symbolic meaning. The theme also sheds light on the outer structure of the heroic plays, or on the essential role of the protagonist and on the dramatic conflict. The outer structure, however, is not resolved in the light of Aristotelian criteria for tragedy. And in the light of these criteria the inner structure, possibly, is nonexistent. The dual structure postulated here is not in fact an actuality of the plays, but, once again, is related only to inconsistencies that crop up when one attempts to classify.

The dangers of leaning heavily on Professor Engelberg's theory (it will be seen that his remarks are quoted throughout this study) and restricting the investigation to only three plays by Yeats are recognized by the author. Limited assertions that tend to arise from such an approach are guarded against by displaying a solid theoretical basis and by adding enough comparative references for an adequate perspective. The view consequently is of an early mystical strain in Yeats's work which becomes less prominent as his art becomes more universalized. Yeats's mystical propensities in the middle period in turn define somewhat a non-paraphrasable content, categorized in this study as "reality." The author suggests that in the heroic plays the aesthetic treatment of this concept is central.

(1)

Yeats's aesthetic, in the words of Professor Edward Engelberg, is never far from "the major issue of the 'concrete universal'—an art at

once both unique and generic."[1] The elements in this aesthetic are first visible in research that Yeats did on the works of William Blake. Yeats, in the following passage, points out the principle of "expansion and contraction" in the mind of man:

> 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 center. 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.[2]

The change that takes place as Blake's ideas filter into Yeats's aesthetic, however, is best understood by an earlier distinction that Coleridge made between "Greek and Gothic."

In an age that was on the verge of transition Coleridge foresaw the artist uprooted from the past and struggling with a new definition of "man as man." The terminology of his distinction, Engelberg notes, "appears at first turned on its head—but only at first":

> The Greeks idolized the finite, and therefore were the masters of all grace, elegance, proportion, fancy, dignity, majesty—of whatever...is capable of being definitely conveyed by defined forms or thoughts: the moderns revere the infinite, and affect the indefinite as a vehicle of the infinite;—hence their passions, their obscure hopes and fears, their wandering through the unknown, their grander moral feelings, their more august conception of man as man, their future rather than their past—in a word, their sublimity.[3]

Engelberg applies the distinction to "moderns [who] look in" in an effort

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[1]Engelberg, p. 7.

[2]Quoted by Engelberg, p. 7. See The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, eds., Edwin John Ellis and W. B. Yeats, I, 242.

[3]Ibid., p. 11. See S. T. Coleridge, "Lectures on Shakespeare," as quoted by D. G. James, The Romantic Comedy (London, 1948), p. 241.

to once again align themselves with a "universal will." "This Romantic conception," he suggests, is dominated by the voice of Schopenhauer, the philosopher that Yeats read "as a young man":

> 'Sublimity' was a word Yeats used infrequently but its meaning was conveyed by 'ecstasy,' a word he was very fond of using, and ecstasy is a lyric or dramatic achievement, never an epic one. It is reached only through tension or action, through ultimate contraction, inwardness, the turning of self toward self. Contraction is, paradoxically, a road toward the infinite, for it is the Self which contains infinite alternatives, infinite mysteries. What makes for conflict is the irresolution of the striving. Whereas the Greeks looked out, the moderns look in: the epic emotion reconciles the individual to the world and the world assimilates and contains him. Epic is always depersonalized, and even Greek sculpture may be said to have striven—in its quest for Allgemeinheit [breadth, generality, universality, the Greek way of relieving the hardness and unspirituality of pure form; a sacrifice of what the moderns term expression]—for the epic inclusiveness. Drama and lyric objectify: the individual appropriates the world, not in order to make himself resemble the world but to make the world resemble him. This Romantic conception was initiated and furthered by Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and above all, by Schopenhauer: 'Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung' [The World is my representation]: conscious will becomes self-consciousness and, in Schopenhauer, individual will abdicates to the power of a universal Will. Paradoxically, therefore, though the individual loses in his power to will, the awareness of his own vision of the world gives him a corresponding freedom, unlimited, infinite.[1]

The personal and the impersonal, the "contraction and expansion" of Yeats's aesthetic also finds a parallel, by way of Schopenhauer, in lyric poetry and drama. Paraphrasing Schopenhauer's aesthetic, Engelberg declares that it is "no accident" that Yeats tries to unify both literary forms:

> When that which is rendered is equivalent to him who renders it, we have lyric poetry; then, in stages, this equation widens until, in drama, the artist and his material are most removed and most finite, since the distance between creator and created in drama necessarily dictates limitations which lyric poetry does not. That Yeats should seek at once the most subjective

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[1]Engelberg, pp. 11-12.

> and objective modes—lyric and drama—is therefore no accident: he desired both.[1]

In actual practice, however, it is still another literary form which places the "subjective and objective modes" in perspective. This is the epic mode which uses the imagination for a stage. The depth of the epic material, as a pattern suggested by the icons (or "emotional-intellectual" symbols), becomes Yeats's "received tradition or procession."[2]

(2)

The "magic" of such archetypal symbols as Yeats uses is that they stir up a similar response in people, permitting them to cross the barrier of mere words, permitting them to "re-enter the Great Memory toward which their personal memories would be pulled by the inherent force, the gravitational pull, in the magnet-like symbol itself."[3] The process, in short, provides the "unseen" of the heroic plays. It is a world which the auditor is called upon to explore with his mind's eye. And it is the primary reason why the symbols must not give more than "fragments" of ideas to the listener. Anything less or more, as Engelberg points out, destroys the illusion:

> Now 'symbols, associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the play-things of the allegorist...and soon pass away.' That is, if symbols are evocative of and associated with ideas that dominate—'are more than fragments'—and so give back to the intellect ideas larger than the emotions evoked initially, then we have idea-dominated allegory....

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[1] Engelberg, p. 13. See Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, tr. E. F. J. Payne (Indian Hills, Colo., 1958), I, 248-249.

[2] Ibid., p. 33.

[3] Ibid., p. 115.

> Ideas, then, should be no more than 'fragments' returned to the intellect by the emotional evocativeness of the symbol chosen. But this does not render the intellect inoperative; on the contrary, 'It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession.' The emotional-intellectual symbol is therefore the preferable kind because it unites the reader—as it must the poet who uses it—to his symbols, unites his self-consciousness to the 'procession' or, as Yeats called it in 'Magic,' to the Great Memory.[1]

It is clear, then, that what is basically expressed in the heroic plays—if indeed the above is functional—is that which is one step beyond the reach of words.

Such a view, of course, cannot be reduced to a category of substance; it is an indirect conception of transcendence.[2] It makes little difference, therefore, what Yeats specifically had in mind—the "procession," the "Great Memory," "God," or, as he wrote two years before his death, a "community of spirits." It is only certain that the individual mind that perceives must also, as best it can, interpret. The "thoughts" that are thus called up can readily be rejected—"'Evolution,'" John Dewey writes, "'appears to be just one of the irreducible traits of the world, which constitute the subject-matter of metaphysics.'"[3] Or the "vision," if it is such, can readily be accepted: the Chinese mystic, Lao Tzu, for instance, begins his teaching with the declaration that "'The reality (tao) that can be conceptualized is not the essential reality.'"[4] That

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[1] Engelberg, p. 108. See W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," Essays (New York, 1924), pp. 197-198.

[2] A phrase used by Martin Heidegger. Infra, p. 34 of this study.

[3] Quoted by Sidney Hook, The Quest for Being (New York, 1961), p. 169.

[4] Quoted by Philip Wheelwright, Metaphor & Reality (Bloomington, Ind., 1962), p. 41.

which is inexpressible is said to be exactly that at the extreme of disbelief or belief. The mysticism of the latter view is as non-communicative as the first is disinterested.

To the extent that mysticism, then, characterizes Yeats's view in the heroic plays, its saving grace, no doubt, is that it becomes a "religious dimension" embodied in three works of art. It is, of course, not simply a matter of giving the "epic dimension" a new name; the religious intent was present from the very first. In this respect the direct conception of transcendence that one finds in two plays by Yeats written during the first years of the decade are significant. These two morality plays, The Hour Glass (1903, 1913) and Where There Is Nothing (1902, 1908)[1], were evidently Yeats's last attempt to "conceptualize" his ultimate subject matter in his art. From the first play the author has taken the phrase, "we perish into reality."[2] The title of the second play suggests its theme, the completed thought being "Where there is Nothing, there is God."[3] Both statements, it may be noted, are not suggestive or "educational" in any sense of the word. The heroic plays, consequently, are a vast improvement if only in the subtlety of their mystification. The matter, however, is better shown as a process of Yeats's aesthetic.

(3)

The breadth of Yeats's vision in the heroic plays is predicated upon his view of "life." Essentially the view is stated in terms of a mind-body

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[1]The second version was renamed The Unicorn from the Stars.

[2]Infra, p. 36 of this study.

[3]Infra, p. 37 of this study.

dualism, because this leaves room for the immortality of the soul. "'Life' [to Yeats] was at least half-spirit, half-soul, and fidelity to 'truth' was precisely the recognition of the unseen."[1] Yeats was enough of an artist to know, however, that even the "unseen" was not well served by an "impressionistic mysticism."[2] In the "Wandering of Oisin" (1889), for example, such a direction was taken. In the sermon delivered by a young god, Oisin (the warrior in the following lines) is told that "the soul passes through several rounds of rebirth . . . . Only when it has abandoned the wheels of rebirth, can the soul experience true freedom and joy":

> "The soul is a drop of joy afar.
> In other years from some old star
> It fell, or from the twisted moon
> Dripped on the earth; but soon, ah! soon,
> To all things cried, 'I am a slave!
> Trickling along the earth, I rave;
> In pinching ways I toil and turn.'
> But, warrior, here there is no law;
> The soul is free, and finds no flaw,
> Nor sorrow with her osprey claw.
> Then, warrior, why so sad and stern,
> For joy is God and God is joy?"[3]

The "ideal 'disembodied beauty'"[4] suggested in these lines still was not "educative" in the way that Yeats would have it be. "Literature," he was later to write, "is . . . the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values."[5] The realignment of his essential

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[1] Engelberg, p. 45. See also Peter Ure, W. B. Yeats (New York, 1963), p. 48.

[2] Ibid., p. 62.

[3] Quoted by Thomas Parkinson, Later Poetry, p. 55. See also The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1951), pp. 358-359. The latter version substitutes "Men's hearts" for "soul."

[4] Engelberg, p. 45. See Yeats's letter to George Russell, cited on p. 53 of this study.

[5] Ibid.

material, based upon what is actually communicated in art and upon what he wanted to communicate, had to at least take as its starting point events or relations that occurred in the actual world. "/Literature/ must . . . describe the relation of the soul and the heart to the facts of life . . . as it is, not as we would have it be. . . . It must be as incapable of telling a lie as nature."[1]

The method eventually used was suggested by the type of art Yeats admired, "all heroic and bardic literature." Engelberg finds in Yeats's admiration of such art, therefore, a clue to the "modus operandi of /his/ aesthetic":

> One kind of art which appealed consistently to Yeats has in common a grandeur of conception and form; all heroic and bardic literature;...everything that could 'mold vast material into a single image.' In that last phrase lies the modus operandi of Yeats's aesthetic: for the threat that vastness would lose itself in anarchic flood was always to be checked by the assertion of the single image.[2]

(4)

The aesthetic, of course, describes what Yeats felt was possible in his art. What the auditor sees and what the author of the heroic plays intends that he should see is in essence the whole problem. The response to such otherworldly obscurities as the heroic plays present, even in Yeats's lifetime, was somewhat negative. The aesthetic and what is found in the plays, however, suggest that a "single image" is present. The heroic plays also suggest that the "single image" includes two polarities that are conceptually opposite: "contraction and expansion," the "personal and the impersonal," or the actual world and the invisible world. If in

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[1] Engelberg, p. 45.

[2] Ibid., p. 4.

the mind of the auditor, however, the "single image" fails to check "unlimited expansion"—that is, if the invisible world is felt to be unrelated to the actual world—then what is left, at best, is but the tragic art of "flood," or a mood and emotion whose causal force seemingly has no origin in the plays themselves. The "single image," as a concept, must therefore be clearly understood if the supposed balance or "unity between opposites" is to be established.

Following Yeats's aesthetic, Engelberg points out that the "single image" is the "disengaging soul . . . defining its individuality within the art it creates."[1] In the later poetry this soul is often Yeats's own; in the heroic plays the poet, of course, is not entirely on the stage. The soul that defines its individuality belongs to the protagonists: Seanchan in The King's Threshold, Cuchulain in On Baile's Strand, and Deirdre in the play by that name. At most these creatures reflect but one facet of the poet's make-up: a projection of what he thought was an opposite—or an "impersonal"—aspect of himself, or of people like himself. The view, though finally an aesthetic one, is here supported by "Yeats' doctrine of psychological dualism—a theory that all men possess both an ego or self and an antiself."[2]

It does not follow, however, that the antagonists—King Guaire in The King's Threshold and King Conchubar in On Baile's Strand and in Deirdre—express the "Self" in the sense that they represent the poet's true personality. The "psychological antinomies," as Professor Seiden writes, center on "single protagonists":

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[1]Engelberg, p. xxx.

[2]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 58.

> Throughout his poetry and dramas of the years 1900 to 1910, Yeats centered his psychological antinomies on single protagonists, rather than solely on different characters whom he juxtaposed. And, after Maud Gonne's marriage in 1903, he undertook to celebrate especially men of the heroic virtues: men who do not abandon instinct for an unobtainable ideal in womanhood; and men who can, in the midst of despair, assume toward life a stoic pose. Occasionally during the 1890's he had admired such men; but they now became a kind of obsession with him. His life and his art thus gained in dramatic intensity. In On Baile's Strand Cuchulain, upon learning that he has inadvertently murdered his own son, conceals his grief, although in so doing he loses his mind. Seanchan the Bard in The King's Threshold, through his very aloofness to misfortune, brings a king to his knees /or brings about his own death in the revised version/. In Deirdre, while they await the vengeance of Conchubar, Deirdre and Naoise quietly play a game of chess.[1]

What is supposedly seen in the heroic plays, then, is the "Masks" (a term used only after the heroic plays for the "antiself"). Behind the Masks (the protagonists) the "Self" once again is "unseen." The "Self," however, is "half-spirit, half-soul." No distinction is made in the heroic plays between the mind and the soul, just as in the writings of Plato, for instance.[2]

It is clear, then, that what the antagonists represent (seemingly coercive institutions, the law, or unimaginative thought) is also the physical world of the Masks. At the end of each play the physical Mask, like the "husks" of the spirit,[3] are left behind, the world of the antagonist is rejected, and the "disengaging soul," at once unique and generic, comes at last to the end of its struggle against warring opposites. The soul or "Self" is not followed into its immortality, but as Yeats believed, "It is the conviction of the soul's immortality, not its

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[1]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 59.

[2]Infra, p. 34 of this study.

[3]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 27.

ultimate life in another world, which makes art possible."[1]

(5)

The ritual of the soul in the heroic plays, however, is not solely indicated by the Masks. Their passions, dramatically at least, suggest that there may be a secretive cause—this is to say that one, generally, cannot rely on the protagonists' initial confrontation with and reaction to evil to present anything other than what appears to be an idiosyncrasy (the heroic stance). The icons, in a way of speaking, also have their secretive cause (is it the spirit or the Self?): "The imagination deals with 'spiritual things symbolized by natural things'—by birds and towers, by dancers and swords, by tables, ancestral houses, and swans."[2] The rhythm of the lyric, not in any sense last, likewise plays its part in emphasizing specific icons. The result is not purposely a dual level—a separation between the "seen" and the "unseen." Rather there is a blend of emotions—the function of three different literary elements—that is meant to create a synthesis:

> Through methods uniquely his own, Yeats developed an aesthetic of equipoise: epic grandeur (reverie), lyric sweetness (ecstasy) and dramatic intensity (passion). Synthesis—or Unity of Being—was salvation: through a balanced interplay of epic, lyric and dramatic, abstraction might be defeated, egoism avoided, and tradition preserved.[3]

The pattern that evolves, then, based upon the "single image" and the "vast material" merely declares its existence upon the stage, and in ways that will presently be pointed out—that is, "It declares that

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[1]Engelberg, p. 63.

[2]Ibid., p. 64.

[3]Ibid., p. 27.

the unseen world is real and the actual a varyingly transparent veil."[1] Such an indirect conception of transcendence, again, lifts itself as it can from the "power of the spoken words," from the "fragments" of ideas that reside in Yeats's icons, and from "an ordering of the whole to which the parts contribute in subordinate fashion." "What is sought," Engelberg says, is a "unity within itself," and what is achieved is "a deeper reality at the circumference of form":

> True art sought unity within itself, that is, by an ordering of the whole to which the parts contribute in subordinate fashion—else pattern would again subdue rhythm, the detail the whole design. Instead of mirroring and trying to balance the objective things of reality—filling the work wholly and faithfully with the rhythms of life in the hope that such rhythms would make a pattern—the artist cut through 'the passing mode of society' to reach a deeper reality at the circumference of form. What he cuts through is space [the pictorial space of the theatre], and the process of forging a path creates in turn the echo or resonance Yeats desired.[2]

The problem that such a rigorous and impacted symbolic language presents to a physical art such as the theatre is understandably a barrier to the uninitiated. One critic of the theatre writes, "The visual and literary arts are not simply juxtaposed [in the theatre]; they are fused in the physical presence of the actor."[3] In one sense of the word, however, the visual element of Yeats's literary art is substantially implied by the presence of the actor. The actor, of course, is the "disengaging soul," the "Self," the "single image," or, in other words, that which emerges epically in the play to become a part of the "unity between opposites."

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[1] A mystical concept so declares itself in religious drama according to Una Ellis-Fermor, The Frontiers of Drama (New York, 1946), p. 146.

[2] Engelberg, p. 126.

[3] August W. Staub, "The 'Unpopular Theatre' of W. B. Yeats," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLVII (December, 1961), p. 367.

The problem of the actor, nevertheless, is not solved if the potential mystic watching the drama unfold refuses to "see." Yeats evidently believed that given the right elements and the proper formula the potentiality would express itself. The impetus is given in the heroic plays in Yeats's emphasis on "a syntax 'for ear alone.'" The visual element, however indescribable, then tends to arise of itself. In this sense (perhaps a very technical sense) it can be said that Yeats put it there:

> He has spent his life, he says in his introduction to his plays (dated 1937, only published in 1961), getting rid of 'every phrase written for the eye' and re-establishing a syntax 'for ear alone'; but the assertion is somewhat misleading: he wished to disengage the audience from visual delusion, but in doing this he substituted a visual illusion which would coincide, rather than interfere, with the auditory power of the spoken words.[1]

In theory, then, the auditor was to see through nature (nature imitated), through "natural things," through his Masks, in fact, just as ancient men or mystics had always seen. And as that "'soul which is alike in all men'—the anima mundi itself"[2] constitutes at least the "half-spirit" of the "single image," or its Higher Self, then Yeats evidently believed that each mind "sees" much the same thing. The word that categorizes the insight of the unique soul of all is, of course, "reality."

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A METAPHYSICAL VIEW OF REALITY

"'A vision of reality': it was a way Yeats defined art, both in

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[1]Engelberg, p. 80.

[2]Thomas Parkinson, W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic (Berkeley, 1951), p. 55. Hereafter cited as Self-Critic.

[3]Engelberg, p. 61.

poetry and in prose," Engelberg writes.[1] Thus the "single image" in the heroic plays defines itself as a part of the value suggested by the term "reality." In a sense this is to say that the "single image" is not paradoxical; the semantic arrow, to the extent that it is perceived, points in one direction—towards "reality." And as the inherent and terminal value of the heroic plays, consequently, "reality" is erected to a point where it transcends all human relationships (and even nature as a whole) and possesses absolute or independent validity. The degree of value, however, is similar to the historical-philosophical one in form only. "Reality" here escapes the usual scientific limitations because its hypothetical constituents are not scientifically but aesthetically determined (nature imitated). Outside such works of art as the heroic plays the "appearance-reality" view—that is the assumption that a distinction can be made between what "is" real and what merely "appears" to be real—is scientifically and pragmatically unwarranted.

