

STILLNESS AND DANCE

—THE PARADOX OF ART IN W. B. YEATS—

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I. INTRODUCTORY

*A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew ;
And half is half and yet all the scene.*

(from "Vacillation")

It is often stated among readers and critics that Yeats was anti-scientific and anti-social, and that he lived in a legendary and supernatural dream-world. In pursuit of the esoteric wisdom in the world of his own imagination, Yeats seems to have isolated himself from the moving world of the twentieth century. It is also pointed out, however, that in spite of his tendency to occultism Yeats was not a mere dreamer—that although his poetic career started as one of the last figures of Victorian romanticism, he was unique in his intent search for some solid objectivity that he thought existed in the world of reveries.¹ As Engelberg and other critics point out, Yeats suffered in seeking the equipoise between the life of contemplation and the life of action, between the life as a poet and the life as a man of the progressing world.² In the growing dis-

¹ As most critics point out, the atmosphere or the tone of writing changes greatly as Yeats grows maturer. The transitional point seems to be around 1903, when the poet was in the middle of his thirties. The works in consideration in this essay are those of the later years, from 1906 to the year before his death in 1939.

² Engelberg, Edward, *The Vast Design*, Univ. of Toronto, 1964; Daiches, David, *Poetry and the Modern World*, Univ. of Chicago, 1941; MacNeice, Louis, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1941; and F. R. Leavis's essay in *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. by Hall and Steinmann, Collier Books, New York, 1961.

crepancy between art and society in the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats realized it as his task to search for a form of art in which the personal and the objective elements are united. Paradoxically, however, his attempt for the solution of the conflict resulted in a highly symbolic system of ideas which appears to be concerned only with the world of personal imagination. And yet, when he seems to be most unscientific, he is in fact searching for some logical truth, though the logic may be of a different kind from what may be applied in practical sciences. Talking about the poet's rejection of the scientific mode of thinking, F. R. Leavis observes: "Indeed, his dealing with spiritualism, magic, theosophy, dream and trance were essentially an attempt to create an alternative science."¹

It may be admitted that Yeats had to return finally to the abstract world of vision for the possible solution of the problem set upon him. He knew that "the intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of *life* or of *the work*,"² and we cannot deny that he, as a poet, meant to choose the latter. Is not art itself, after all, something separate from other, more practical, human activities? Does not a work of art seem cold and solitary against the world of flesh and blood? To achieve a state of "unity of being" in the world of art seems to signify the separation from the external world and isolation into a lonely self-containment.

We cannot consider, however, the problem Yeats presents in his work simply as the dichotomy of the two values. The importance is rather in the interrelationship between them. At this point of argument we realize that the two contrasted concepts, "art" and "life," need to be analysed and clarified before we continue this generalized discussion. They cannot be taken simply as "visionary" and "actual" or "romantic" and "scientific." What seem to be contradictory on the literal level of meaning may be seen in correspondence on the symbolic level.³

¹ Hall, J. and Steinmann, M., eds., *op. cit.*, p. 154.

² From "The Choice". (The italics are mine.)

³ I use the word "art" because "poetry" or "poesy" does not seem broad enough to imply the whole body of Yeats's aesthetic vision. Yeats, indeed, does not talk only about poetry but about the visionary experience in general upon which all kinds of art are founded.

As we see in the quotation at the opening of this essay, the dual-phased reality which the poet calls the "unity of being" is symbolized by the two-sided tree of green and gold. The half of the tree is abounding with lush foliage, while the other half is going through transformation into something supernatural. Here we shall have to add another tree image—the image of a withered tree such as we see in the play, *At the Hawk's Well*. The tree, in green, gold, and withered grey, symbolizes life, art, and the physical sacrifice required of the artist. But we must be reminded that in Yeats those different elements cannot be considered in isolation. A tree is one of Yeats's favourite images as it symbolizes organic unity.

In the following parts of this essay I intend to discuss the problem outlined here through the analysis of Yeats's writings. Part II will deal mainly with the image of "artifice" as exemplified in the Byzantium poems, and in Part III the discussion will be concerned with the different levels of the meaning of "life" or "nature" such as we see in "Among School Children."

II. NATURE AND ART

*No matter what I said,
For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
Like everything that has the stain of blood,
A property of the living.*

(from "Blood and the Moon")

The longing for the dream world in the sorrow of human life, seen in such earlier lyrical poems as "The Stolen Child" or "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," grows in his later poems into a much severer pursuit of the abstract, intellectual essences that exist in the wandering shapes of beauty. The atmosphere of lingering twilight vanishes as the solid, sharp-cut images begin to appear in his work. Art comes to be seen as some detached being from the world of nature. At the same time the romantic, even aristocratic, feeling of solitude transforms itself into a tragic consciousness of human sacrifice required for the creation of art. As F. R.