Yeats's "reality," therefore, may be typed as it shows forth its own ontological limits, based upon the implicit outreach and intent of the images and symbols. The intent here, the author suggests, is best determined by Yeats's aesthetic. "Reality" in the heroic plays, to repeat the assertion, is not commensurate with any other "reality," although it may be thought of as though it were the "whole reality."[2] Yeats at least must be allowed the exercise of his intellectual rights, remembering once again that the poetically significant I—the Yeats who is his art—is to be distinguished from the Yeats who wrote prose. The Yeats who writes

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[1]Engelberg, p. 61.

[2]The argument is paraphrased from Philip Wheelwright's Metaphor & Reality, pp. 167-172.

prose interprets "reality"; the Yeats who is his art presents "reality." The interpretations of the former, of course, are an invaluable guide. The primary difference, however, is between a direct and an indirect conception of transcendence. The direct conception, as the earlier quoted remark of Lao Tzu implies, is not entirely meaningful.[1]

A distinction here is also postulated between Yeats's real understanding of the term and an artistic situation which merely capitalizes on the term. The latter, of course, is not to be taken in a derogatory sense. In effect, the difference, as an assumption, is between the knowledge that a philosopher has and the knowledge that a mystic supposedly has. Consequently, in the writings of the artist there emerges an older and more philosophically astute Yeats who often attempts to reconcile his later erudition to earlier insights, or in the light of an earlier mystical knowledge which in essence defies explanation.

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Yeats's aesthetic, further, is related to the issue of "reality" in the heroic plays purely from a philosophical standpoint. Engelberg, for instance, suggests that the aesthetic has a parallel in "the philosophic quarrels centering on the tension between form (stasis) and reality (flux), and the attempted Platonic synthesis between stasis and flux . . . /as/ outlined in detail by Pater in Plato and Platonism /1922/."[2] The first three essays in Pater's book, Engelberg declares, "reflect the background of a philosophic equipoise between motion and rest which bears

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[1] Supra, p. 11 of this study.

[2] Engelberg, p. 184.

resemblances at every turn to the Yeatsian aesthetic."[1] What follows is a brief summary of two of the essays and an application of purely philosophical ideas to Yeats's aesthetic and his later thoughts about "reality." In the first essay it is noted that "Heraclitus' theory of 'eternal flux'" was unacceptable to Plato:

> According to Pater's first essay, "Plato and the Doctrine of Motion," Plato was influenced by three precursors: Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Pythagoras. Each contributed to Plato's philosophy, either by irritating Plato into attack or by serving to support a position to be further developed. Chief among the irritants was, of course, Heraclitus' theory of 'eternal flux,' which Plato felt bound to oppose with his 'Doctrine of Rest.' Pursued to its logical end, the Heraclitean position rendered knowledge relative, reality /actuality/ plastic, and Absolutes untenable. This stress on Becoming, rather than Being, paralleled, as Pater noted, the scientific-philosophic movements of his own time: Darwin and Hegel. And Pater put the Doctrine of Motion to the test: 'Mobility! We do not think that a necessarily undesirable condition of life.... 'Tis the dead things, we may remind ourselves, that after all are most entirely at rest, and /we/ might reasonably hold that motion (vicious, fallacious, infectious motion, as Plato inclines to think) covers all that is best worth being.[2]

Professor Engelberg next summarizes Pater's presentation of Plato's "Doctrine of Rest." Pater, it is noted, rejects "Pure Being" but says, in effect, that as an aspect of Plato's Hellenism it completes a balance that is desirable—"motion checked by rest; rest animated by motion." Yeats also recognizes at this later date that "a single and multiple reality" are irreconcilable:

> "Plato and the Doctrine of Rest" examines this Platonic check against the still dominantly Asiatic conception of flux. Here the role of Parmenides seems crucial, for it is he, according to Pater, who suggested to Plato the idea of an 'unchangeable reality'—an idea which Yeats, through Bergson, had once rejected on philosophic grounds. But even Parmenides' Doctrine of Rest was based not on inherent stasis but on the

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[1] Engelberg, p. 184.

[2] Ibid., p. 185.

> paradoxical theory that 'perpetual motion' in space becomes eventually 'perpetual rest': the analogue to Yeats's aesthetic use of the dance.
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> Pater's treatment of Plato's abhorrence of motion is often hostile, even irreverent, for Pater's doctrines of art depended on the vitality of process—growth and change. Like Yeats he felt that Pure Being might lead to Pure Nothing, to death. To Parmenides' paradoxes, 'that what is, is not; [and]...that what is not, is,' and 'that what is, is; and that what is not, is not,' Pater ascribed a harmful influence: 'the European mind...will never be quite sane again,' because a too relentless quest for the One, the Absolute, is Quixotic, a search for the 'algebraic symbol for nothingness.' Himself essentially a relativist, Pater felt such an uncritical dedication to a single deity to be a 'mania,' leading to the 'self-annihilation' of 'Old Indian dreams,' to the 'ecstasies of the pure spirit, leaving the body behind it,' to a 'literal negation of self'—in short, to 'moral suicide.' Yeats never went so far: he would need to keep both impulses, self-realization and self-surrender, and maintain his grasp on reality with the 'profane perfection' of his soul. 'I think,' he wrote in 1930, 'that two conceptions, that of reality as 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.' For Yeats, therefore, single and multiple reality, the One and the Many, were irreconcilable, except within the pattern of their alternating rhythms in man and the history he shapes. If Yeats moves forward from his position of 1930 it is only to see that the Many can become One, that 'congeries,' assembled in the proper design, assume the shape of a 'single being.' On the other hand, Pater saw the whole movement in philosophy from Plato through Spinoza, Descartes, and Berkeley as a futile pursuit of Pure Being 'attained by the suppression of all the rule and outline of one's own actual experience and thought'; and at such a price he disallowed it.[1]

In summary, Engelberg writes, "Heraclitus taught 'progress' and Parmenides 'rest': Pythagoras taught the philosophy of 're-action.' Plato then executed his dualistic 'compromise'; upon it, Yeats seems late in life to have built his own."[2]

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[1] Engelberg, pp. 185-186.

[2] Ibid., p. 187.

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The philosophic implications, perhaps, are rightfully felt to invalidate somewhat the "reality" of the heroic plays—but mainly, it must be noted, from the standpoint of explanation. What essentially, then, is to be added? One eminent writer points out that the element of change in the logical structure of explanation itself, for instance, is based upon the recognition of successive entities that remain themselves unexplained. Sub-atomic particles and space itself have this in common—that is, their explicative force remains intact as long as they are not themselves under investigation. The statement here, of course, is hopefully a faithful rendering of a view expressed by Bertrand Russell.[1] John Dewey writes, "'The attempt to give an account of any occurrence involves the genuine and irreducible existence of the thing dealt with.'"[2] The limitations that the philosophic view thus imposes on "reality" are possibly more in conflict with the theatre itself than with the subjective aspects built into Yeats's plays by the lyric mode. To the extent that the rhythms and images of Yeats's lyric are present, "reality" is an explicative force in the heroic plays. It is the theatre, on the other hand, which presents "natural things" and asks that first they be seen as such. And it is the theatre which, at its best, removes the type of "reality" that Yeats invokes to such a distance that it is not of immediate concern. Therefore, deus ex machina in the theatre is perhaps as much of an anomaly as is Yeats's "reality" in the theatre. It is not difficult to see why Yeats wanted it

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[1] Russell, pp. 44-45.

[2] Quoted by Hook, p. 169.

there. It is difficult, however, to disentangle "major premises"—one belonging to Yeats's "reality" and the other to the theatre—which work at cross purposes.

"Reality," therefore, leads one ultimately to a questioning of Yeats's aesthetic. The design of his later poetics provides a few examples that are instructive. For it is only in art, in a poem like "Sailing to Byzantium," for instance, that the necessary qualifications can be made. Paradoxically—at least to this author—this meant that the "whole reality" must first be seen as the actuality of the world (the Heraclitean "flux"). The special knowledge, or the "ecstasy" of the heroic plays, becomes once again the stepping stone to the "reality at the circumference of form." "The paradigm of this mode," according to Professor Parkinson, is the poem "Among School Children":

> Because of his sense of the reality of biological and social limit as well as the claims of the super human, he could order a range of experience that would include the reminiscent personal and move out to the historical or biological limits of men and from there to a final religious vision. The paradigm of this mode is "Among School Children," beginning as a lament on the defect of human expectations and, in its final version, ending coolly with the observation that the world of permanent forms mocks every great man and his enterprise, but in its final version tearing the fabric of its vision to permit the emergence of the symbolic tree....It brings its writer and reader smoothly to the ultimate, and there it stops, with the implied proviso that beyond this point language is useless.[1]

Parkinson adds that "one way of phrasing the intention is to assume that he is examining the emergence of reality in a multiplicity of processes, the poem being the instrument of a spiritual quest."[2]

The "reality" that emerges, however, can as easily signify art itself

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[1]Parkinson, Later Poetry, pp. 50-51.

[2]Ibid., pp. 51-52.

as the supernatural. The last line of the last stanza that follows, for instance, seemingly asks how one can know the particular from the universal, whether in art or in life?

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
> Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
> Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
> O Chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?[1]

In these lines the ecstatic utterance leaves little doubt that something fundamental in art and in life is being singled out. The "tree" as the essence of life, either timeless or temporal, and the "dancer" as an aspect of "reality," either beyond art or in art, are so subtly juxtaposed that their implications are not immediately seen. If the questions are felt to indicate an Immanent Principle, then the implication is that it conditions the whole of human experience. Placing the questions in terms of the individual, however ("How can we know—?"), implies that human experience is essentially the sole arbiter of value judgments. Yeats undoubtedly would accept both interpretations as valid, based on his aesthetic. The conflict between the One and the Many, however, is not thus resolved.

The distinction, perhaps, was only brought home to Yeats in his later years. Nevertheless, even then, he still "sought to balance between the self-consciousness of freedom and the consciousness of surrender":

> Yeats worried about the metaphysical design and he never found any single relationship that exactly suited his needs. The Christian design placed man between God and the beasts; the Greeks, by and large, excluded man from the design except in

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[1] The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1951), p. 214. Hereafter cited as Poems.

> so far as he was a victim of its operation: though excluded by the gods, the Greek could not afford to live without them. Only the East has provided for a union with the divine of which the divine is not jealous, probably because the Eastern ascetic is willing to dissolve his persona, is not jealous of it, a dissolution neither Odysseus nor Faustus could even contemplate. Yeats borrowed freely from all views, including the Greek Necessity and the Christian longing for a unity that would close the gaping chaos that followed the Fall. But he always sought to balance between the self-consciousness of freedom and the consciousness of surrender: 'I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realization of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the 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 or the other could prevail, all life would cease.' Man can neither live outside the design nor lose himself in it; but to survive he must retain both impulses. Although he can never relinquish the image of Self, the only way of ensuring against that Self ultimately alienating itself from the world is to make it serve the design that is its nearest kin. That was the accomplishment of the Byzantine craftsmen and artists when, collectively, they expressed a single image of their culture without violating their individual talents. The design is the shape given it by its artificers.[1]

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The "reality" of the heroic plays, therefore, is an early value-term of Yeats's art. To the extent that it constitutes Yeats's "choice," it is a "religious philosophy, a Platonism articulated . . . in terms of his Celtic symbolism."[2] As to its real meaning, even Yeats's later "synthetic myth in prose," A Vision, is of little help. It is clear, for instance, that the one "reality" must somehow justify even that strange work. In the final analysis, however, the distinction between Yeats's prose writings and his art must again be made. "His philosophic speculations," Engelberg declares, "were merely 'metaphors' for his poetry:

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[1]Engelberg, p. 207.

[2]Amos N. Wilder, The Spiritual Aspects of the New Poetry (New York, 1940), p. 201.

the aesthetic itself is, after all, philosophic (as distinct from the 'philosophy' of A Vision)."[1] The two versions of A Vision that were published, and several statements that come at the very end of Yeats's life, suggest at least that the same impasse was reached: "reality" remained impenetrable and inexpressible. Nevertheless, as Engelberg notes, "A Vision enables us to see the aesthetic reflected and refracted from different angles."[2]

It is, of course, not wise to overlook Yeats's myth, A Vision. Yeats, as Parkinson writes, "could not accept the idea that subject made no difference to the value of a poem, that medium was all."[3] The reaction in part was against current tendencies in painting and poetry that held that art was something entirely separate from subject matter. The Americans, Whistler and Pound, for instance, were proponents of such views.[4] The criticism that Ezra Pound leveled at Yeats was that "the symbolist's symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7."[5] The inference was that whether it be "Christianity or Platonism /it/ was in poetry a mode of cheating: it asked a uniform response, whatever context was provided for the symbol."[6] Yeats, of course, felt that the subject matter was a part of his own "nature," which he could not separate from his work. In the preface to his collected essays, he writes

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[1]Engelberg, p. xviii.

[2]Ibid., p. xxix.

[3]Parkinson, Later Poetry, p. 16.

[4]Ibid., pp. 9 and 16.

[5]Ibid., p. 15.

[6]Ibid.

as follows:

> I have never said clearly that I condemn all that is not tradition, that there is a subject-matter which has descended like that 'deposit' certain philosophers speak of. At the end of his essay upon 'style' Pater says that a book written according to the principles he has laid down will be well written, but whether it is a great book or not depends upon subject-matter. This subject-matter is something I have received from the generations, part of that compact with my fellow-men made in my name before I was born. I cannot break from it without breaking some part of my own nature; and sometimes it has come to me in supernormal experience; I have met with ancient myths in my dreams, brightly lit; and I think it allied to the wisdom or instinct that guides a migratory bird.[1]

A Vision, therefore, is Yeats's attempt to catalog that "received tradition." Its complexities need not be detailed here. The Doctrine of the Mask has been emphasized by those who investigate Yeats's poetics. This study, however, emphasizes its ontological aspects. The following summary, then, the author believes, is sufficient as a general outline of what is involved:

> A Vision is based on the conception that all existence is in conflict between opposed principles (hence each human being is both himself—Man—and his opposite—Mask). The characteristics both of individuals and of historical periods likewise belong to opposed principles: the principle of objectivity, which Yeats calls primary and that of subjectivity, which he calls antithetical. In between these two extreme conflicting poles there are a number of possible intermediate states. Considering individual or universal life in time, Yeats postulates a continuous movement of such life from a primary (objective) to an antithetical (subjective) state, and back again to primary. And he chooses to use, in order to represent this movement, the analogy of the 28 phases of the moon during the lunar month, so that phase one, the dark moon, represents complete objectivity (primary) and phase fifteen, the full moon, complete subjectivity (antithetical).[2]

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[1] Quoted by Parkinson, Later Poetry, p. 16.

[2] Giorgio Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1961), p. 173.

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In the 1925 and 1937 versions of Yeats's myth, "The principal symbol in the essay is that of a Great Wheel, which," Professor Seiden writes, "defines the Absolute."[1] The overall implication of Yeats's "system," however, reaches out toward "reality." In philosophic terms, as was seen, the insoluble riddle of "reality" hinges primarily upon a synthesis of the "Unchangeable One," the thing-in-itself, and that which expresses difference and change. Yeats's A Vision, of course, neither poses the problem in these terms nor answers such a problem directly. One must assume, therefore, that A Vision has a specific meaning for Yeats which even that work inadequately suggests. One of its possible meanings, as far as "reality" is concerned, is related to the dominant symbol itself.

The important fact about Yeats's Great Wheel is that it has a hub, a motionless place for the axle, or, as the author shall henceforth refer to it, a "Centre." As an expression or characteristic of the Absolute (its quality of "emptiness" or "Nothingness" appears so at least to human eyes), it underlies all things and yet is pre-eminently the thing-in-itself. The symbol, however, further indicates that It is the necessitating logical ground of the existence of this world, the Many, "motion and change," or the rim of the Wheel. The One and the Many, therefore, are in truth of the same substance, or of the same "Nothingness." It is worldly knowledge which views things in terms of a glib dualism.

Such a view, of course, may be traced to the very beginnings of philosophical thought. "Sacred space," as Professor Mircea Eliade points

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[1]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 15.

out, is of the essence of a "Centre":

> A 'Centre' represents an ideal point which belongs not to profane geometrical space, but to sacred space; a point in which communication with Heaven or Hell may be realized: in other words, a 'Centre' is the paradoxical 'place' where the planes intersect, the point at which the sensuous world can be transcended.[1]

The implication, then, is that the Great Wheel has also a microcosmic existence in the mind of one person. To a certain extent this identifies the mystical experience with an extra-empirical "reality." In this sense, more than one "Centre" is recognized at the "rim of the Wheel." Yeats, for instance, has the line, "'God is a circle whose centre is everywhere.' While the saint resides in the centre, the poet moves to the circumference, to the ring 'where everything comes round again.'"[2] The concept essentially is of an Immanent Principle. Speaking of such a concept, Professor Sidney Hook declares, "In its strict form . . . /it/ leads to pantheism."[3]

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When the 1925 version of A Vision was published, one of the criticisms leveled at Yeats's "system" was that his "universe" had no God:

> During the 1890's and shortly afterwards he /Yeats/ had occasionally made reference to Him—in The Secret Rose and in Ideas of Good and Evil—as the Nothing which is beyond matter, the human spirit, and Anima Mundi. But, while at work on Per Amica Silentia Lunae and the first edition of his sacred book, he had completely removed God from his universe.[4]

Such a view, of course, implied that Yeats's world was completely

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[1] Images and Symbols (London, 1961), p. 75.

[2] Engelberg, p. 29.

[3] Hook, p. 126.

[4] Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 120.

"deterministic."[1] Moral choice, long associated with the Incarnate God of the West, had clearly been overlooked. "In his [Yeats's] diary notes of 1930," Professor Seiden remarks, "he wrote that a 'levelling pantheism' could in no way satisfy him: it completely denies the individual ego. But the deists, he complained in the diary, remove God much too far from the human consciousness."[2]

In the 1937 version of A Vision it is clear that Yeats tried to amend his "vision of reality." God became the Thirteenth Sphere of Anima Mundi. The Great Wheel gave rise to a series of cones that interpenetrated with other cones to become "gyres":

> The world of the spirit and the world of man, he [Yeats] imagines, are to each other as two interpenetrating gyres which, like all such gyres, alternately expand and contract. Next, he imagines that in Anima Mundi there are Thirteen Spheres; and these he goes on to characterize in great detail. He begins with the argument that they are symbols of perfection, that they are Great Wheels, and that they are simultaneously cones, gyres, and cycles. And then he explains the complex relation of these Spheres to one another. Except for the last, the Thirteenth, they exist in transcendent time or supernatural years. The first Twelve Spheres, with the entire phenomenal universe, evolve towards and emanate from the last. And the last, the Thirteenth Sphere or Cycle, is the greatest of all possible gyres, whether supernatural or natural, although it is completely without past, present, or future. Yeats here describes the macrocosm as consisting of Thirteen Spheres, probably, because he would suggest the archetypal cycles of Blake's Prophetic Books and of occult lore. These cycles are traditionally symbols of God and His Twelve Emanations, Christ and the Twelve Apostles, the revolving heavens and the Twelve signs of the zodiac, and an imaginary year and its twelve lunar months.[3]

After the publication of the 1937 version, it occurred to Yeats that he had created a "transcendent" God. Secondly, since God was equated with

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[1] Seiden, Mythmaker, pp. 125-126.

[2] Ibid., p. 122.

[3] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

the Thirteenth Cone, it was pointed out that He was clearly not the center of Yeats's "universe."[1] Yeats ended by saying that A Vision was only his "public philosophy," his "private philosophy" had yet to be stated.[2]

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Professor Virginia Moore gives more space than most Yeatsian scholars to what is perhaps Yeats's final statements about "reality." There seemingly is little attempt toward the last to reconcile the philosophical arguments. In "Seven Propositions," the two sides of the question are merely juxtaposed in direct statements: (1) "Reality is a community of spirits," and (2) "Reality is a sphere." A third statement, taken from a letter to a friend, is at least final: "Man can embody truth but cannot know it."[3]

The words thus stated indicate little except that a philosophical stalemate has been reached. Much, it is clear, has been left unsaid. That which cannot be said, it is hoped, has also been indicated. To a certain extent this latter remark also applies to Yeats's "unity between opposites." When the "opposites" do not adequately explain actuality, then, possibly, a synthesis is valid. Such syntheses have occurred in the past. The atomists—Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus, for instance—[4]formulated a compromise between the One and the Many. As a theoretical pattern it later became a point of reference in the Hegelian

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[1]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 129.

[2]Ibid., p. 127.

[3]Quoted by Moore, p. 434. For Professor Parkinson's interpretation of this remark see page 63 of this study.

[4]Russell, pp. 44, 45 and 109.

dialectic. Russell declares, "It is certainly true of intellectual progress that it arises from a synthesis of this kind, consequent upon an unrelenting exploration of extreme positions."[1]

In art, however, the "extreme positions" are mainly ethical in nature. If Yeats's "unity between opposites" is somehow to be related to the phrase "Know thyself," then what is essentially involved is either a static or a dynamic attitude toward one of the higher fidelities, viz. the Truth. The two attitudes are vaguely comparable to "motion and rest," the "Self and the Soul," "contraction and expansion," "picture and gesture," "lyric and drama," or "personal and impersonal." The point, however, is that to make sense of the ethical view of the heroic plays the auditor is forced to reject one of each of these pairs of "opposites." The end result, therefore, is the recognition of a static attitude toward a supposed ultimate Truth. Martin Heidegger writes, "Every philosophy which revolves around an indirect or direct conception of 'transcendence' remains of necessity essentially an ontology, whether it achieves a new foundation of ontology or whether it assures us that it repudiates ontology as a conceptual freezing of experience."[2] The "Self and the Soul" as essentially one behind the "Mask" is in fact two assertions to most intellects. In the writings of Plato, however, one also finds that the soul and the mind are indistinct.[3]

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[1]Russell, p. 29.

[2]"The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1956), p. 219.

[3]Russell, p. 75. Cf. Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being, (Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 48. "Ideas /to Plato/ were eternal objects of pure thought, souls were everlasting conscious and thinking beings; and since the former were universals or essences, and the latter were individuals, they could not easily be reduced to unity. But it is

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Platonism is the probable parallel to Yeats's views in the heroic plays. The "real" world is felt as invisible and essentially as the One. It is the polar opposite to "this" world, which is to say that the "pantheism" inherent in Yeats's icons and more or less indicated in the first version of A Vision had not been clearly thought out. Yeats, just as Plato did, attributed to "reality" an "indescribable beauty."[1] Plato, in one passage, says that to apprehend it, the faculty of knowledge, "'along with the whole soul, must be wheeled round from that which is subject to becoming until it is able to endure the contemplation of that which is, and the most resplendent part thereof; and this, we declare, is the Good.'"[2] Yeats, of course, tended to think of the Absolute as detached from any ethical implication.

There is also the suggestion in Yeats's use of the Great Wheel and in earlier passages from The Hour Glass (1903, 1913) and Where There Is Nothing (1902, 1908) that "reality" is either prior to God or perhaps an approach to God. The relationship is not clearly stated in Yeats's early writings. What is suggested, especially in the morality plays mentioned above, is something that parallels a line of thought developed in a poem by the Chinese mystic, Lao Tzu—that is, "reality," or the Way (tao), is like "a preface to God":

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at least a probable conjecture—which can be supported by specific passages—that Plato in the end conceived of the highest members of both series as somehow identical."

[1]Engelberg, p. 41.

[2]Lovejoy, p. 41.

The Way is a void,
Used but never filled:
An abyss it is,
Like an ancestor
From which all things come.

It blunts sharpness,
Resolves tangles;
It tempers light,
Subdues turmoil.

A deep pool it is,
Never to run dry!
Whose offspring it may be
I do not know:
It is like a preface to God.[1]

The "Nothingness," or the hub of the Great Wheel, similarly suggests that it is all that humans with their limited views can understand of God. Yeats's attitude in this respect is again akin to the views expressed by traditional mysticism, of which Professor Blakney writes: "The ultimate Reality is not impersonal; to coin a word, it is proto-personal, that is, pregnant like a mother with men as well as things. It is One and God is in it; it therefore involves personality."[2] The outlines of just such a "reality" is seen in Yeats's The Hour Glass. In this play the protagonist is made to say: "We sink in on God, we find him in becoming nothing—we perish into reality."[3]

In the other morality play, Where There Is Nothing (1902), later

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[1]Trans. by Blakney, p. 56. Professor Blakney writes of the Way of the mystics as follows: "...their conclusion was that the Way of nature is the untimate Reality that gives birth to all things and regulates them. The Way of nature is the universe of being, with this difference: it is process and not static. So much might be gathered from the word chosen to designate it. The Way is not a path which nature might take, but it is the movement of nature itself; it is effortless movement, but nonetheless a movement, like the annual rhythm of the seasons (pp. 42-43)."

[2]Ibid., p. 43.

[3]This earlier prose version is quoted by Una Ellis-Fermor in The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 115.

revised into The Unicorn from the Stars (1908), Paul Ruttledge speaks in similar language: "We must put out the whole world as I put out this candle. . . . Where there is nothing . . . —there is God!"[1] Some confusion may no doubt result, at least as such things are viewed in this decade, because of the "Nothingness" propounded by Existentialist thinkers. The difference, possibly, is that in the mystic view prayer is meaningful; the "Nothingness" of the Existentialist, on the other hand, is more to be equated with "emptiness" than the "rich nought," so to speak, of the mystics.[2] Yeats, of course, was no theologian. He tries to express his

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[1]Quoted by J. I. M Stewart, Eight Modern Writers (Oxford, 1963), p. 328.

[2]The distinction drawn here is taken from Helmut Kuhn, Encounter with Nothingness, An Essay on Existentialism (Hinsdale, Ill., 1949), pp. 90-92. Professor Kuhn sees a certain similarity of language used but a radical difference in point of view between the Existentialists and the mystics. To clarify this point, Professor Kuhn's view is quoted here at length:

> The similarity of language is striking indeed. Tedium, ennui, emptiness—these words from the Existentialist vocabulary are fully applicable to a mystic experience more commonly referred to as the dryness of the soul or acedia ('spiritual indifference') or, with a different emphasis, as the annihilation of the self, or the 'noughted soul.' The same correspondence of terms exists on the side of the object. God Himself is described by mystic writers as Nought (one remembers the Gottes-Nichts in Meister Eckhart), and this divine Nothingness, like the Nichts in Heidegger, is active—it 'noughts' ('es nichtet'), and the fruit of its annihilating activity is, in Walter Hilton's expression, the 'noughted soul' (The Scale of Perfection, Book II, Chap. 35). The same metaphors are used, especially the dark night, the desert, and the abyss. Tauler speaks of the 'Wilderness of the Quiet Desert of the Godhead' (The Inner Way, Third Instruction, p. 324); Ruysbroeck, of the 'Abyss of Darkness where the loving spirit dies to itself, and wherein begins the manifestation of God and of Eternal Life' (L'ornement des noces spirituelles, Lib. III, chap. 2). Tauler and Eckhart play with the similarity of the German word for ground or reason (Grund) and the one for abyss (Abgrund)—and so does Heidegger (Vom Wesen des Grundes, p. 109).
>
> Let it be said at once that the kinship of language is misleading, particularly where the objective side of the experience is concerned. The Nothingness of the Existentialists is the actual void, nothingness by itself, the deprivation of Being or, at any rate, of meaningful Being.

mystical visions. One critic notes that he variously referred to God as the "'Eternal Darkness,' 'the Supreme Enchanter'. . . the 'Ineffable Name,' 'the Light of Lights,' the 'Master of the still stars and of the Flaming door.'"[1] And in old age, as was seen, Yeats evolved the more unusual term "the Thirteenth Cone."[2]

Yeats's Irish Rituals (from his diary of 1898 to 1901) also suggest that the invisible world, as the one "reality," is what is being hinted at. These rituals were written for a project which never materialized, the proposed "Irish Mysteries at a Castle of Heroes."[3] In the last rite, the Initiation of the Spirit, the One and the Many are again suggested in the following account:

> It starts with a reference to the 'Islands of the Young and of the Blessed, Tir-nan-Og' as present, though invisible. Then the previous initiations are explained. The elements have been 'symbolically overcome.' An Officer reads the Candidate's

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But when the mystic speaks of God as Nought, as Darkness, or as abyss, he means to say that God appears so to us. The God-Nothing is really our own nothingness which is unable to comprehend God. It is the inadequacy of our own human language which, in the vain attempt to express God, is finally reduced to stammering 'Nothing,' thus confessing that our words are too narrow to hold God and that He can be expressed only negatively and indirectly by the admission of our failure to express Him. Considered by Himself, God is none of the things he is likened to. In fact, He is the very opposite, and it is blasphemy to think otherwise. God, in truth, is the 'rich nought' that appears void only to our deficient comprehension, the infinite light of wisdom which, precisely because of its superlative resplendence, is like night to our feeble eyesight, the teeming abyss of Being rather than the waste abyss of Nothingness....

The anguish suffered by the mystic in the spiritual desert is still prayer, whereas the Existentialist's encounter with Nothingness is 'the opposite.'

[1]Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (New York, 1964), p. 53. Hereafter cited as Identity.

[2]One remembers also the image in "Easter 1916"—"'The stone's in the midst of all,' radiating through its stillness all the life around it." See Engelberg, p. 127, and Poems, p. 179.

[3]Moore, p. 58.

> record; and speaks of choice, and the stilling of choice. 'The incarnate is many, the discarnate one; all flames are in the flame.' They bow heads and cover eyes. Now the Candidate must enter the formless. Having passed through sound, silence. They make a circle round him. Each member's right hand lifts a staff, while his left grasps the wrist of a neighbor. The staves meet above the Candidate's head. The First Officer praises unity (the circle) and variety (the pattern of the staves). 'All unite, yet each remains individual.' The tests, the Candidate is told, show the form his staff must take.[1]

The ritual, seemingly, has little that could be called a "climax." However, they "show plainly," Professor Moore declares, "what Yeats in his early thirties considered to be important."[2] In Professor Moore's words, this is first "the attainment of true individuality" and, secondly, the attainment of "joy":

> Man is a pilgrim, life is a quest, the purpose of which is the attainment of true individuality—in other words, the bringing to consciousness of man's Higher Self. His journey to the light reverses the cosmic and anthropological descent from the Absolute, and involves him in the world of contraries. From matter, he passes through soul (water, the ford) to spirit. The process takes will. Hastened by initiation, the end is joy.[3]

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The difference between Yeats's mysticism and his occultism is best suggested by the word "magic." Professor J. I. M. Stewart, for instance, recounts the familiar details of Yeats's life, but insists—mainly from the concluding poem of The Rose (1893)—that Yeats's "vision is magical, not mystical."[4] The view of this study is simply that the two went hand in hand. Celtic lore itself, Professor Amos Wilder remarks, "was congenial

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[1]Moore, p. 75.

[2]Ibid., p. 81.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Stewart, p. 306.

to the mysticism that he [Yeats] brought to it in common with other Irish poets."[1] Yeats as wholly a mystic, however, is a claim that no critic would allow. Mysticism is generally associated with some individualistic form of theism. One of its chief claims is that it is the sole means of penetrating to the essence of God. The conviction of such views with Yeats evidently went hand in hand with a critical or objective attitude toward such views, as may be gathered from what has been said about A Vision. The "theorizing" of the heroic plays may therefore be ascribed to the poet's attempts to express a mystical experience, or at least a thoroughly mystical view of life, in his art.

Occultism itself has this quality of seeming but chaff to the wheat where a great tradition of mysticism is involved. To the mystic, perhaps, the ready-made formulas are a means of evoking magically or of suggesting symbolically that which ordinary experience is impotent to reveal. An expedient solution at least is offered to a language problem. That which cannot be expressed, however, provides no exit to what is essentially a "hall of mirrors" (to use a metaphor for the world). If each "mirror," to continue the metaphor, is a Yeatsian symbol with something of "reality" in it, then only the breaking of all of them would establish that "theism" is being communicated and not "pantheism." Such a view is suggested in the third stanza of Yeats's poem, "The Statues." The "empty eyeballs" hint at a microcosmic version of the Great Wheel; the thought is primarily that worldly knowledge leads one astray:

> One image crossed the many-headed, sat
> Under the tropic shade, grew round and slow,
> No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat
> Dreamer of the Middle Ages. Empty eyeballs knew

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[1] Wilder, p. 109.

> That knowledge increases unreality, that
> Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.
> When gong and conch declare the hour to bless
> Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.[1]

The "emptiness" of the One (the Buddha) and of the Many (the eyeballs) once again present the view of "theism" with an almost equal stress on "pantheism." Both views are also present in the heroic plays, for, to return to the metaphor, Yeats would have his "viewers" break only certain "mirrors" and then pretend that the rest are illusory. The visions that derive from a "heterodox mysticism" (Yeats's own term) imply as much.[2]

The mysticism that _is_ present, however, compares, not in tone but in substance, with the reports of mystics in other lands and other times. The five points of R. B. Blakney[3] (numbered below and with the author's comparative references between) suggest one parallel by which Yeats's mysticism may be evaluated:

> (1) Reality, however designated, is One; it is an all-embracing unity from which nothing can be separated.

Yeats writes, "we perish into reality" and "Reality is a sphere."

> (2) It, the Ultimate, is nameless, indescribable, beyond telling: and therefore anything said about it is faulty.

In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" the Ultimate is similarly indicated: "For intellect no longer knows / _Is_ from the _Ought_, or _Knower_ from the _Known_."[4] From a passage in the first draft of his _Autobiographies_, one finds the remark, "'Should not religion hide within the work of art as

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[1] _Poems_, p. 323.

[2] Wilson, p. 15.

[3] Blakney, pp. 29-30.

[4] _Poems_, p. 231.

God is within His world.'"[1] The "Centre" of the Great Wheel likewise suggests that the Ultimate is indescribable.

> (3) Within the self, IT is to be found and there it is identical with Reality in the external world.

Professor Seiden lists as one of the major paradoxes of Yeats's belief the following: "Although he [Yeats] maintained that his myth both originates in and describes the psychic life of mankind, he fervently asserted that all of its dominant ideas have an independent reality and truth."[2] A similar paradox was seen in the last stanza of "Among School Children" and the third stanza of "The Statues."[3]

> (4) It can be known, not discursively, but by acquaintance, and this acquaintance is the point of all living.

In a passage already quoted Yeats says, "I cannot break from [my subject matter, or the "received tradition"] without breaking some part of my own nature; and sometimes it has come to me in supernormal experience."[4]

> (5) Reality is disclosed only to those who meet its conditions and the conditions are primarily moral.

Yeats writes, "'For there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection, and it sometimes has the form of the religious life and sometimes of the artistic life.'"[5] The moral condition is also a primary characteristic of the protagonists of the heroic plays. The "heroic stance" permits Seanchan, Cuchulain, and Deirdre to realize their Higher Selves. As in Yeats's Irish Mysteries, they pass through "sound" (the

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[1] Quoted by Moore, p. 82.

[2] Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 2.

[3] Supra, pp. 26 and 41 of this study.

[4] Supra, p. 29 of this study.

[5] Quoted by Moore, p. 28.

world), "silence" (the "tragic gesture"), and into the "formless" ("reality").[1]

The heroic plays, this author believes, are the last artistic pieces by Yeats of which it can be said that the mystical strain is properly "concealed" and morally true to ritual and myth. In the later plays the stultifying conditions of the actual world are dropped and the "obscurity" itself is presented. Thus if the veil is penetrated in the heroic plays, as Yeats thought it would be, mysticism, or a dominant tendency toward mysticism, lies "unconcealed." Professor F. A. C. Wilson, in his discussion of Yeats's dramatic techniques, also, it is clear, describes the mystical process in the heroic plays. The movement toward the "Centre," as this "Centre" earlier was described, constitutes the action of the plays, as well as the ritualistic entrance into the "formless":

> What Yeats primarily requires of the theatre is less katharsis than what he calls 'stillness'; a single moment of emotional equipoise to which all the 'passionate intensity' of the action will tend...; one might define it as an awareness of stasis, a moment when the mind passes through profound emotion into a condition of absolute calm.[2]

The "Centre," or the "stillness," again, is the "intersecting plane" through which the "Self" transcends time and achieves "stasis"—"the eternal non-temporal present."[3]

The antidote to the "complete surrender" implied by "stasis," however, is also present in the heroic plays. Essentially it is the Many of "reality," for Yeats's icons suggest that an entrance is first made into the "cyclic" world of Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World. The

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[1] Supra, p. 39 of this study.

[2] Wilson, p. 37.

[3] Eliade, p. 75.

inference is seen most clearly in Deirdre. The two lovers expect the fulfillment of their tragic earth-bound affair in the beyond. It is possible because "reality is a community of spirits." Engelberg writes, "Because infinity and eternity became overwhelming absolutes, Yeats could contemplate only a cycle, in which souls, reincarnated, keep returning. It was too much to lose one's soul forever—to the powers of light or dark."[1] The "cyclic" world, of course, preserves something of the actuality that was at the same time being rejected. In the later poems, as Professor Seiden notes, Yeats adheres to the cyclic pattern, favoring "reincarnated souls, not disembodied men."[2] It is but one more of the conflicts that Yeats later discovered in "reality."

In the 1937 version of A Vision, an escape from the cycles of rebirth is possible, however. The release occurs when the soul ascends into the Thirteenth Sphere of Anima Mundi. The "reality" that Yeats wanted to convey, of course, made some such explanation as to the final "burial ground" of consciousness a necessity. "'It is that cycle [the Thirteenth],'" Yeats writes, "'. . . which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space.'"[3] The issue, however, is more clearly seen in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." In this poem the poet is urged to rejoice in "the winding ancient stair" (the imaginary gyre or "Centre") leading to God. The symbol of the "stair," or the "ladder" (one may remember "Jacob's ladder"), again, is fully in accord with traditional usage. Professor Mircea Eliade writes, "The most usual symbol to express the

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[1] Engelberg, p. 177.

[2] Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 293.

[3] Quoted by Moore, p. 372.

break through the planes and penetration into the 'other world' . . . is the 'difficult passage,' the razor's edge."[1] The text of the Gospel that is somewhat analogous is "'Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth to life, and few there be that find it.'"[2] In Yeats's poem, the soul must ascend in the darkness which is its light, for "Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?"

> My Soul. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
> And falls into the basin of the mind
> That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
> For intellect no longer knows
> Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known--
> That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
> Only the dead can be forgiven;
> But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.[3]

In On Baile's Strand, when Cuchulain similarly loses his senses, the implication is that he also "ascends to Heaven." The whole of the symbolic statement suggested by the icons in that play, however, tends to support this view rather than the mere fact of the protagonist's insanity.

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At this point most critics let the matter come quietly to rest. The ideas in the 1937 version of A Vision are quite enough to explain most obscure passages in the later lyrics. The material that follows, then, is not intended to describe the "whole reality" (implied by the theme of the heroic plays), but merely to justify the use of the term as an inherent and terminal value of those plays.

The author suggests, then, that what is ultimately "imagined" or

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[1] Eliade, p. 83.

[2] Quoted by Eliade, p. 83. See Matt. 7:9.

[3] Poems, p. 231.

"understood" by Yeats as an underlying principle of things is Nothingness, or the "rich nought" behind and within "unlimited expansion." The vision is similar to Blake's in that "he /Yeats/ sees, in fact, what is to human eyes nothing. He returns to the primal unity before the bifurcation of God into the Sun and Moon resulted in the stars, the earth, and all that goes with it."[1]

The one-to-one relation between the world of man's apprehension and the spiritual world, or the Doctrine of Correspondence, likewise suggests that Yeats's vision of "reality" is but a series of fading worlds. Blake earlier expressed the doctrine when he wrote, "'There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.'"[2] The ascent by negation—"Not this and not this," as the Hindu says—leaves only a complete "self-surrender" to the final That. Yeats therefore says that the last of his worlds encompasses all, it has the attributes of deity, and, in effect, nullifies (philosophically) the infinite regress. It is possibly for this reason that Professor Moore writes: "It is correspondence that lies behind his /Yeats's/ new theory of freedom as the gift of the Thirteenth Cone."[3] The finite existence of "Nothingness," then, if as such it can be conceived, occurs at the expanding edge, for it is known that the galaxies are expanding at tremendous speeds from the center of the universe. Therefore, "Reality is a sphere" (Yeats's definition of the universe and of the soul). At the edge, however, there are seemingly "solar systems"

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[1]Parkinson, Later Poetry, p. 159.