Leavis says, "He exhibits for us the inner struggle of the nineteenth century mind in an heroic form—heroic, and because of the inevitable frustration and waste, tragic."¹

The contrast of nature and art, the human and the superhuman, appears in the two well-known poems on Byzantium. In "Sailing to Byzantium," the poet, as an inhabitant of the mortal world of senses, has sailed to Byzantium, the city of immortal art. To the poet old age seems to be a mere corruption unless the soul gradually purges off its external properties and approaches simplicity, transformed from the state of human complexity to the state of art. In the city of Byzantium he hopes to see the "monuments of unageing intellect," those images in which the transformation is seen perfected. He desires that he himself should be transmuted into the ancient goldsmith's handiwork. Like the Grecian urn of Keats, this form of beauty seems to Yeats to be standing "out of nature," out of the influence of time and the cycle of reincarnation. The living "birds in the trees" which appear in the first stanza are in the fourth stanza replaced by the metallic bird on a golden bough, and between those stanzas the poet presents the images of physical decay (stanza II) and of spiritual purgation (stanza III). The physical decay, "every tatter" that the poet makes in his "mortal dress," is considered as the human sacrifice given in the process of the consummation or art. The song of the ageing artist and the song of the metallic bird, seen in the second and the fourth stanzas, are also contrasted with the "sensual music" of the first stanza and thus suggest the different levels of the meaning of the word.

In "Byzantium" the poet stands on the side of the immortal city and watches the mortal beings come across the sea of life. There is a contrast again between the world of "blood-begotten spirits" and the world of "starlit or moonlit dome,"² and the latter seems to "disdain" the complexity of natural life. Compared with "Sailing to Byzantium" this poem expresses more intensely the dynamic tension between the

¹ Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

² "Starlit" and "moonlit" conditions of being correspond in *A Vision* to the phases 1 and 15, where no natural activity is possible.

opposite worlds. In the former poem the poet expresses his longing to be removed out of nature; to the poet the world of Byzantium is still a sort of remote ideal. But in the latter the emphasis is upon the agony of a spirit which is actually going through the process of purgation. On the cold marbles of the Emperor's pavement those "blood-begotten spirits" purge their moral existence away through dancing. Through the images of the purgatorial dance we imagine a human body, dancing round and round forgetting itself, transformed finally into the abstract and even geometrical shape of a gyre. The complexity of the imagery and content of the poems needs a much fuller analysis which is beyond the scope of the present essay.¹ Here let me simply state the fact that in the above two poems we see the struggle of the world of *becoming* into the world of *being*.² The unpurged spirits strive to be removed from the state of feverish movement to the state of cold stillness.

One of the characteristics of the Yeatsian imagery, which is seen in its representative form in the above two poems, is that of describing a work of art as something cold, solid and metallic. A stone, for example, often symbolizes the unchanging truth against the vicissitudes of human world. An example of this is seen in "Easter 1916," in which the poet meditates on the passing of time and sings of the people of his recollection:—

A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse splashes within it;
The long legged moor-hens dive,

¹ "Byzantium," indeed, deals not only with the contrast of the two worlds but with the intermixture of the two. There are not only two but three phases of problem suggested here by such trios as "image, man and shade" or "miracle, bird or golden handiwork." The poem deals with the intermeditate stage between the natural and the supernatural, which is defined as the world of shades, spirits or immaterial flames. The analysis of this point requires another discussion.

² Burke, Kenneth, "On Motivation in Yeats," in *The Permanence of Yeats*, pp. 224-237; and "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," *A Grammar of Motives*, New York, 1952, pp. 447-463.

And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

. . . England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

After the continuous beating of the three-stressed lines suggestive of the passing time, each stanza ends with the beautiful and grave lines: "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born." In the third stanza the ending lines are varied to: "Minute by minute they live: / The stone's in the midst of all." "A terrible beauty" and "the stone," in correspondence with each other in their implication, function together to signify the supernatural quality of beauty and its detachment from the world. The poet's vision of beauty is at once "terrible" like the ghostly flames on the marble floor, and rigid and objective like a stone.