[2]Quoted by Moore, p. 87.

[3]Moore, p. 372.

of Consciousness (of the soul it is the mind), worlds such as the earth whose spirits have not yet broken away to become a part of the Nothingness at the center. These spirits in their "invisible world" are a part of Anima Mundi: "Reality is a community of spirits." Eventually, as the galaxies disappear like a puff of smoke in the void, there will only be spirits, the Many, and the original Nothingness, the One. "'The whole passage from birth to birth,'" Yeats writes, "'should be an epitome of the whole passage of the universe through time and back into its timeless and spaceless condition.'"[1]

(17)

The author's hypothetical statements do not, of course, suggest that the scheme has "beauty" or a final "joy." Yet, these ingredients, it is clear, are as much a part of Yeats's ultimate subject matter as is the simplified universe that emerges as the final frame of reference. Its ultimate mystery, in fact, is its strong point. Its final value is possibly its weak point. Nevertheless, it was important to Yeats and it has meaning for Yeats's art. The theme of the heroic plays therefore remains "we perish into reality."

Yeats's "reality," to the extent that it is an inherent value of the heroic plays, has three principal characteristics: it is presential, it is coalescent, and it is perspectival.[2] The "sense of presence," as an independent dimension of "reality," is, in the heroic plays, related to the essentially symbolist technique of exploiting mythological material

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[1]Quoted by Moore, p. 379.

[2]The description paraphrases a similar one made in Philip Wheelwright's Metaphor & Reality, pp. 154-173.

for the purpose of intimating mood and emotion. The example may be drawn of a person who returns from a distant city ("the glittering town," as Yeats would say).[1] His experience of "being there," linguistically conveyed, creates an emotion in his listeners that may be termed a "sense of presence." The emotion, if skillfully controlled by the speaker, approximates more and more closely the original experience but never truly equals it. Other than this "sense of presence," one must rely on what religion has always said—*believe*—or on what might be termed Yeats's "option"—*magic*. The latter method of bringing the listeners into the unknown city, so to speak, has been related to Yeats's occult symbols, his belief in a generic soul, and the intent of his dramatic techniques.

"Every presence," Professor Wheelwright declares, "has an irreducible core of mystery, so long as it retains its presential character."[2] To explain the mystery, as Yeats tries to do in *A Vision*, is only to obscure the issue. It is to be caught up in endless circles, the cycles of re-birth, and the insoluble riddle posed by philosophy. "All such questions," says Wheelwright (in another context and about "reality" in general), "are peripheral":

> Explanations, theories, and specific questionings are directed toward an object in its thinghood, not in its presentness. An object in its thinghood is characterized by spatio-temporal and causal relations to other objects in their thinghood: we inquire about its name, its place, its why and whither, its status according to some system of values. All such questions are peripheral.[3]

"Reality," as Yeats evidently viewed the term (through his icons),

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[1] Ellmann, *Identity*, p. 48.

[2] Wheelwright, p. 158.

[3] Ibid.

is also coalescent in that no line of demarcation exists between mind and matter, or between subject and object. Professor Ellmann writes, "His /Yeats's/ work finds its real centre in the imagination. . . . At its most extreme he asserts that the imagination creates its own world. There is also the reverse of this medal, an acknowledgment that the world should be the creation of the imagination but is not."[1] The view that results from such a paradox, therefore, is taken as a true statement of the way things are. Professor Wheelwright expresses much the same thought when he says that the beauty of a rose is neither in the mind of the beholder nor in the rose, but it resides in both.[2] In terms of Yeats's "reality," the I and the not-I are of the same primordial substance; awareness thus is a matter of "surrender" to the pristine view of things:

> The I who am aware and the That of which I am aware are but Two aspects of a single sure actuality, as inseparable as the convex and concave aspects of a single geometrical curve. They can be distinguished intellectually, for the simple reason that they vary in their respective degrees of prominence in different situations.[3]

In the heroic plays, therefore, the mind and the soul as the "Self" are one behind the "Mask." Only after the heroic plays does one find the Self and the Soul pitted against each other, or "distinguished intellectually."

Again, to the extent that Yeats sees life in constant motion, the soul in a state of growth and rebirth, even in the beyond (as in A Vision), his "reality" also coalesces with time. The coalescence between particulars and universals, for instance, was seen in the last stanza of Yeats's

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[1] Identity, p. 5.

[2] Wheelwright, p. 166.

[3] Ibid.

poem "Among School Children."[1] In the heroic plays much the same thing can be said for the soul that is unique in time and that "soul which is alike in all men" for all time. The distinction that is pertinent here is related to the views of a science-oriented society as opposed to those of a "pre-sophisticated civilization":

> Abstract universals are the product of logical analysis; in Greece an understanding of them was of slow growth, resulting from the successive contributions of (in the main) Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Concrete universals, on the other hand—in which the particular actuality is one with all other things of the same species—are the natural and usual terms of thought in a pre-sophisticated civilization, and they persist in, or at least leave their traces on, the poetic mode of thinking in times thereafter.[2]

In On Baile's Strand, therefore, the fowl (or chicken in the pot) is seemingly used to represent the "Self" of both father and son. If the "Self" is "half-spirit, half-soul," then no real conflict should be felt when it is seen that the hawk also represents the "Self" of Cuchulain. Bird imagery is primarily responsible for the symbolic pattern that emerges in all three plays. The blending of real objects, therefore, predicates itself on the "dramatic ecology" of the universe. The immensity of the pattern and the nature of Yeats's icons, on the other hand, make it wrong to suppose that Yeats's methods operate entirely within a "closed system of reference," as Professor Parkinson points out:

> When he /Yeats/ writes of ultimate reality that it 'can be symbolized but not known,' he is stating a counterpart to the guiding motive of his dramaturgy: 'A man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' Art embodies reality and makes a dramatic or symbolic revelation; it is not a closed system.[3]

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[1] Supra, p. 26 of this study.

[2] Wheelwright, p. 168.

[3] Later Poetry, p. 123.

The above statement, of course, is truer of Yeats's later poetics than of the heroic plays. Enough of the "cyclic" world and the outlines of traditional drama are present in the heroic plays, however, to cast doubt on Yeats's possibly resolute intent. The problem that remained for the later poetry, therefore, was still "reality."

In the heroic plays, this "reality" is finally perspectival in that it provides an angle of vision through which his "reality" can be beheld in a certain way, a unique way, not entirely commensurate with any other way.[1] If, however, this "reality" could be entirely understood, then, possibly, it would be a "closed system." Its vagueness, its almost confusing moral implications, of course, do not permit such a view. The ultimate truth, even to Yeats, was at best a question mark. The Yeats of the heroic plays, however, was implying that the truth existed and that it was a vital end result of all things. Thus he stated the fact in the only language capable of significantly doing so when he wrote the heroic plays.

(18)

THE HEROIC PLAYS AS A PERCEPTUAL UNIT

The preceding discussion has to this point concerned itself primarily with the relationship of content to form in the heroic plays. Whether or not an essential value of Yeats's subject matter is in fact definable in the light of the "clean outline" provided in the heroic plays has been questioned. The author suggests still that a certain view must be taken of Yeats's "single image." The metaphysical intent then becomes

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[1] Wheelwright, p. 170.

aesthetically understandable—that is, it becomes a value to which all subordinate parts contribute. Such an intent, besides being subtly woven into the fabric of Yeats's art, vitalizes a mystical view of that which is non-discursive and primeval. The unity which is perhaps not established by Yeats's use of three literary elements becomes, therefore, a distinguishing characteristic of the heroic plays. Such a view is assumed, for instance, if one feels incapable of the mystical vision of "Nothingness." In what follows, more general and possibly more conclusive features shall be pointed out, but this aesthetic malfunction is the controversial item, perhaps, in any determination of the heroic plays as a perceptual unit.

Yeats is commonly said to be a poet who wrote in the symbolist literary tradition, but his more than twenty-five plays attest to a lifelong interest in the theatre. His theatrical works are divided by most critics into three periods, corresponding generally to the development of his verse. The heroic plays, then, are products of Yeats's middle period, dated by two volumes of poetry, In the Seven Woods (1903) and Responsibilities (1914). Some hint of a changing attitude toward his art after the turn of the century has already been indicated. Professor Seiden was quoted on events in Yeats's personal life that might have affected his changing views.[1] The fifteen-year-old love affair with Maud Gonne that ended abruptly in 1903 receives extensive treatment in Ellmann's book, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (1948).

In another book, The Identity of Yeats, Professor Ellmann gives more attention to the possible influence of Nietzsche, whom Yeats began reading

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[1] Supra, pp. 15-16 of this study.

in the summer of 1902.[1] In a letter to the poet George Russell (AE) of May 14, 1903, Yeats shows a sudden interest in the Apollonian and Dionysian principles propounded by Nietzsche:

> 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 an impulse to create form, to carry the realization of beauty as far as possible.[2]

The form that Yeats created for the heroic plays—supposedly in accordance with the Apollonian principle—must finally be seen as incomplete, or at least in a process of "becoming," for after 1910 he began his search for what he termed the "'theatre's anti-self.'"[3]

Ellmann also notes "that Nietzsche's contrast of slave morality with master morality helped Yeats to set the pattern of opposition between self and soul which became central in A Vision and much of the later verse."[4] The point is possibly important as it may suggest that no distinguishable difference was drawn between the "self and soul" until after the heroic plays. The view that the "self and soul" are the same to Yeats during the first decade was one modification which this author made in Professor Engelberg's explanation of Yeats's aesthetic, for instance. In Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1918), Yeats conceives of the soul as both Anima Mundi and Anima Hominis, which corresponds to Engelberg's statement that life to Yeats was "half-spirit, half-soul." Nevertheless, Ellmann,

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[1] Ellmann, Identity, p. 91.

[2] Ibid., p. 95.

[3] The expression is quoted by Eric Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," The Permanence of Yeats, eds. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York, 1950), p. 244.

[4] Identity, p. 97.

in his book, cites a marginal note made by Yeats "under Nietzsche's stimulus" which seemingly implies that the "Self" (perhaps as mind or intellect) is merely a subdivision or an appendage of the "soul":

Night	Socrates Christ	one god -	denial of self in the soul turned towards spirit, seeking knowledge.
Day	Homer	many gods -	affirmation of self, the soul turned from spirit to be its mask and instrument when it seeks life.[1]

Running counter to Parmenides' warning, then, Yeats begins with non-Being rather than with Being in the heroic plays. The adjustment was made in his later poetry when the process was reversed.

Brief mention must be made also of three characteristics which help to define the heroic plays: Yeats's treatment of "sensuality," his specialized use of esoterica, and his idea of a "Unity of Culture." Professor Ellmann, for instance, points out that Yeats only late in life achieved some rounding out of his view of sex:

> In contrast to the idealized celibacy of his early verse, the lyrics of the middle period made allusions to sensuality which were usually baldly physical; not until about 1918, in such poems as the series about Solomon, did he bring together warm affection with sexuality. When he did his noble isolation was over.[2]

The "sensuality" of the heroic plays derives mainly from the emphasis upon the passionate nature of the protagonists. It is not an obtrusive quality of the plays; nevertheless, it is present.[3]

Yeats's use of occult symbols in the heroic plays has not been

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[1] Identity, p. 97.

[2] Ibid., p. 115.

[3] See Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 179.

generally recognized. The search for "interconnecting correspondences" and such has taken on something of the chase where other works of Yeats are concerned. In this study the complexities of this aspect of the heroic plays are left for Chapter Three. The distinguishing characteristic of Yeats's esoterica in the heroic plays, the author suggests, is simply its appearance of being a shadowy substratum to otherwise turgid drama. The episodic movement and the single dramatic idea in each play leave little time for the auditor to ponder over difficulties. Nevertheless, Yeats possibly felt the auditor would; and, it must be noted, this was the very purpose of the heroic plays. The blending of literary elements was to permit those who were perceptive to finally grasp the shadowy chain of events that, in effect, had caught up the soul of the protagonist.

Finally, there is a quality of the heroic plays that can only be described as "cosmic optimism." The author believes that this is essentially related to what Yeats termed a "Unity of Culture." At the turn of the century he felt that such a unity was possible in Ireland. And at no time, evidently, did he conceive of his work as something perpetrated in vacuo. One way of viewing the heroic plays, for instance, is as a social warning to a nation not to tamper with the essential "feudalism" of the universe. "Have not all races," Yeats writes, "had their first unity from a mythology, that marries them to rock and hill?"[1] In a more reflective vein, Yeats modified his statement:

> But this much at any rate is certain—the dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false; though it may be we can achieve it for some small circle of men and women, and there leave it till the moon

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[1] Autobiography (New York, 1953), p. 131.

bring round its century.[1]

When the heroic plays were written, Yeats was interested in reaching all levels of society. His People's Theatre, the Abbey, was in fact to portray "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland."[2] The fact that such dreams came to nought prompted him to search for a Unity of Culture in history:

> And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
> To the holy city of Byzantium.[3]

The heroic plays are possibly Yeats's most conscientious attempt to relate Irish heroic legend to the very beginnings of occidental mythology. Professor Seiden writes that two main currents of Gaelic Ireland's literary tradition were used, bardic stories principally, as well as folk tales:

> The first includes the bardic stories of the Red Branch Tribe of Ulster and the Fenians of Connacht and their successors, warriors who flourished in Ireland from the period shortly before the birth of Christ through the early Middle Ages, men whose stories are a charming mixture of fact and fiction. The second tradition includes the folk tales and the folk songs and ballads: a literature about the Sidhe (the fairies or demons of the atmosphere), about life among the peasantry in rural Ireland, and about a Catholicism in which paganism is sometimes mixed with orthodox creed.[4]

The heroic plays, of course, are not the only plays that draw upon Irish heroic legend. The Cuchulain cycle eventually became a series of five plays, three of which were written after 1910 when Yeats became aware of Noh drama.

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[1] Autobiography, p. 196.

[2] Haskell M. Block, "Yeats's The King's Threshold: The Poet and Society," Philological Quarterly, XXXIV (1955), p. 207.

[3] "Sailing to Byzantium," Poems, p. 191.

[4] Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 6.

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In The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats, The Green Helmet (1910) is listed as "An Heroic Farce." Originally it was the author's intent to include this play. Perhaps its most significant feature, however, is an "irregular fourteener," a "heroic" line which rightfully outweighs what can be said of its symbolic intent. Professor Ellmann comments: "Yeats had sporadically toyed with fertility ritual in his play The Green Helmet."[1] Professor Stewart sees the play as "a rough-and-tumble version of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."[2] Nevertheless, Professor Peter Ure writes with a greater understanding of its intricacies than most. In a recent article, Ure points out its avoidance of "the conflict between two or more harmonies." The tripartite blend, as was noted elsewhere in this study, characterizes the three heroic plays under discussion here. In the following passage, then, the hint that "reality" of one form or another is a recognizable value in all of Yeats's plays does not, of course, suggest that the method of achieving this or that "reality" is well known. "Real people," as Eliot is cited as expecting from the heroic plays, is once again confused with the protagonists who are "seen":

> It is, in some ways, a great misfortune for Yeats's reputation as a poetic dramatist in the Age of Eliot that his discovery of the Japanese Noh not long after the composition of The Green Helmet made it easier for him not to follow up what the play had begun: the forging of a measure which would avoid the conflict between two or more harmonies, which, Eliot considers, jolts the audience into an awareness that people talking poetry are not real people. Yeats had to choose between running this risk, for which he has paid in full, and foregoing his

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[1] Identity, p. 170.

[2] Stewart, p. 338.

> wish to 'transport the audience violently from one plane of reality to another'—the subject of most of his plays, for which he has not yet been fully judged at all.[1]

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Since the writing of this study (it was begun in the summer of 1963), scholarly works on Yeats's plays and poetry continue to appear. Rightfully, as a trend, the business at hand has been the sustained achievement of Yeats's later poetry. The workshop—if as such the middle period may be termed—has had consequently its one grand exit. Yeats's aesthetic, however, belongs essentially to the middle period. Only with difficulty, in fact, can the aesthetic be applied to the later poetics. Professor Engelberg explains: "Testing the poetic achievement against theory does not always yield happy results: it leads to a limitation either of the theory or of the poetry."[2] Whether or not the aesthetic remains more appropriate to the heroic plays than to the poetry is, of course, merely a passing reflection of this investigator. There is the suspicion that only the problems that remained unsolved had any deep meaning for Yeats. "Reality," as the author has tried to point out, was one of these problems. As in the legend of Parsifal and the Fisher King, it was the question asked that ultimately counted. Yeats, it is clear, also had his important question to ask:

> Between extremities
> Man runs his course;
> A brand, or flaming breath,
> Comes to destroy
> All those antinomies

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[1] "Yeats and the Two Harmonies," Modern Drama, VII (December, 1964), p. 254.

[2] Engelberg, p. 5.

Of day and night;
The body calls it death,
The heart remorse.
But if these be right
What is joy?[1]

The previously quoted passage of Professor Peter Ure, then, somewhat outlines the nature of the task remaining. It is felt, possibly, that Yeats was unwise in 1910 in not deciding to become another Eliot or another Chekhov. Eminent critics such as Professors Peter Ure, Thomas Parkinson, and Helen Hennessy Vendler, for instance, accede to the presence of an otherworldly view in the heroic plays. Their interests and the gist of their writings, however, are more readily stated as a concern with parts that are involved in the whole, rather than with any inclusive "unity" that makes use of diverse parts. Professors C. M. Bowra, Morton I. Seiden, and Richard Ellmann, ranging from brief statements to a full description, interpret the plays primarily as a projection of the poet's personal problems. Many critics, including Eric Bentley and Ronald Peacock, comment knowingly about Yeats's dramatic art without telling what actually goes on in the heroic plays. Professor Una Ellis-Fermor is alone in stating that the spiritual view is the sine qua non of all the plays. Unfortunately, she cites only the two morality plays, The Hour Glass and Where There Is Nothing. She sees the poetry in The King's Threshold in spiritual terms, but she says nothing about the function of the symbols. Professor F. A. C. Wilson, on the other hand, explains the symbols, but only for the later plays. He lists symbols with a subsidiary function for The King's Threshold and Deirdre, but they are not explained. As far as it has been possible to determine, no critic has stated a central theme

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[1]The opening stanza of "Vacillation," Poems, p. 245.

for the heroic plays which does justice to Yeats's poetic vision and the symbols that are involved.

It would therefore be an inaccuracy to subdivide the views of the above critics into groups. As far as the heroic plays are concerned, they have in common an absence of emphasis on poetic symbols—Yeats's icons. A line here and a page there completes what may possibly be termed the "special interest" literature on the heroic plays. The nationalistic view of the heroic plays, the work of essayists generally, has been omitted. Whether or not Cuchulain is in fact Charles Parnell, in any case, stems mainly from Herbert Howarth's view of The Green Helmet. In Chapter Two, therefore, the author proposes to present full descriptions of the heroic plays (largely based on the work of Professor Peter Ure) and commentary from those scholars who probe deeply the values of the heroic plays. The latter include such scholarly critics as Professors Thomas Parkinson, Morton I. Seiden, and C. M. Bowra. Such a list is by no means definitive. Their views are comprehensive, quotable, and to the point. They see the heroic plays in the light of the traditional theatre—the only way these plays have ever been seen—and they emphasize their remarks accordingly.

It will be seen that Professor Ure presents a view of The King's Threshold which marks it as somewhat transitional. Professor Seiden suggests that in one sense Yeats's subject matter is "reality." Professor C. M. Bowra sees the plays mainly as poetry. Generally, however, the theme which the heroic plays are said to share in common is one which was first offered by Professor Ellmann: "the conflict between the reckless ideal and the inglorious reality."[1] Chapter Two examines the views that

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[1] Identity, p. 106.

are a development of this theme, as well as related commentary. Chapter Three presents arguments for the theme "we perish into reality."

CHAPTER II

THEATRE BUSINESS, 1903-1910

What is mainly of aesthetic or philosophical interest is but lightly touched upon or not at all by critics who write of the three heroic plays—The King's Threshold (1904, 1922), On Baile's Strand (1903, 1906) and Deirdre (1907). The theme that these plays share in common, Professor Ure declares, is "the conflict between an objective world of established values, of government, concord, and reason, and the passion of the hero, which affirms the inward self and all the wasteful virtues."[1] The theme that is perhaps the original to this (indicated at the end of the last chapter) belongs to Professor Ellmann. Professor Thomas Parkinson, in his first book on Yeats, also applies a comparable version of this theme to all three of the heroic plays.[2] The variation of this theme, stated in modified form for each of the three plays, comes from Professor Morton I. Seiden: "The transiency of earthly pleasure" for The King's Threshold; "the eternal conflicts between an individual and himself or society or nature or, perhaps, his God" for On Baile's Strand; and "the impossibility of perfect love" for Deirdre.[3] "Reality," Professor Seiden also implies, is a way of indicating the metaphysical aspects of Yeats's art; but it

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[1] W. B. Yeats (New York, 1963), p. 42. Hereafter cited as Yeats.

[2] Infra, pp. 70-71 of this study.

[3] "W. B. Yeats as a Playwright," Western Humanities Review, XIII (Winter, 1959), p. 91. Hereafter cited as WHR.

ultimately "eludes explicit statement."[1] Professor C. M. Bowra offers perceptive commentary on poetry in the heroic plays. His concern is not essentially with theme but with Yeats's conception of poetical drama.

The scholarly acumen and preciseness which characterize the above critics' evaluations of the heroic plays convince one that additional remarks will be either repetitious or peripheral. The author's study, no doubt, is in the latter category, for it is concerned with the implications, the "overtones" perhaps, of that which is termed by Professor Ure "the wasteful virtues" (comparable to Ellmann's "reckless ideal"). The chief difference between the author's theme and the views of the above critics is simply that in this study a special emphasis is placed on overall pattern, such that, in a sense, more of what Yeats put in the heroic plays is pointed out. Yeats's "vast material" in fact finds itself somewhat dwindled in the writings of these critics, circumscribed, perhaps, by views that relate only to "Theatre business, management of men."[2] Whether the heroic plays can be so viewed without losing something of their intent is, in the main, the purpose of this chapter.

TRAGIC REVERIE

Professor Ure, to begin with, draws attention to a larger outline or purpose in the heroic plays—suggested by the term "tragic reverie"—which has to do with Yeats's anima mundi and the bringing to light of "secret thoughts."[3] These terms are stated for what they are worth;

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[1] Seiden, WHR, p. 89.

[2] "The Fascination of What's Difficult," Poems, p. 91.

[3] Yeats, p. 43.

they are possibly the by-products of Yeats's theory of tragedy. More to the point, the relationship between two of Yeats's earlier plays and the heroic plays is suggested in terms of Yeats's "mere story." It therefore develops, according to Ure, that as "the true dramatic encounter becomes possible" in the heroic plays Yeats's antinomies become central—that is, the plays became "essentially a dialogue between objective and subjective."[1] In Ure's view, then, it is the "objective world . . . wrought explicitly into the structure" which must ultimately be weighed against what Yeats terms "life," or against, perhaps, his intended "play of ideas."[2] The balance in favor of this view, again, centers upon Yeats's protagonists. They are seen, even with their defects in character, as real people. The aesthetic distance that is thus destroyed (as they are not therefore seen as "Masks") damages the intent of Yeats's theory of tragedy. The explanation at this point, of course, belongs to the author. Professor Ure, for his part, stresses the observable presence of "the objective world" in the heroic plays:

> On Baile's Strand does not fit Yeats's theory of tragedy, if only because the exclusion or lessening of character occurs even less in this play than in Deirdre. The very success of the Abbey made Yeats frightened of the theatre and awakened old suspicions of its power to move us not with the anima mundi, not with 'life,' but with excitements and energies that are specialized within the theatre itself 'before the footlights.'[3]

It must be noted at this point that essentially the author has no quarrel with this view of the heroic plays. The special plea of this study is merely that more, possibly, can be said for the heroic plays

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[1] Yeats, p. 42.

[2] Ibid., p. 48.

[3] Ibid.

than the fact that they do not succeed in the theatre. The theatre, as an art form, very likely eschews stylization of any kind. The degree to which it is carried in the heroic plays, however, makes Yeats's contribution of interest on that account. Such an opinion hardly serves notice on Professor Ure's views; the author, at the most, suggests that some clarification at least is needed of what is involved in "a dialogue between objective and subjective" where only the "objective" seems to be functional.

RITUAL OF PASSION

In the fourth chapter of Professor Ure's book, W. B. Yeats, a possibly representative summary account of the three heroic plays is given. The plays are not well known. The author therefore quotes at length certain passages of Ure's fourth chapter, the gist of which has already been indicated. A brief description of the heroic plays is followed by pertinent background material, as noted in the above, and the outline of Yeats's theory of tragedy. Professor Ure quotes Yeats to show that his "ritual of passion" is intended to produce a "condition of 'tragic reverie.'" The communion of souls and the unbaring of "secret thoughts" perhaps stresses the importance that "perception" has in Yeatsian drama:

> In The King's Threshold Seanchan the poet gives up his life in a prophetic ecstasy rather than yield to King Guaire's demand that poetry should accept its banishment from the council table. In On Baile's Strand Cuchulain the free warrior clashes with the High King of Ireland but, by betraying his own nature, becomes the victim of an evil will outside himself. In Deirdre the heroine triumphs finally, in a great act of the loving imagination, over her own weakness and over the possessive bonds of King Conchubar's amorous will. This conflict is of the same kind that came much more faintly to life between the subjective poetic world of Aleel in The Countess Kathleen and the demands made upon the heroine by the suffering of the actual world about her, and

> between Forgael's dream and his companions' greed and common sense in The Shadowy Waters. Yeats had appeared to choose Aleel's and Forgael's world, which is the world of The Rose and The Wind Among the Reeds; but all his art, as he came to discover, perhaps chiefly in the process of writing these plays, was to be essentially a dialogue between objective and subjective. In the plays the objective world is at last wrought explicitly into the structure and, since its place is recognised within the work of art, the true dramatic encounter becomes possible. All the plays are tragedies, and for Yeats tragic art is, above all, passionate art. He defines passion as 'the straining of man's being against some obstacle that obstructs its unity.' A passion can only be contemplated in a work of art 'when separated by itself, purified of all but itself, and aroused into a perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law.' Tragedy, he thought, unlike comedy, tends not towards the definition and discrimination of individuality, to all that is called character, but towards those moments when individuality sinks away, when drama is 'emptied' of the naively human.[1]

Such a view is taken, Ure believes, when Yeats writes, "Amid the great moments, when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio 'absent thee from felicity awhile,' when Anthony names 'Of many thousand kisses the poor last,' all is lyricism, unmixed passion, 'the integrity of fire.'"[2] The human condition, at least, gives way to that which is more than human. At such moments all thoughts, perhaps, are influenced by that bisexual principle in the circumambient ether—the anima mundi:

> It is this 'ritual of passion' that induces in the audience the condition of 'tragic reverie,' a condition which is easily disturbed by an awkward gesture or a misplaced stage-effect, and which is frustrated by the trappings of the naturalistic theatre, by hysteria, elocutionary expertise or constantly varying attitudes on the actor's part. Yeats's theatre values stillness, and stresses the distinguished, solitary, and proud; he wanted his actors to look more and more like Byzantine icons, and finally covered the tawdry human face with a mask. There remained for them only the energy and precision of subtle speech, which arises from the depth of the soul and so communicates with the soul of the audience; for in the moments of

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[1] Yeats, pp. 42-43.

[2] Essays (New York, 1924), p. 297.

> tragic reverie audience and performer draw upon the anima mundi, 'that soul which is alike in all men,' and startle us with our own secret thoughts.[1]

It might appear that this view is related to what Professor Ure actually finds in the heroic plays. If so, the description is misleading, for Yeats's "ritual of passion" is seen to lead not so much to the threshold of anima mundi as to a willful or rueful death under mitigating circumstances. Beyond what appears a rather ambiguous end to that which, Ure implies, is possibly cast in the form of tragedy, there is no mention of "stillness" or of the Yeatsian values which supposedly transcend form. The end of each play indicates simply that the "dialogue between opposites" is at an end. The "objective world" does not include the "subjective world"—at least not in the Yeatsian sense—except possibly in The King's Threshold. The fact that it does so in this play derives mainly from what the protagonist is made to do—that is, speak out his convictions in poetical terms. It will be seen later, however, that these poetical terms "objectively" indicate traditional Christian theology to a great extent, whereas at a "subjective" level (which this study terms the symbolic level) the orientation is primarily toward Eastern thought. Nevertheless, Ure suggests that Seanchan's faith is not entirely convincing, mainly because his identity is incomplete:

> The King's Threshold (produced 8 Oct. 1903), the least impressive of the three plays, presents well enough the dialogue between the objective and subjective worlds and moves through it towards a 'ritual of passion.' The sense of locality is strong and the temptations offered to Seanchan to break his fast are solidly realised; his different visitors, the Mayor of Kinvara, the soldier, the monk, the chamberlain, the cripples bring with them a circumstantial world of provincial pride, sick cattle, and salt fish, and they quarrel convincingly. The episodes are organized in 'Greek' fashion, as

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[1] Yeats, p. 43.

> Yeats himself said, round the poetic Samson, Seanchan; he is an obdurate professional, not a dreamer like Aleel. As he is separated and purified from everything, his mind rises out of delirium and weakness into the intensity of prophecy, into 'joy,' and he assumes the role of the 'man that dies,' with a vision, like that of Paul Ruttledge in Where There Is Nothing, of the future race that lies beyond the world of death. The symbols that mediate this antithesis—the infected moon, and the joyful, pro-creative stars—because they are located in dramatic speech, and because the speaker has a situation and a history, come to us with the passion and directness that was lacking in the symbolic language of the earlier lyrics. But it is precisely the 'absolute and uncontaminated' nature of Seanchan's poetic faith, as Una Ellis-Fermor describes it, that makes the play difficult to accept now; although Seanchan's message of rejoicing is the same as the one which came to the old man by the cave that's christened Alt[1], his character and the faith which he holds are finally so purified of irony and compromise that they lack salt. Yeats still exempts the 'ritual of passion' itself from the sardonic eye that was to turn even poets into old scarecrows.[2]

Professor Ure gives extended treatment to On Baile's Strand, perhaps the most "joyless" play of the group in the eyes of most critics. Ure declares that "the play is about how the building of a city and a kingdom destroys another kind of life"—the life of "wasteful virtues." A network of ironies indeed draws Cuchulain toward the ultimate unacceptable irony—the unknowing murder of his own son. Such "objective" elements at least are stressed by Professor Ure. Cuchulain suffers and is broken finally because in a moment of weakness he sells his birthright:

> The hero of On Baile's Strand [produced 27 Dec. 1904] is a more troubled figure. Unlike Deirdre and Seanchan, he is not single-hearted in his opposition to the objective world of order, represented by King Conchubar, but also, more specifically, by fixed values of inheritance and kinship: Conchubar has sons who will succeed him, Cuchulain has none, and his childless condition is a dangerous emblem of the old, untamed,

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[1]The reference is to "The Man and the Echo," Poems, p. 337.

[2]Yeats, pp. 43-44. The last reference is to Yeats's poem, "Among School Children," Poems, p. 212.

heroic self. Begotten by a god, he glories in this turbulence; but Conchubar knows that in his sleep Cuchulain cries out despairingly 'I have no son.' This division of the hero's self against itself is the weakness at which, when the play begins, Conchubar is levering in his endeavour to get Cuchulain to swear an oath of obedience to him. For the play is about how the building of a city and a kingdom destroys another kind of life. Conchubar, planning his kingdom, wants to establish it upon the union of Cuchulain's warrior-strength with his own wisdom; his most powerful argument is that Cuchulain, hunting and dancing with his wild companions, has left the shore unguarded so that an unknown warrior from Scotland has been able to land. (This interweaving of the themes into the initiation of the main action is particularly skilful and was achieved only after the first half of the play performed in 1904 had been entirely rewritten). Cuchulain, weakened, finally gives way and takes the oath; it is an oath specifically directed against the power of the shape-changing witches and the wild, antithetical hate and love—'the brief forgiveness between opposites'—which had bound together Aoife and Cuchulain long ago in Scotland; by taking it, Cuchulain repudiates the golden liberty, which has been his joy and his secret despair. The oath is no sooner done than the unknown warrior from Scotland, Conlaoch, arrives with his challenge to Cuchulain. Struck by his resemblance to Aoife, which answers to his deepest wish for a son, Cuchulain wants to make a comrade of him; but his is the first test of his new allegiance and of the kingdom's power to defend itself against intruders, and Conchubar insists upon the fight. In a fury of sudden movement, when Cuchulain strikes the High King, he is persuaded that Conlaoch's power over him is the power of witchcraft again at work, and they rush to their swords. So Cuchulain kills his own son, as he learns at the end of the play from the Fool and from the Blind Man, who knows everything.

The hero's destiny and character are here trapped in a network of ironies, as are King Conchubar's. Both, when they least suppose it to be so, are in the power of Aoife's witchcraft and evil will—Conchubar when he insists on ruining what was to be the strength that upheld the stability of his land, Cuchulain when he fights the son whom the new movement towards peace and kinship, intensified in him by the oath that repudiates wildness, presents to him in a form that answers to his wish. But it cannot be fully recognised because he is made foolish by the new allegiance. That Cuchulain and Conchubar are playing the roles of blind man and fool is of course brought home by the presence of the Blind Man and Fool at the beginning and end of the play; they are cleverly used, not only as expositors and as possessors of the secret that drives Cuchulain mad, but also as a means of enforcing the main theme of foolish strength entangled with dependent wisdom and of framing all this heroic circumstance within a sardonic commentary from common life: what is the death of heroes, and

all that fuss and fury, beside a chicken in the pot?[1]

In Deirdre, the "mere story," in so many words, is told at the beginning of the play. The method undoubtedly was meant to suggest to the auditor that his concern should properly lie elsewhere. Following Ure's commentary, one surmises that the interest was redirected to "that movement of tragic sympathy" which center on the human condition. Ure explains, however, that this would be so only if one sees Deirdre's "life in her way and not another's."[2] The implication again is that her character and her "choice" (suicide) do not do justice to common notions of what life is all about:

> Deirdre (produced 24 Nov. 1906) has a different structure. We are told at the beginning of the play, by the authority of the Musicians, whose skill in reading omens and whose experience as storytellers inform them what kind of story they are in, that the tale is to have a tragic ending; that Deirdre is trapped and that Conchubar is determined to kill her lover Naoise and possess her. When Deirdre enters, we watch her gradually finding out the nature of the story she is in; her understanding is stressed against the foolish hopes and mistakings of Naoise and Fergus. Her imaginative effort becomes directed to altering the story from within by the assumption of a series of roles; she tries to pretend that after all she does not love Naoise so that he may escape, then to await death in the posture of an ancient heroine, a role which in its turn breaks down when she pleads with Conchubar for Naoise's life, and finally, after Naoise is killed, she plays her most testing part and wrenches the story towards the end she now designs for it: she assumes the role of a half-reluctant mistress, attracted by Conchubar and yet angry with him because he will not allow her a moment to adjust herself to her new dignity by brief mourning over her former lover's corpse. Conchubar is convinced and unknowingly allows her time to die behind the curtain upon the body of Naoise. She finishes the story in her way, and not Conchubar's, by a great effort of the imagination and will, by a climactic disguising. That is the form her 'ritual of passion' takes. This is a remarkable and successful scheme, and does have the effect of making us

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[1] Yeats, pp. 46-48.

[2] Ibid., p. 45.

> live with the character as she creates her conscious paradigm of roles. Deirdre stands out from her background as no Yeatsian character hitherto has done. For this reason, it is difficult to admit that Yeats has emptied his play of character, in the ordinary sense, although it is true that, if we can share in Deirdre's efforts to see her life in her way and not another's, what separates her from us may melt away in that movement of tragic sympathy which Yeats called 'a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man.'[1]

The hesitancy to dwell on some of the more obscure values (even from the "objective" view) that might be present in the heroic plays is, of course, quite correct. It is the duty of critics to evaluate stage productions in the light of values traditionally associated with the theatre. The author suggests, however, that it is also a duty to find out what such an author as Yeats is trying to fashion out of his art. Perhaps this is not a larger purpose, for there is no essential conflict with the views of theatre critics, but merely another purpose—an understanding of the heroic plays. In the field of Yeatsian dramatic literature the heroic plays already are undergoing a process of ossification. What is important about them, however, is only partly related to the theatre. Their value as "theatre," in fact, has long since been decided. The effort to see them in terms of tragedy, as this term is generally understood, is somewhat doomed from the start. The plays highlight the tragedy of mundane existence, yet their outcome is better seen in terms of a "divine comedy." Comedy for Yeats implied a heightening of character, and it is precisely such a process that the critics tend to describe. The imagination which Yeats counted on to transcend the actual world merely dissolved, not the real world of human nature, but the procenium arch. The heroic plays but give another example of the difficulties of breaking down this

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[1] Yeats, pp. 44-45.

most humanistic of art forms—the theatre. It is only necessary at this point, however, to indicate that the author sees the heroic plays in different terms. Much that is found in secondary literature about the heroic plays is still of interest and deserves to be heard.

REVELATION OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY

Professor Thomas Parkinson centers his investigations on the second play of the group, On Baile's Strand. The theme for all three plays, however, is again "the conflict between the institutional world and the personal world of the protagonist":

> Most simply stated, the major subject of Yeats's Abbey dramas was the conflict between the fixed palpable world of human affairs (Guaire, Conchubar) and the world of passion and aspiration, which is beyond reason, system, or office (Seanchan, Cuchulain). The basic split in the plays is that between the institutional world—limited, tame, calculating, interested in the virtue of fixed character—and the personal world—exuberant, carefree, wild, affirming the values of intense personality.[1]

The end result of such a conflict, according to Parkinson, is to "grant us a revelation of human possibility."[2] The qualification here, of course, is to understand this revelation in terms of a "universal mood."[3] In this light the tragic gesture, or climactic moment, becomes supremely important in each of the plays. In the hero's act of passion the essence of tragedy is expressed. The "sublime simplicity" of these moments should also be understood as the time of unification with the anima mundi:

> Cuchulain, Naisi, Seanchan, Deirdre—indeed all of Yeats' tragic heroes—are noble persons who live in terms of guiding

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[1] Self-Critic, p. 54.

[2] Ibid., p. 84.

[3] Ibid., p. 83.

> passions that are too large for a limited temporal structure. Because of his excessive passion the hero is in continual conflict with some external person, perhaps with some motive within himself. When that conflict reaches a climax, the hero then asserts his force of being in an extravagant gesture: Seanchan's hunger strike, Deirdre's suicide, Cuchulain's fight with the waves. The gesture is meaningless except as an expression of the hero's passionate nature.
>
> This gesture is, to Yeats' mind, the essence of tragedy. Insofar as human experience is significant, it follows a certain definable pattern, that is, a hero moves through conflict to simplicity; the conflict develops and reveals his nature, and his ultimate gesture stands as a symbol of a universal mood.... Such figures as Deirdre and Cuchulain grant us a revelation of human possibility.[1]

The author suggests that even these rather conservative remarks have quite another implication. Professor Parkinson's writings imply, perhaps, that the terminal value gained from the plays is somehow related to "dying well"—that is, the terrestial, heroic end of life gives to all much food for thought; it is "a revelation of human possibility." Seemingly there is no further "revelation." The "extravagant gesture is meaningless except as an expression of the hero's passionate nature," which is to say that only life, or the human condition in the actual world, is served through the hero's death. Consequently it is difficult to see such a death as anything but bleak. Cuchulain, somewhat like Hercules, is made in all innocence to perform horrible murder. What happens is psychological disaster. Cuchulain, however, goes on to perform his "gesture" of fighting the waves, just as Hercules in the myth goes on to perform his Herculean tasks. Pericles would dismiss both courses of action (per tragedy) as morally indefensible. Cuchulain, in Parkinson's view, is therefore more pathetic than tragic, and what is left, consequently, is a death without hope. Where then in this play is

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[1] Self-Critic, p. 83.

the shaping force of anima mundi and its message that there is "joy" beyond such a troubled existence? Professor Parkinson, in the final analysis, denies that it is there.

ANTINOMIES AND REALITY

Professor Morton I. Seiden discusses the heroic plays primarily as drama but with an emphasis on Yeats's metaphysical leanings. The themes that he lists for each of the three plays has already been cited.[1] Professor Seiden, it must be noted, is possibly the most authoritative critic of Yeats's synthetic myth, A Vision. He offers lucid commentary on all phases of Yeats's esoterica and perhaps pinpoints the real problem in the heroic plays—Yeats's antinomies. The author feels, in fact, that this study is but a development of a view which Professor Seiden gives and then, unfortunately, dismisses. Of Yeats's purpose, he writes, "The end of dramatic art was that it must effect a spiritual regeneration of the modern word."[2] As can be seen from a resume quoted in the first chapter of this study, the biographic interest of the heroic plays is his main concern.[3] He does, however, offer another view, more inclusive, which points out that Yeats's subject matter, in fact, is "reality":

> In short, the proper subject of the drama, as of all literature, is reality; the only reality is that of the soul, and the soul, by which Yeats means the imagination or the passionate intellect, inevitably eludes explicit statement.[4]

Whether or not "reality" is only the "soul," even in the Yeatsian sense,

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[1] Supra, p. 62 of this study.

[2] WHR, p. 94.

[3] Supra, p. 16 of this study.

[4] WHR, p. 89.

is a question which the author attempted to answer in Chapter One. The view that Yeats's Abbey plays do not center in their ideological content, when finally analyzed, is perhaps relevant to Professor Seiden's point of view. Nevertheless, one finds Seiden writing that "A Vision is, to a large extent, a mythopoeic faith,"[1] the elements of which he sees even in the poetry of Yeats's middle period.

PURE POETRY

Professor C. M. Bowra is the critic whose views must properly bring this chapter to its conclusion. The search for some intelligible criterion which may better be applied to the heroic plays causes Bowra to question the very basis of Yeats's dramatic art. In comparing the heroic plays to Shakespearean drama and Shelley's The Cenci, Bowra notes that they differ primarily in a conception of poetry. In the heroic plays, Bowra believes, the natural rhythm of drama is usurped by the poetry. In turn, certain basic problems of the playwright's art are left unresolved. Bowra concludes that Yeats's plays "are after all more poetry than drama":

> Yeats is so thoroughly a poet, so loyal to his conception of poetry for poetry's sake, that he hardly varies his tone throughout [the heroic plays]. The persons speak with his voice and his intensity. The result is that they are not characters in any dramatic sense. They are not even types. They are creatures of the imagination who speak poetically about matters of great and universal import. They have more affinity to lyric than to drama. Now it is true that in the highest moments of all great poetical drama the personality of the character does not count so much as his situation, which is typical of a tragic human destiny, and that at such moments individuality is merged in poetry. Yeats is capable of such effects as this. There is real tragic nobility in such lines as his Deirdre speaks when she knows that she and

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[1] Mythmaker, p. 129.

her lover are to die:

> And praise the double sunset, for naught's lacking,
> But a good end to the long, cloudy day.[1]

> But the whole play is pitched at this level and almost in this tone. As a dramatist Yeats did not interest himself in building up the action and the characters, in leading from one tone to another, from ordinary events to a tragic end. No doubt he felt that this was not a poet's business and that poetical drama must throughout be poetry. In his own way he still sought 'pure poetry' and provided it in his plays. Poetical drama cannot be 'pure poetry' if it is to be dramatic, and Yeats' plays are after all more poetry than drama.[2]

Ultimately Professor Bowra's view suggests that the heroic plays have no ideological center, rather, since he uses the term "pure poetry," it is an image or a set of images and not an idea which must occupy the foreground of the auditor's attention. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that Bowra, using a more technical term than Seiden, nevertheless arrives at much the same position in regard to Yeats's non-paraphrasable content. The heroic plays—whatever they are, it is implied—are not "plays of ideas." In respect to "pure poetry," however, John Crowe Ransom, for one, questions whether it can, in fact, be as "pure" as it claims to be.[3] No one, it may be suspicioned, has written a play or a poem, worthy of being called such, without saying something. "Idealists are nothing if not dialectical," Ransom declares.[4] Even the Imagists themselves rather believe "that no image ever comes to

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[1] The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1952), p. 125. Hereafter cited as Plays.

[2] The Heritage of Symbolism (London, 1943), p. 197.

[3] "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," The Great Critics, eds. James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks (3d ed., New York, 1950), p. 771.

[4] Ibid.

us which does not imply the world of ideas, that there is 'no percept without a concept.'"[1] Perhaps a mere use of terms is here involved, but it does focus attention upon "poetry" as Bowra uses the word.

Some confusion arises perhaps from the fact that Professor Bowra notices that the music or rhythm of poetry is present to an unusual degree in the heroic plays, but ends by implying that its purpose cannot ultimately be determined. If, however, "matters of great and universal import" are the kind of content, then (if poetry is indeed present) it would still be necessary to point out the order of content to at least establish the movement of things or ideas, or, in short, the poet's ontology.[2] Professor Bowra, however, shifts his attention to the heroic plays as drama and the question of rhythm—if this truly is the question—still remains unanswered. Yeats, at least, writes as though the rhythm of his poetry did have a purpose in the kind of plays he proposed to write:

> When I began to rehearse a play I had the defects of my early poetry; I insisted upon obvious all-pervading rhythm. Later on I found myself saying that only in those lines or words where the beauty of the passage came to its climax, must rhythm be obvious.[3]

The effort to break away from "theatre business," to see one literary element as predominant over another, is once again to tamper with the harmony of the theatre. Yeats attempts a new harmony, an art which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal. In the traditional

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[1] The Great Critics, p. 772.

[2] Ibid., p. 769. The argument is paraphrased from a remark made by John Crowe Ransom, quoted by eds. as follows: "One guesses that it is an order of content, rather than a kind of content, that distinguishes texture from structure, and poetry from prose."

[3] Autobiographies; Dramatis Personae, 1896-1902, pp. 291-292.

theatre there is always the view that what Yeats has created is not traditional. To many that view is enough. Louis MacNeice, for instance, answers Bowra when he writes, "It would be a confusion of cause and effect to attribute Yeats's failure as a dramatist to the inadequacy of his dialogue. His dialogue is inadequate because he lacked the dramatic sense."[1]

Chapter Three presents demonstrations for the author's theme, "we perish into reality."

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[1] The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1941), p. 191.

CHAPTER III

WE PERISH INTO REALITY

The theme of the heroic plays—The King's Threshold (1904, 1922), On Baile's Strand (1903, 1906), and Deirdre (1907)—is "we perish into reality." In itself, such a phrase little suggests the reverence of tone or the impenetrable allusiveness usually found in mystic utterances. Such a direct conception of transcendence was in fact "eliminated" in the writing of the heroic plays. As a diagrammatical representation of Yeats's "mere story," then, one discovers only the "spokes" and the "rim" of the Great Wheel. If this were all, however, the heavy stress on contrary forces which characterizes the "rim" (or the Doctrine of the Mask, as it is often referred to) would suggest the "Yin-Yang" cognates of Taoist thought rather than the more philosophically mature concretion of the Wheel.[1] Yeats's idea of "opposites" is akin to the Yin and Yang to the extent that both offer an explanation of the actual world, predominantly in terms of femaleness and maleness. In each instance, also, the preference is for the weaker side, for the darkness or the negativeness associated with a feminine or a subjective personality. The point, however, is that the interaction of "opposites," in Yeats's view, may lead to a synthesis, a perfect state—more reasonably thought of as Yeats's Otherworld, as the "Centre" of things, or as Yeats's "reality."

Yeats's "reality" in the heroic plays is determined (theoretically

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[1] A brief account of the "Yin-Yang" is given by Blakney, pp. 24-26.

at least) mainly by "event"; it is found "beyond death" (or, aesthetically, at the "circumference of form"), though even here the distinguishing boundary line shows signs of being blurred. It is possibly true, for instance, that the "perception" of Yeats's Otherworld on the part of the auditor, if it is to take place at all, must be somewhat in retrospect, in that "still" moment when insight or vision rises above the mere swirl of conflicting natural forces (Yeats's "mere story"). The more mystical description of this moment of insight, or moments such as this, is given by Ananda Coomaraswamy: "'Whoever would transfer from this to the Otherworld, or return, must do so in the uni-dimensioned and timeless 'interval' that divides related but contrary forces, between which, if one is to pass at all, it must be 'instantly.' (Symplegades, p. 486).'"[1]

Essentially this process, which the author believes to be related to the mystical experience (whether Yeats intended it to be so or not), must finally be described as a solitary passage that reaches a visionary truth. As in The Hour Glass, only in that blind moment of spiritual terror can the ultimate reconciliation take on meaning:

> Only when all our hold on life is troubled,
> Only in spiritual terror can the truth
> Come through the broken mind.[2]

Such a Truth, for the outsider or for the student, can merely be typed. Nevertheless, such an "eternal non-temporal present," or this idea at least, rounds out Yeats's world—the world of contrary forces—and adds design and meaning to the heroic plays.

If the critics, then, have but described the "rim" of the Great

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[1]Quoted by Eliade, p. 84.

[2]Plays, p. 208.

Wheel, the author consequently has the task of indicating the "spokes"—the images, the icons, the "fragments" of ideas—that point to the "rich nought," the hub, or the motionless "Centre" of the heroic plays. A summary of each play on this level of meaning is attempted in this chapter. Yeats's esoterica, of course, is of primary concern. The necessary philosophical qualifications need not be reiterated. Yeats in his metaphysical leanings, it may be noted, strives to be a system-thinker. In his art, however, one does well to recognize his ability as a problem-thinker, for it is the aesthetic unity in itself which he ultimately develops to its fullest. If the latter is but another way of stating poetic license, then its terms will become clearer as the author proceeds.

THE OCCULT TRADITION

To begin with, then, the central place that bird-imagery has in Yeats's art must be remarked upon. In a note appended to the first edition of Calvary (1921), Yeats suggests again his world of "opposites," his "dialogue between objective and subjective." The antinomies, just as in Yeats's "system," have their appropriate symbols:

> Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river, while the beasts that run upon the ground, especially those that run in packs, are the natural symbols of objective man. Objective men, however personally alone, are never alone in their thought, which is always developed in agreement or in conflict with the thought of others and always seeks the welfare of some cause or institution, while subjective men are the more lonely the more they are true to type, seeking always that which is unique and personal.[1]

Each of the birds listed in this passage is present in the heroic plays:

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[1] Melchiori, p. 102.

the crane or heron and the swan in The King's Threshold; the hawk in On Baile's Strand; and the eagle, a pair of them, in Deirdre.

Professor Thomas Parkinson finds bird-imagery in Yeats's poetry even before the turn of the century, in Yeats's Celtic Twilight period. The symbols from the following lines, from one of the Rose poems, is explained in terms of the "occult tradition":

> Soon far from the rose and the lily,
> and fret of the flames would we be,
> Were we only white birds, my beloved,
> buoyed out on the foam of the sea!

> ...the white bird is an alchemical symbol for the soul. The rose and lily symbolize the masculine and feminine principle, hence sex....The aesthetic hope is that the symbols will stir vague indefinite moods within the audience by playing upon the unconscious mind, the anima mundi of occult tradition, which is similar to Jung's collective unconscious.[1]

Yeats's schooling in the occult tradition, it is clear, achieves something of the academic specialty. Bird-imagery, though his particular obsession, is but a part of his specialized repertoire. The time that Yeats gave to secret societies or to research into esoterica is in itself informative. The fund of symbols and the strange knowledge gathered from each of the three following sources, for instance, can hardly be indicated: Theosophical Society, 1887-1890; Golden Dawn, 1890-1901; and the Blake edition, 1889-1892.[2] Any listings of items that might bear on his thought, or on the heroic plays, is likely to appear presumptuous. Nevertheless, the attempt is necessary.

In the heroic plays, Yeats makes use of "interconnecting correspondences," such that a color, a direction, a bird, a tower, or a tree

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[1] Self-Critic, p. 18.

[2] See Ellmann, Identity, p. 27.

tends to have added significance. The meanings of certain symbols are perhaps shrouded in antiquity, formerly being a part of primitive belief. The direction "up," for instance, is quickly seen as somehow a "moral" direction, for the ethical course of action habitually runs counter to human nature.[1] It is perhaps inevitable then that fire, warmth, birds, the direction east, the pillar, the sun, and the tree should come to share something in common. Downwardness, on the other hand, brings one to the earth-mother, the source of nourishment, eventually to ideas of inward things like the soul, the life-giving water, the mysterious roots, and possibly spiritual rebirth. Some symbols, which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion of mankind, are termed archetypal.

QUADRIPARTITE DIVISION

In the occult tradition the correspondences between all manner of symbols are of central concern. "To know the genuine correspondences is to be master of the switches that control life and poetry," or so Yeats believed.[2] In the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, Yeats no doubt studied closely the "associations of the seasons":[3]

Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Morning	Noon	Evening	Night
Youth	Adolescence	Manhood	Decay
Fire	Air	Water	Earth
East	South	West	North

When Yeats became a member of the Isis-Urania Temple of Hermetic Students

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[1]The information is paraphrased from the material in Philip Wheelwright's book, Metaphor & Reality, pp. 111-119.

[2]Ellmann, Identity, p. 27.

[3]Ibid., p. 26. Professor Ellmann gives the more precise account of Yeats's esoterica; it should be emphasized, however, that a close reading of Yeats's Autobiography is indispensable.

of the Golden Dawn, he encountered more of the same. Professor Virginia Moore writes about the central place that the Doctrine of Correspondence had in its instruction in the Medieval Occult sciences:

> Yeats' Hermetic Order taught that the Hermetic philosophy underwent permutations without ever losing its central doctrine of correspondence. It could not lose it and remain Hermetism. By the test of this focal doctrine, the Order—and Yeats—regarded many bodies of belief, traveling under other labels, as species of Hermetism: among others, Chaldaeanism and Pythagoreanism (supposed to derive from Egypt), Platonism (supposed to derive from Pythagoras), Jewish Gnosticism (supposed to derive, ultimately, from Egypt), Christian Gnosticism (supposed to derive from Hermes and Christ), Johannine Christianity with its Logos doctrine (supposed to derive from Christ but to have been foreshadowed by Gnosticism and Platonism), Cabalism (supposed to derive from Egypt through Moses), and medieval alchemy and Rosicrucianism (supposed to derive from various of the above). Medieval alchemy—whether it aimed at making physical gold, or at that transmutation of the inward man which means gold on another level, moral gold—stood between ancient and modern Hermetism: between the ancient as outlined above and the modern as represented by Paracelsus, Boehme, Swedenborg, and Blake....
>
> Do these movements combine to constitute a tradition in the sense of a set of beliefs transmitted, handed down? The Hermetic Order thought so; also Mead and Yeats. Hermetism to them was a many-branched tree.[1]

The system of degrees was fundamental in the Golden Dawn, Professor Moore relates. "Passing through them constituted, Yeats said, 'an evocation of the Supreme Life . . . a climbing to the light' which it was the very essence of their system to believe flowed from the highest to lowest, and lowest to highest."[2] In one of the degrees Yeats was required to meditate upon the "five Hindu Tattwa /or Tattvas/ symbols . . . a means of developing clairvoyance (clear-seeing)."[3] Professor Giorgio Melchiori lists these symbols as follows:

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[1]Moore, pp. 112-113.

[2]Ibid., p. 164.

[3]Ibid., p. 141.

Element	Name	Color	Figure
Earth	Prithivi	Yellow	Square
Air	Vayu	Blue	Circle
Water	Apas	Silver	Crescent
Fire	Tejas	Red	Triangle
	Akasa	Black	Ovoid (egg)[1]

The importance of the "quadripartite division" to Yeats, which figures in his conception of a unity, is noted by Professor Ellmann:

> The linking of qualities to the four elements in particular became habitual with him [Yeats]. Long afterwards he still felt under the influence of a Kabbalistic ceremony in which he participated as a young man, where there were 'two pillars, one symbolic of water and one of fire....The water is sensation, peace, night, silence, indolence; the fire is passion, tension, day, music, energy.' But the example of Blake was perhaps most important in keeping the poetic usefulness of this collection of correspondences always before his mind.... [For Blake also] saw the world in terms of a quaternion....[2]

Professor Ellmann also points out the form that Yeats's four elements take in their Irish setting: from the first draft of Yeats's Autobiographies—"'the four talismans of the Tuatha De Danaan [legendary inhabitants of Ireland], the Sword, the Stone, the Spear, and the Cauldron.'"[3] Professor Ellmann explains as follows:

> The spear is associated with passion, the sword with intellect, the cauldron with moving images (presumably imagined), and the stone with fixed ones (presumably seen). The man who has mastered each of these can hope to attain to the fifth element or final harmony ('Jerusalem'), where he is at one with universal forces, and where passion and intellect, desired image and actual fact, are united into one whole.[4]

The fifth element, it is seen, is comparable to "Akasa" in the Tattvas symbols. The figure for this element is listed there as "Ovoid," which

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[1] Melchiori, pp. 25-26.

[2] Identity, pp. 27-28.

[3] Ibid., p. 29.

[4] Ibid.

by extension, possibly, suggests the phrase "reality is a sphere."

The "various guises" which these four elements take are described by Professor Ellmann:

> With his tentative congregations of symbols and symbolic ramifications in mind, we can penetrate some distance into his manner of composition and into the structure of his poetic imagery. The four elements appear steadily. They can be recognized easily under various guises: water is often 'dew,' 'wave,' or 'flood'; air is 'wind'; fire is 'stars' or 'flame'; earth is 'clay' or 'woods.' These readily extend themselves: the darkness of earth suggests a connection with night and sleep such as Yeats made in his Esoteric Section journal, and, because of the connotations of blackness, is often regarded as malevolent. Since Satan, supreme power of darkness, has his seat in the north (originally, perhaps, because of climatic considerations), that cardinal point may come to be associated, by successive stages, with earth. Water suggests tears and sorrow, therefore loss and therefore death; since death is traditionally 'stepping westward,' water comes to be related to the west. Fire, being crimson and suggesting the fires of passion—a metaphor which indicates how irresistible this way of thinking has always been, may become a symbol of love and, being hot, call up the south. The remaining cardinal point is east, and the element remaining is air; by identifying these for the sake of congruence we obtain a connection between air and the rising sun and dawn, and thus hope.[1]

It is not difficult, being confronted with this set of elements, to become fanciful. In passing, however, it may be noted that certain symbols suggest more than one element. The tree, for instance—the Sephirotic tree, in fact—had "two aspects, one benign, the reverse side malign. . . . Since the Kabbalists consider man to be a micrcocosm, the double-natured tree is a picture both of the universe and of the human mind, whose faculties, even the lowest, can work for good or ill."[2]

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[1] Identity, p. 30.

[2] Ibid., p. 76.

THE SHADOWY WATERS

To see the occult symbols at work immediately preceding the heroic plays—at least, where they are said to be at work—one must turn to Yeats's thoroughly symbolic play, The Shadowy Waters (1885-1899). Professor Ellmann paraphrases Yeats's first explanation of this play as follows:

> Its hero appears with a lily embroidered on his breast, its heroine with a rose; Yeats explained in a note on the play that these were masculine and feminine symbols, for he conceived of man as for ever seeking death, and of woman as for ever seeking life. This explanation helps to make precise what the poem makes only misty, that the speaker is anxious to escape from the world where such distinctions of desire, and such opposite states as life and death, trouble the inhabitants....Venus, the flaming star of evening, suggests love and death; they are contrasted with the maternal ocean, to which their tensions drive the poet to flee with his beloved in the form of a bird.
>
> But birds are not free of all these pressures. We are dealing here, however, with special birds, close to the discarnate species in 'Sailing to Byzantium.'[1]

From the start, Professor Ellmann notes, readers of The Shadowy Waters were perplexed by it. Yeats, when asked to supply an exegesis, replied, "'The more one explains, the more one narrows the symbols.'"[2] A few years later, however, in 1906 Yeats did offer a summary:

> Once upon a time, when herons built their nests in old men's beards, Forgael, a Sea-King of ancient Ireland, was promised by certain human-headed birds love of a supernatural intensity. These birds were the souls of the dead, and he followed them over seas towards the sunset, where their final rest is. By means of a magic harp, he could call them about him when he would and listen to their speech. His friend Aibric, and the sailors of his ship, thought him mad, or that this mysterious happiness could come after death only, and that he and they were being lured to destruction. Presently they captured a ship, and found a beautiful woman upon it, and Forgael subdued

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[1] Identity, p. 70.

[2] Ibid., p. 80.

> her and his own rebellious sailors by the sound of his harp. The sailors fled upon the other ship, and Forgael and the woman drifted on alone following the birds, awaiting death and what comes after, or some mysterious transformation of the flesh, an embodiment of every lover's dream.[1]

Whether the perfect state is located definitely in death or in life, Ellmann remarks, is typically left unsettled.[2] An additional bit of information, written "for the performance of the play of July 9, 1905," supplements the above:

> The main story expresses the desire for a perfect and eternal union that comes to all lovers, the desire of Love to 'drown in its own shadow.' But it has also other meanings. Forgael seeks death; Dectora has always sought life; and in some way the uniting of her vivid force with his abyss-seeking desire for the waters of Death makes a perfect humanity. Of course, in another sense, these two are simply man and woman, the reason and the will, as Swedenborg puts it.
>
> The second flaming up of the harp may mean the coming of a more supernatural passion, when Dectora accepts the death-desiring destiny. Yet in one sense, and precisely because she accepts it, this destiny is not death; for she, the living will, accompanies Forgael, the mind, through the gates of the unknown world. Perhaps it is a mystical interpretation of the resurrection of the body.[3]

With these two summaries Professor Ellmann proceeds to explain other symbols in the play. Essentially he suggests that Yeats's "opposites," on a symbolic level, achieve a unity or a "reconciliation," such that both death and life are placed in relation "to some kind of transmutative fusion of the two":

> These hints will bring us closer to the intent of the symbolism. Even the stage setting is symbolic. It shows the deck of a galley, with a sail which has 'a conventional pattern' of three rows of hounds, 'the first dark, the second red, and the third white with red ears.' In the programme note, Yeats

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[1] Identity, pp. 80-81.

[2] Ibid., p. 81.

[3] Ibid.

> offers the suggestion that these may 'correspond to the Tamas, Rajas, and Sattva qualities of the Vedanta philosophy, or to the three colours of the Alchemists.' With the aid of Max Muller, who was probably the main source of Yeats's early knowledge of Vedanta, the passage may be glossed as meaning that the hounds symbolize thesis, antithesis, and reconciliation. As Muller puts it, 'Tension between these qualities produces activity and struggle; equilibrium leads to temporary or final rest.' In later life Yeats identified Tamas as darkness and exhaustion, Rajas as activity and passion, Sattva as brightness and wisdom. The three hounds signify, in terms of the play, Forgael's death-wish, Dectora's life-wish, and their fusion in 'some mysterious transformation of the flesh.' Yeats chooses hounds for his symbols to suggest pursuit, and their colours reflect their qualities—the dark being related to death, the red to life and passion, and the white with red ears to some kind of transmutative fusion of the two.[1]

In a last note on The Shadowy Waters, Professor Ellmann points out a few of the "symbols of reconciliation":

> The Shadowy Waters carries its symbolic involutions still further. Since hero and heroine have opposite longings, they respond oppositely to one another. As Dectora falls in love with Forgael, her heart is said to grow young, his to grow old. As their warring hearts and opposite desires are joined, symbols of reconciliation appear on the scene. The arrow at last succeeds in piercing the red hound's heart, and Dectora imagines that she sees apple blossoms over a stream. Such blossoms, Yeats makes plain in an occult diary kept while he was writing his poetic play, 'are symbols of dawn and of air and of the earth and of resurrection in my system and in the poem.' A wood of precious stones has also a symbolical meaning, according to Yeats's note; the stones 'are perhaps emotions made eternal by their own perfection'; and the first draft of his Autobiographies gives corroborative evidence: 'I thought we /Maud Gonne and himself/ became one in a world of emotion eternalized by its own intensity and purity, and this would have for its symbol precious stones.'[2]

The "responding oppositely" to a person, as will be seen, is used in a different fashion in The King's Threshold.

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[1] Identity, pp. 81-82.

[2] Ibid., p. 83.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS AND A TRIAD OF COLORS

Every critic who writes of Yeats must sooner or later wade through a luxuriant undergrowth of occultism. Following this path or that, one may nevertheless perceive that all is not mystery or aimless wandering. Certain symbols such as the tree, the bird, the ocean, and many others have the potential of being both occult and traditional. The symbol with a multiple meaning may on the one hand suggest the "large elementals"—the sky, the ocean, the journey, the return of the seasons—and also add the secretive meanings of occultism. Yeats's "great water plant"—or so he evidently viewed anima mundi during the middle period[1]—was used in this way. As the series of symbolic meanings begins to evolve into a pattern (the "procession") in the heroic plays, the "water plant," in the form of something "upright" (usually a tower or a tree), is made to serve also as the symbolic "Centre."

Yeats's allusions to certain colors in the heroic plays suggest his continuing experimentation with multiple meaning. Professor Ellmann pointed out in The Shadowy Waters the presence of the triad red, black, and white-and-red. These colors, in this order, are most noticeable in On Baile's Strand. In a final scene the blood from Cuchulain's sword that is wiped on the white feathers of the fowl suggests that once again

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[1] In Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1918) Yeats attempts to express his conception of the Great Memory with images borrowed from the poetry of Edmund Spenser. Professor Melchiori suggests that the reference in the following lines is to Spenser's Garden of Adonis: "'I [Yeats] think of Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden where it [a logical process or a series of related images] spreads through allotted growth like a great water plant or branches more fragrantly in the air.'" Quoted by Melchiori, p. 30.

a "reconciliation" of sorts has taken place. In The King's Threshold this particular series is not prominent, although at the "Centre"—the Tree of Life in Seanchan's dream—the fruit that is eaten, supposedly apples, does suggest the inner white and the outer red. If the allusion seems a bit vague, Fedelm makes the point quite clear when she says suggestively a few lines later: "I'll dip this piece of bread into the wine, / For that will make you stronger for the journey."[1]

In Deirdre the white-and-red in association with a symbolic "Centre" occurs twice, perhaps for emphasis. In the song of the Musicians[2] the gannets (white) and a blossoming apple-stem (red) are singled out along with a tower (the first emergence, so to speak, of a "Centre"). In the last scene, Deirdre's suicide (suggesting red blood and white skin) occurs at the second "Centre" (only to the worldly intellect is it "second": it is an open grave that holds the dead body of Naoise).

Central to the symbolic intent of the heroic plays, therefore, is the ever-recurrent suggestion that a cosmic Principle lies always beneath the surface of things. Communication in the world is primarily in terms of power (and perhaps without an understanding of "real" power). People view each other from islands, without thought of the greater "reality" of the mainland. The islands, perhaps, symbolize abstraction and are proof that the mainland—even such a concept as this—is mere fiction. Those who believe otherwise do best to play the game and keep their thoughts to themselves.

The trait to strive for in such a world is "aloofness," which in

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[1] Plays, p. 90.

[2] Ibid., p. 116.

itself denotes a certain passion for an ideal. Within the inner-self the life of the soul or of the mind then becomes dominant. It is in fact the only real entity worth speaking of; when all conflict is over only it will remain. It remains, possibly, because it develops from a "still" point in time, a memory of something that denotes both origin and destiny. Eventually, for the passionate soul, it becomes "reality"—a way of journeying toward the "Centre" of things. In the heroic plays the ritual of the soul is enacted symbolically.

In The King's Threshold the "bird in the pool" image suggests that Seanchan's individual consciousness is committed to something outside himself. In each successive image the "Centre" tends to enlarge, until the symbolic tree itself is recalled by Seanchan. The world is finally rejected, the body dies, and the individual memory enters the formlessness of "reality." The imaginative "Centre" in On Baile's Strand is suggested by the "chicken in the pot." The fowl is eaten at the last by a Blind Man, symbolically hinting at the death of the body and the departure of the soul. In terms of Yeats's "opposites," it is seen that as the fowl is taken from the cauldron so also is the soul of Cuchulain delivered to the waves. Father and son thus find deliverance from a world that has pitted them against each other. The "wild bird in a cage" suggests once again in the third play, Deirdre, that a symbolic "Centre" is being fashioned. The "room" and the "grave" hint at the "rich nought" of the "Centre." At the end of the play Deirdre and Naoise "escape" into one of Yeats's "cyclic" worlds.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD

The opening scene of The King's Threshold shows the bard Seanchan

lying on the steps before the palace of King Guaire at Gort. The King welcomes a pupil of Seanchan and explains the cause of Seanchan's hunger strike. His opening lines hint that there is a dichotomy in art, or "two kinds of Music: the one kind / Being like a woman, the other like a man."[1] The division is stated matter-of-factly; yet, unaware, a reference to nature's opposites—symbolized by silver and gold—slips into his speech.

The Oldest Pupil, won over by Guaire's arguments temporarily, asks Seanchan to give up his protest. The poet merely answers by recounting a dream, for it is on this plane that he would have his pupil focus his attention. The next few lines then suggest symbolically that Seanchan's individual consciousness is in a "lunar phase," or that the "ritual of passion" is now in tune with a "dream world." The overt implication is that the poet is indeed on the King's (or rather "reality's") threshold:

> Oldest Pupil.
> ...The hunger of the crane, that starves himself
> At the full moon because he is afraid
> Of his own shadow and the glittering water,
> Seems to me little more fantastical
> Than this of yours.
> Seanchan. Why, that's the very truth.
> It is as though the moon changed everything—
> Myself and all that I can hear and see;
> For when the heavy body has grown weak,
> There's nothing that can tether the wild mind
> That, being moonstruck and fantastical,
> Goes where it fancies.[1]

In the succeeding exchange between the poet and his pupils, Seanchan tries to place his art in a larger perspective, as something that "God gave to men before He gave them wheat."[2] The Oldest Pupil at this point raises a question. Why, he asks, does poetry then need defending?

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[1] Plays, pp. 72-73.

[2] Ibid., p. 74.

Seanchan's answer is not too clear; he refers in vague tones to the future. His voice rises to an ecstatic pitch; he prophesies of the coming "joy":

> I would have all know that when all falls
> In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,
> Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
> The victim's joy among the holy flame,
> God's laughter at the shattering of the world.
> And now that joy laughs out, and weeps and burns
> On these bare steps.[1]

Seanchan as the "Mask," the defender of his art in the world, thus proclaims his task of building, through revelation and protest, the "golden cradle" so that his special kind of art may be preserved.

The episodes that follow in the play show the bard in the role he must play. His poetic utterances defend deity and the inevitable cosmic change that must, in the end, make "all things vanish away." "I have heard, /" Seanchan says, "Murmurs that are the ending of all sound. / I am out of life."[2] The "Centre," to which Seanchan's inner-self gradually awakens, at this point, appears as a state of blessedness removed, "The images of them that weave a dance / By the four rivers in the mountain garden."[3]

When the Monk arrives on the scene the symbolic reference to the "Centre" becomes clearer and more immediate. Seanchan uses the image of a "drowsy" King listening to the chirping of a bird after the table has been cleared. The language, as a part of a dramatic exchange, merely points out that the state religion has become a hireling of the King.

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[1] Plays, p. 75.

[2] Ibid., p. 82.

[3] Ibid., p. 83.

The "drowsy" King and the bird that keeps him awake, however, suggest a deeper parallel. If not for the singing, it is implied, there would essentially be no kingdom, for it is the one of the Many at the rim of the Wheel (the singing bird in this instance) which in itself indicates the existence of the One (the King who is thus awake). It is the King, on the other hand, who has given the bird its voice. The one cannot exist without the other (cognitively). The following passage, then, suggests in typically brief and cryptic language the concept of the Wheel:

> Seanchan.
> Stoop down, for I would whisper it in your ear.
> Has that wild God of yours, that was so wild
> When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,
> Grown any tamer? He gave you all much trouble.
> Monk.
> Let go my habit!
> Seanchan. Have you persuaded him
> To chirp between two dishes when the King
> Sits down to table?
> Monk. Let go my habit, sir!
> Seanchan.
> And maybe he has learned to sing quite softly
> Because loud singing would disturb the King,
> Who is sitting drowsily among his friends
> After the table has been cleared....[1]

Perhaps the most striking commentary on these lines is provided by Yeats himself. A kingdom is like a Wheel; at the center one finds the "drowsy Emperor." If he should sleep, it would indeed be "emptiness" at the "Centre." Nevertheless, all art, ideally, pays homage to the One:

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enameling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.[2]

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[1] Plays, p. 85.

[2] "Sailing to Byzantium," Poems, p. 192.

In The King's Threshold the bird is thought to be perched on the King's finger. Nevertheless, what is offered in both poem and play is a "fragment" of an idea.

The fusion of ideas in the poem—where the "golden bough" suggests a ray of sunlight, as well as the title of Frazer's book (hence "inherited subject matter")—is also a clue to the dominant (that is, analyzable dominant) "Centre" in The King's Threshold. The colors that fuse, or at least are closely juxtaposed, are, in the play, white-and-red. Fedelm, the poet's betrothed, offers Seanchan a life of ease if he will give up the hunger strike. The offer implies a rejection of the One and an acceptance of the "flux" of life—the Many—for she says that there are numerous beds, suggesting thus the various "cradles" or phases of the moon:

> Come with me now...
> For I have a great room that's full of beds
> I can make ready; and there is a smooth lawn
> Where they can play at hurley and sing poems
> Under an apple-tree.[1]

The "apple-tree," of course, causes Seanchan to remember another "tree":

> Seanchan. I know that place:
> An apple-tree, and a smooth level lawn
> Where the young men can sway their hurley sticks.
> *[sings]*
> The four rivers that run there,
> Through well-mown level ground,
> Have come out of a blessed well
> That is all bound and wound
> By the great roots of an apple
> And all the fowls of the air
> Have gathered in the wide branches
> And keep singing there.
> Fedelm.
> No, there are not four rivers, and those rhymes
> Praise Adam's paradise.
> Seanchan. I can remember now,
> It's out of a poem I made long ago
> About the Garden in the East of the World,

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[1] Plays, p. 89.

> And how spirits in the images of birds
> Crowd in the branches of old Adam's crab-tree.
> They come before me now, and dig in the fruit
> With so much gluttony, and are so drunk
> With that harsh wholesome savour, that their feathers
> Are clinging one to another with the juice.
> But you would lead me to some friendly place,
> And I would go there quickly,
> . . . . . .
> Fedelm.
> I'll drip this piece of bread into the wine,
> For that will make you stronger for the journey.[1]

The theme of the "Centre" has, by a bold, rhythmic passage, moved to the foreground. It is not the final "Centre," however. Seanchan's vision is better understood by referring to a passage in the Zelator Grade of the Golden Dawn "telling of man's bliss, fall into matter, and slow return":

> 'And tetragrammaton placed Kerubim at the East of the Garden of Eden and a Flaming Sword which turned ever was to keep the Path of the Tree of Life, for He had created Nature that Man, being cast out of Eden, may not fall into the Void. He has bound Man with the Stars as with a chain. He allures him with Scattered Fragments of the Divine Body in bird and beast and flower, and He laments over him in the Wind and in the Sea and in the birds. When the times are ended, He will call the Kerubim from the East of the Garden, and all shall be consumed and become Infinite and Holy.'[2]

The kinship that is suggested here between man and the stars occurs also as a part of Seanchan's poetic vision. In rather Nietzschean tones, Seanchan speaks of the union of opposites and the "mightier race" that will come:

> I lay awake:
> There had come a frenzy into the light of the stars,
> And they were coming nearer, and I knew
> All in a minute they were about to marry
> Clods out upon the ploughlands, to beget
> A mightier race than any that has been.[3]

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[1] Plays, pp. 89-90.

[2] Quoted by Moore, p. 144.

[3] Plays, p. 89.

After Seanchan's vision of the "tree," then, his delirium increases and his body weakens. The King, in one last effort, urges him to eat. The unrepentant bard addresses his pupils—now as adamant as he in their defiance of the King—in words that contain standard Biblical references, as well as the deeper strain of occult meaning. There is, in fact, in Seanchan's last speech a rather strange play on opposite meanings. The poet says, for instance, "The man that dies has the chief part in the story."[1] The inference, if stated in terms of Yeats's opposites, is that the "soul that lives" has also the least part in the "story." The moon, in terms of the "mere story," is leperous—that is, wholly misleading if seen through worldly eyes. Only after the body has become "husk" or an empty shell may one see that it is the very opposite. Therefore, Seanchan's last words are "Dead faces laugh." In the speech that follows it will be noted that Seanchan begins with a paraphrase of Christ's words as he looked out over Jerusalem.[2] The city which is here indirectly suggested is, in terms of Yeats's occultism, a symbol of the "fifth element...or final harmony"—that is, "reality":[3]

> O my chicks, my chicks!
> That I have nourished underneath my wings
> And fed upon my soul. /He rises and walks down steps.
> I need no help.
> He needs no help that joy has lifted up
> Like some miraculous beast out of Ezekiel.
> The man that dies has the chief part in the story,
> And I will mock and mock that image yonder,
> That evil picture in the sky—no, no!
> I have all my strength again, I will outface it.
> O, look upon the moon that's standing there
> In the blue daylight—take note of the complexion,

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[1] Plays, p. 93.

[2] See Matt. 23:37 and Luke 13:34.

[3] Supra, p. 85 of this study.

Because it is the white of leprosy
And the contagion that afflicts mankind
Falls from the moon. When I and these are dead
We should be carried to some windy hill
To lie there with uncovered face awhile
That mankind and that leper there may know
Dead faces laugh. /He falls and then half rises.
King! King! Dead faces laugh. /He dies.[1]

The lunar color—silver—comes at the conclusion of the play in the words of the Youngest Pupil:

O silver trumpets, be you lifted up
And cry to the great race that is to come.
Long-throated swans upon the waves of time,
Sing loudly, for beyond the wall of the world
That race may hear our music and awake.[2]

The Many who sing, these lines seem to suggest symbolically, may yet give meaning to the "limitless One," who in the Upanishads is described as "He who awakes the world."[3] The theme of The King's Threshold is, nevertheless, "we perish into reality."

ON BAILE'S STRAND

An advance in Yeats's iconographic practice is noticeable in the tightly constructed play, On Baile's Strand. Cuchulain, the central figure of the play, is identified in Irish mythology as a "solar hero."[4] Originally associated with "the hound of Cu," Cuchulain is linked in On Baile's Strand with Yeats's pervasive bird imagery—in this instance a hawk. The alteration of traditional imagery suggests that the individual consciousness is to be symbolically exalted—Cuchulain's subjectivity—

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[1] Plays, p. 93.

[2] Ibid., p. 94.

[3] John B. Noss, Man's Religions (New York, 1963), p. 140.

[4] John Unterecker, "The Shaping Force in Yeats's Plays," Modern Drama, VII (December, 1964), p. 350.

while at the same time his role in the "mere story" is to become essentially that of a "Mask." The "solar hero," therefore, appears to be very much of the world. The tragic circumstances that surround this figure—the circumstances of which the "Mask" is wholly a part—is, therefore, all the more cruelly determined. The "story" rushes toward catastrophe; the "real" Cuchulain, on the symbolic level, escapes.

The main characters, it will be noted, are four in number. The occult view that all the elements present in nature are to shape the "story" is thus suggested. Yeats later refers to these four characters as "those combatants who turn the wheel of life."[1] The symbolic "Centre"—at least the first unobstrusive suggestion of such—is of primary interest here however. The "bird in the pool" image, it will be remembered, initiated the symbolic series pointed out in The King's Threshold. Such an image is also established in the opening passage of On Baile's Strand.

The Fool says, "You take the fowl out of my hands . . . and you put it into the big pot at the fire there."[2] The "cauldron," as Professor Ellmann explained, is associated "with moving images (presumably imagined)."[3] The "fire" in the Tattvas symbols corresponds to the color "red," symbolizing morning, youth, tension, music, energy. The "water" supposedly is to bring to mind the color "silver," hence the crescent shaped moon (Tattvas) and a premonition of the coming "peace," the coming "night," the future "silence." Anima Mundi, it is suggested, is astir.

It is quickly seen that as Conchubar and Cuchulain are opposed to

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[1]Quoted by Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 58.

[2]Plays, p. 162.

[3]Supra, p. 85 of this study.

each other as wise man and warrior, so also are their respective shadows or antitypes, the Blind Man and a Fool, who open the play. The latter two parody in cruder terms the larger conflict of the play. They squabble over a scrap of food and perhaps suggest by their actions and their talk that amorality or nihilism is the order of the day. On the symbolic level, however, their words suggest, usually, the very opposite of what they say. At the first, however, it is seen that the conflict of the play must be completed before the symbolic meaning of the "chicken in the pot" becomes clear:

> Blind Man. Hush, hush! It is not done yet.
> Fool. You said it was done to a turn.
> Blind Man. Did I, now? Well, it might be done, and not done. The wings might be white, but the legs might be red. The flesh might stick hard to the bones and not come away in the teeth. But, believe me, Fool, it will be well done before you put your teeth in it.[1]

As the play progresses the symbolic fowl becomes associated first with the young man from Aoife's country—described as having red hair—and secondly with Cuchulain. Aoife's country, the Blind Man makes clear, is in the North (hence a premonition of darkness, completeness, and the opposite of "solar" influence).[2] From the hints given, the auditor also understands that the young man is Cuchulain's son. Thus the individual consciousness that is the possible intent of the fowl as a symbol is also related to Cuchulain. The specific reference to this fact is made when Cuchulain enters and begins his argument with the High King. One line out of some seventeen establishes the link. Cuchulain says, "Are my shins speckled

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[1]Plays, p. 163.

[2]Ibid., p. 165.

with the heat of the fire?"[1] In this simple utterance the red legs of the fowl are brought to mind.

Reference is also made in this same passage to the "Garden in the East of the World." The phrase, at least in its vowels, is like a distant shout; yet, "East" is a masculine symbol of youth and fire, and "Garden" but suggests once again the anima mundi. Conchubar refers to the wildness of Cuchulain's blood—the red again.[2] And several passages later the identity of the "Mask"—suggestive of aristocratic privilege—is somewhat defined:

> I think myself most lucky that I leave
> No pallid ghost or mockery of a man
> To drift and mutter in the corridors
> Where I have laughed and sung.[3]

Conchubar, of course, discounts such a wild thought. He reminds Cuchulain of the hereditary line that must be safeguarded. The "story interest," in fact, is emphasized at this point with only scattered references to symbolic individuation. The "dream world," however, is not forgotten; as the conversation turns to love and the perspective comes to include a wild love affair that happened long ago, Cuchulain suddenly reflects pointedly upon his experience. In the world, he suggests, the contrary forces are such that one looks forward to little; the conflict of mere existence permits at most "A brief forgiveness between opposites":

> I never have known love but as a kiss
> In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce
> Of oil and water, candles and dark night,
> Hillside and hollow, the hot-footed sun

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[1] Plays, p. 167.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 168.

> And the cold, sliding, slippery-footed moon—
> A brief forgiveness between opposites
> That have been hatreds for three times the age
> Of this long-'stablished ground.[1]

The need for something more, something undetermined, in these lines, is a "mood" which has a faint echo in Cuchulain's expressed sentiments. Certainly it is difficult to distinguish between the "Mask" and the "Self" in such passages as these. One must keep in mind the lofty tones and, possibly, the iconographic intent. "To become impassive in the face of one's own remembered experience," Professor Helen Hennessy Vendler writes, "is the Yeatsian goal, not to repent and do otherwise."[2] It is in fact difficult to say what Yeats meant by repentance, unless it signifies the oblivion of the conscious mind. In a poem quoted elsewhere in this study, Yeats has the line, "Only the dead can be forgiven."[3] Nevertheless, Cuchulain's "remorse" offers a clue to the determinism present in On Baile's Strand. And as Cuchulain the "Mask" is also a part of the world's scheme of things, it is understandable that the "Mask" should be swallowed up by the world. Nevertheless, Cuchulain's inner-self rebels at the prospect of becoming the King's hireling:

> Nestlings of a high nest,
> Hawks that have followed me into the air
> And looked upon the sun, we'll out of this
> And sail upon the wind once more. This King
> Would have me take an oath to do his will,
> And having listened to his tune from morning,
> I will no more of it.[4]

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[1] Plays, p. 170.

[2] "Yeats's Changing Metaphors for the Otherworld," Modern Drama, VII (December, 1964), p. 309.

[3] Supra, p. 45 of this study.

[4] Plays, p. 170.

Cuchulain, however, does agree to take the oath, thus setting in motion the tragedy which will end in the death of his son and his own madness. The Sidhe—as guardians of what some call heroism, others anarchy—are exorcised by the women of the court:

> May this fire have driven out
> The Shape-Changers that can put
> Ruin on a great king's house
> Until all be ruinous....
> The women none can kiss and thrive,
> For they are but whirling wind....
> Bodies that can never tire
> Or grow kind, for they anoint
> All their bodies, joint by joint,
> With a miracle-working juice
> That is made out of the grease
> Of the ungoverned unicorn....
> Those wild hands that have embraced
> All his body can but shove
> At the burning wheel of love
> Till the side of hate comes up.[1]

The dominant "Centre" of the play is here suggested as the Kings kneel in a semicircle before two of the women of the chorus and Cuchulain. In Yeats's Irish Mysteries, it will be remembered, such a scene was termed the "entrance into the formless."[2] The flame into which Cuchulain thrusts his sword represents the One (microcosmically), the participants the Many. Off stage, the Blind Man, as we find out later, now decides to eat the fowl himself.

The pace of the dramatic action quickens from this point on. Cuchulain encounters his son. One of the women of the chorus cries out, "I have seen Cuchulain's roof-tree / Leap into fire, and the walls split and blacken."[3] The dark night of the soul is perhaps suggested.

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[1] Plays, pp. 171-172.

[2] Supra, p. 39 of this study.

[3] Plays, p. 178.

Next the Fool and the Blind Man re-enter. Symbolically their words indicate that the "pattern" is now complete:

> Fool. You have eaten it, you have eaten it!
> You have left me nothing but the bones.
> . . . . . .
> Blind Man. What would have happened to you but for me, and you without your wits? If I did not take care of you, what would you do for food and warmth?
> Fool. You take care of me? You stay safe, and send me into every kind of danger. You sent me down the cliff for gulls' eggs while you warmed your blind eyes in the sun; and then you ate all that were good for food. You left me the eggs that were neither egg nor bird.[1]

The final harmony, whose figure is "ovoid" in the Tattvas symbols, is here suggested. The paradoxical last line leaves no doubt that an ulterior meaning is implied. It only remains to dispose of the bones.

At this point Cuchulain enters and listens to the two quarreling. The Blind Man again refers to the final phase symbolically:

> Where would he /the Fool/ be but for me? I must be always thinking—thinking to get food for the two of us, and when we've got it, if the moon is at the full or the tide on the turn, he'll leave the rabbit in the snare till it is full of maggots, or let the trout slip back through his hand into the stream.[2]

The crescent moon at the opening of the play is here at the full. In Yeats's "system" the full or the dark of the moon denotes the absence of all life.[3] The "fish to water" image hints that a return to nature's Great Memory—the anima mundi—has been made. Cuchulain then proceeds

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[1] Plays, p. 178.

[2] Ibid., p. 179.

[3] See Yeats's poem, "The Phases of the Moon," Poems, p. 161.

> Robartes. Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon
> The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
> Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
> The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:
> For there's no human life at the full or the dark.

to wipe the blood from his sword on the feathers nearby. He then learns from the Blind Man that he has killed his own son. Silence—of a terrifying kind—ensues. In an insane rage Cuchulain rushes down to the sea and begins fighting the waves. The bones, symbolically, are disposed of at last. The theme of the play is "we perish into reality."

DEIRDRE

A definition of this last play in the "grand traditional manner," as Joseph Hone phrases it, is suggested by a remark that Yeats aimed at the central figure, Deirdre—"a wild bird in a cage."[1] Deceptively simple, the remark causes Professor Ure to write, "Her last phase . . . is certainly not a phase of pure and almost depersonalized grief, like that of Synge's heroine /in Deirdre of the Sorrows/."[2] The problem connected with character portrayal that Professor Ure raises has been indicated elsewhere in this study.[3] By contrast, however, Yeats's comment tends to solve a problem for anyone who tries to gauge the extent of the symbolic meaning in this play. The author therefore suggests that one finds here the "bird in the pool" image of the two preceding plays, The King's Threshold and On Baile's Strand, cast simply in another mold. The "Nothingness" at the "Centre," surrounded in this image by the wires of a cage (the Many), finds its symbolic counterparts in Deirdre as the "room" and the "grave." Deirdre, one might note, is throughout the play first in one and then the other. "An empty house upon the journey's

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[1] Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright (New York, 1963), p. 56.

[2] Ibid., p. 57.

[3] Supra, pp. 70-71 of this study.

end!" she says.[1] It is, significantly, a guest-house near the seashore, referred to in the opening lines of the play. In such references one tends to think of the whole island kingdom of Britain and Ireland set in the midst of the sea. Nevertheless, the imagery is seen even on a microcosmic plane when Deirdre speaks of the "house of ivory":

> O Mover of the stars
> That made this delicate house of ivory,
> And made my soul its mistress, keep it safe![2]

The setting thus is symbolic, for outside the guest-house Conchubar's silent army, a hundred strong beneath each of the great oak trees, awaits.[3]

The bridal chamber that the lustful Conchubar is readying for Deirdre is repeatedly mentioned. The allusion, seemingly, is to a richly ornamented bird cage: ". . . embroideries / To hang upon the wall, or new-mown rushes / To strew upon the floors. . . ."[4] Conchubar's intent, it is clear, is a very worldly one. Deirdre, therefore, has the choice of giving up her idealism or of remaining true to her inner-self.

The story and its outcome, consequently, is suggested by the conversation between Fergus and the Musicians:

> Come now, a verse
> Of some old time not worth remembering,
> And all the lovlier because a bubble.
> Begin, begin, of some old king and queen,
> Of Lugaidh Redstripe or another; no, not him,
> He and his lady perished wretchedly.[5]

The hint that all is not as clear-cut as these lines seem to imply is

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[1] Plays, p. 118.

[2] Ibid., p. 120.

[3] Ibid., p. 124.

[4] Ibid., p. 113.

[5] Ibid., pp. 115-116.

given in a brief passage immediately preceding the above. Fergus extolls Conchubar's fame, but suggests, symbolically, that he may be getting more than he has bargained for:

> Conchubar's fame
> Brings merchandise on every wind that blows.
> They may have brought him Libyan dragon-skin,
> Or the ivory of the fierce unicorn.[1]

Deirdre's opening lines in the play suggest that Conchubar's "merchandise," in this instance, is akin to a lion in sheep's clothing. The terms are essentially occult—a "fierce unicorn" (intense spirituality) in a "Libyan dragon-skin" (a worldly mask)—but the surface meaning is clear:

> It is my husband's will
> I show my trust in one that may be here
> Before the mind can call the colour up.
> My husband took these rubies from a king
> Of Surracha that was so murderous
> He seemed all glittering dragon. Now wearing them
> Myself wars on myself, for I myself—
> That do my husband's will, yet fear to do it—
> Grow dragonish to myself.[2]

Deirdre, in other words, is preparing to assume the "Mask." The emotions that have grown cold—the "jewels" that she must wear—are for her predestined role in a world of conflict. The red of the rubies upon her bodily "house of ivory" suggest that the ritual of her soul has a cosmic setting not indicated by the "mere story."

Deirdre, of course, rebels at a life of pretense. Naoise explains: "She has the heart of the wild birds that fear / The net of the fowler or the wicker cage."[3] Being born in a "mountainous place," like the eagle,

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[1] Plays, p. 115.

[2] Ibid., p. 117.

[3] Ibid., p. 121.

she knows, significantly, "past wrong forgotten" and a love that is not subject to change. Thus, like Cuchulain, she makes an effort to define herself:

> Were we not born to wander?
> These jewels have been reaped by the innocent sword
> Upon a mountain, and a mountain bred me;
> But who can tell what change can come to love
> Among the valleys? I speak no falsehood now.
> Away to windy summits, and there mock
> The night-jar and the valley-keeping bird![1]

After Deirdre has been informed that the house is surrounded, however, she prepares herself for the worst.

The lines much admired by Professor Bowra (and condemned by Professor Stewart) are spoken at this point. The night of the soul, it is symbolically suggested, is near:

> And praise the double sunset, for naught's lacking
> But a good end to the long, cloudy day.[2]

The torches then are lit in the sconces; there is a growing sense of solitude and loneliness. The Musicians sing. Deirdre speaks to Naoise of "Imperishable things":

> Bend and kiss me now,
> For it may be the last before our death.
> And when that's over, we'll be different;
> Imperishable things, a cloud or a fire.[3]

Yet, "hollow night's above,"[4] Naoise cries out to her later when confronted with his own death. The part that Deirdre has to play is now in earnest. Naoise is killed. Deirdre contrives to see him once more.

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[1] Plays, p. 122.

[2] Ibid., p. 125.

[3] Ibid., p. 126.

[4] Ibid., p. 129.

In her last lines Deirdre expresses joy and shows that she has made her choice:

> Now strike the wire, and sing to it a while,
> Knowing that all is happy, and that you know
> Within what bride-bed I shall lie this night,
> And by what man, and lie close up to him,
> For the bed's narrow, and there outsleep the cockcrow.[1]

After these lines Deirdre kills herself. The First Musician says, "Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed."[2] The stage directions note that the house should now be filled with the glare of torches. Fergus says, "King, she is dead; but lay no hand upon her. / What's this but empty cage and tangled wire, / Now the bird's gone?"[3] Throughout the play the explicit outreach of symbols had been directed to this moment of "stillness." Beyond the event is one of Yeats's fading worlds. The "Centre" as a passageway, symbolized by the grave, has opened up to receive its own. Time, momentarily, has stopped. The theme of the play, once again, is "we perish into reality."

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[1] Plays, p. 133.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The heroic plays of William Butler Yeats are perhaps only metaphorically accessible to the intellect in the final analysis. As a part of The King's Threshold, On Baile's Strand, and Deirdre one finds that the seemingly casual drift of images and symbols tends to create, perhaps not fully, an imaginative "picture" world, a world that is assuredly part motion and part stillness, a world with geometrical outlines (the Wheel, the sphere), as well as its allowable but perhaps mysterious energy "quotion" (the ritual of ascent and of individuation). Does such an art center mainly on the imagination? The non-mystic at least will always think so. But is it possible to imagine that one is now turned toward the light and is for the first time at the mouth of Plato's cave, the shadowy world of false assumptions far behind? Art in general is capable of this effect, this "reality." For the most part it is earth-bound, a picture world abstracted from constant change, from Heraclitus' "flux." The heroic plays, however, because of faulty structure, remain somehow on the margin of such effectiveness.

Compared to such a view, the "theorizing" mentioned by Professor Ellmann suggests that the "problem" of the heroic plays is to be grasped entirely by the intellect (using imagination?). It is a bit late to be defining problems; but, even here, it helps with one final query about the heroic plays. One asks, can the most significant value of these plays be known? The author's answer is "only partially." To give more

of an answer than this, Ellmann's assumed "problem" must be stated. The problem, in this instance, is essentially the intellectualization of terms at the vital center of the heroic plays such that they yield familiar values, or, in the light of anthropomorphism, something at least of ourselves. The recognition of the latter, of course, is but a step removed from classifying Yeats as a humanist. In this light the Delphic inscription "Know thyself" (individuation) was suggested as a possible aspect of Yeats's aesthetic formula, a "unity between opposites." On an ethical plane, it may be noted, the latter phrase merely indicates that between love and hate, happiness and suffering there is a common ground.

Is the common ground then "joy" or "blessedness"? Yeats perhaps means both when he uses the former word. It cannot be shown, however, that suffering or hate has anything to do with any meaning of "joy." The dualism of the heroic plays, therefore, remains, and the aesthetic formula, in this respect, begins to topple. On the other hand it is possible to couple "joy" with the phrase "Know thyself." The resultant phrase, generalized, would read roughly a "joy in speculation." If it were not for the later poetry, such probing would be a clutching at straws. To "Know thyself," it is clear, is a sure prelude to much else. At least it is the "much else" that is the only tenable ground. And of such is the significant feature, this author believes, of "gaiety" in the following lines from "Lapis Lazuli":

> Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
> Are carved in lapis lazuli,
> Over them flies a long-legged bird,
> A symbol of longevity;
> The third, doubtless a serving-man,
> Carries a musical instrument.
> Every discoloration of the stone,
> Every accidental crack or dent,
> Seems a water-course or an avalanche,

> Or lofty slope where it still snows
> Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
> Sweetens the little half-way house
> Those Chinamen climb toward, and I
> Delight to imagine them seated there;
> There, on the mountain and the sky,
> On all the tragic scene they stare.
> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.
> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.[1]

Their "half-way house" is perhaps, in one of its various guises, Yeats's aesthetic formula, a principle, the poem seems to say, which is only reached by a leap of the imagination ("I / Delight to imagine them seated there").

Yet, let it be said finally that in the heroic plays there are only pale reflections of what later was to become polished works of art. Yeats's "mirror world," in the later poetics, achieves a unity to which, on the other hand, the heroic plays offer much, the most important of which, possibly, was a skeletal outline of the possibilities of symbolism. As such, perhaps, the heroic plays are seen as the necessary work of a poet. It does not in the least detract from their interest. The "gaiety" of the two Chinese mystics has "dignity," whereas the "joy" of the heroic plays has only aristocratic pride. And in the last analysis the author suggests that the heroic plays are as much "pre-philosophy" as they are "pre-drama." They contain not logical ideas to be developed but, significantly perhaps, much contemplative thought. The action—and it is difficult to apply such a word—is mainly of the ritualistic kind. For the events are determined from the very start, and the object is to reveal or uncover and not to develop a point of view. Instead of a language of

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[1] Poems, pp. 292-293.

communication, one discovers in retrospect the language of communion. In the heroic plays, homage is done to yesterday and its myths, to the "big house" of the Irish countryside, to kings and warriors, to lost causes and past love affairs, to a series of fading worlds, in fact—and it is doubtful that such things, when they are lost from sight, recede into the past or, paradoxically, into the future. For are not such things, in art at least, a part of the process of individuation? "'I always feel,'" Yeats says of one of his last plays, "'that my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith.'"[1] Yet, life on the Great Wheel is such that nothing is really lost, nothing dispensable. One's only assurance is that the generic "birds" that take flight in these plays do in fact enter the next world—the world proper of the twentieth-century. Their aviary is the later poetics, and their world appears to be the world of the Many. No one, perhaps, can prove otherwise.

What results in the heroic plays, then, is possibly a psychological attitude or merely an impoverished theme that states "we perish into reality." Since the "Self" is largely an unknown, silence is its best defense. Nevertheless, the author suggests that the bird symbols and the way they are used in the heroic plays explain much more than any interpretation based solely on the dramatic conflict. In The King's Threshold the individual consciousness is symbolically represented by the crane. The circumstances of Seanchan's life are but a foil to the more significant ritual of the soul. The mundane world, which is but a shadowy one, is rejected, the body dies, and the individual memory enters the formlessness of "reality."

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[1]Quoted by Moore, p. 329.

The symbolic pattern is especially close-knit in On Baile's Strand. The imaginative "Centre" is suggested by the fowl in the pot, representing the inner-self or both father and son. The ritual of the soul is finished when it is perceived that there is only "emptiness" at the "Centre."

A series of related symbols is used with good effect in Deirdre. The "wild bird in a cage" is used as a frame of reference throughout the play. The "rich nought" of the "Centre" is more imaginatively suggested by the use of an open grave. An ideal love, but in another world, is hinted at when the First Musician says, "Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed." The theme of all three plays, the author suggests, is "we perish into reality."

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