The stone-like impersonality of the world of art, such as we see in the examples above, comes from essentially the same idea as his doctrine of the "mask" which he defines as the "anti-self." The following quotations will give a general idea of the doctrine. Yeats writes in his *Autobiographies*:

. . . as I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image, which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life.¹

As early as in 1906 the poet reflects on the growth of his own attitude

¹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London, Macmillan, 1966, p. 274.

in literary creation, and says that once he thought "of putting [his] very self into poetry, and had understood this as a representation of [his] own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential."¹ But as he grows maturer he finds out what he was really searching after:

Then one day I understood quite suddenly . . . that I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand. The more I tried to make my art deliberately beautiful, the more did I follow the opposite of myself.²

The "opposite of himself" is what he calls the Mask or Image, and it is the object of the artist's perpetual desire. "Though images appear to flow and drift," he writes in "Anima Mundi,"

it may be that we but change in our relation to them, now losing, now finding with the shifting of our minds; . . . those images may be hard to the right touch as 'pillars of crystal' and as solidly coloured as our own to the right eyes.³

The making of art, for Yeats, was not the expression of his own self but was the creation of his counter-self. The beauty or delight involved in the work of art, likewise, was not the result of human happiness but was the result of sorrow and agony. (The word "result" may be misleading; we might rather say that in order to gain the "mask" of his desire the poet has to give up his daily comfort in reciprocation.) In *Autobiographies*, for example, Yeats writes about Dante and Villon, and points out how, behind the loveliness expressed in the created work, those great poets had to suffer from the bitterness of their lives. They had to go through the agony, Yeats says, "that [they] might through passion become conjoint to their buried selves, turn all to Mask and Image, and so be phantoms in their own eyes."⁴ The following dialogue from "Ego Dominus Tuus" will give a further illustration of this idea:

¹ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, New York, Macmillan, 1961, p. 271.

² *Ibid.*

³ Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, New York, Macmillan, 1924, p. 517.

⁴ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 273.

Hic. Yet surely there are men who have made their art
Out of no tragic war, lovers of life,
Impulsive men that look for happiness
And sing when they have found it.

Ille. No, not sing,
For those that love the world serve it in action,
Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
And should they paint or write, still it is action;
A struggle of the fly in marmalade.
The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?

Hic. And yet,
No one denies to Keats love of the world;
Remember his deliberate happiness.

Ille. His art is happy, but who knows his mind?

In the poem above, as in "Sailing to Byzantium," the "singing" of the true artist is distinguished from the "singing" of the happy man. Even though a man of power and action, whose aim is to establish happiness of life, should sing of his love of the world, his song is only an imitative art and not a real creation.¹ The poet severely distinguishes "artist" from "rhetorician" and "sentimentalist." He says in "Anima Hominis":

[not a single] poet I have read of or heard of or met with [has] been a sentimentalist. The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self . . . comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality.²

For Yeats the denial of the personal self was not the act of self-deception. Neither was it the total renunciation of the human world. How-

¹ The kind of mask worn by a man of action is explained in *A Vision* as follows: "In the *primary* phases man must cease to desire *Mask* and *Image* by ceasing from self-expression, and substitute a motive of service for that of self-expression. Instead of the created *Mask* he has an imitative *Mask*; and when he recognizes this his *Mask* may become the historical norm, or an image of mankind." (From *A Vision*, Macmillan Paperbacks, New York, 1961, p. 84.)

² *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, p. 493.

ever dedicated he was to the world of art, the human life, spontaneous and natural, seemed to him to assert its value with the equal strength. He was in perpetual conflict between the two worlds which were both real to him, and this conflict often produces in his poetry a tone of bitter irony. In the following poem, "The Dolls," for instance, we feel a complex movement of a mind that cannot immediately accept the victory of art over the life of man:

A doll in the doll-maker's house
Looks at the cradle and bawls:
'That is an insult to us.'
But the oldest of all the dolls,
Who had seen, being kept for show,
Generations of his sort,
Out-cries the whole shelf: 'Although
There's not a man can report
Evil of this place,
The man and the woman bring
Hither, to our disgrace,
A noisy and filthy thing.'
Hearing him groan and stretch
The doll-maker's wife is aware
Her husband has heard the wretch,
And crouched by the arm of his chair,
She murmurs into his ear,
Head upon shoulder leant:
'My dear, my dear, O dear,
It was an accident.'

A doll, an image, endowed with the eternity of life, claims its superiority to the living child. The doll-maker's wife, being forced to stand between the two values, says to her husband that the childbirth was an accident. Seemingly, nature surrendered before the supernatural, but the bewilderment and ambivalence of a human heart is strangely vivid in the last several lines. The poem seems to signify the fact, at the same time, that human beings can never get out of the cycles of incarnation as long as they pursue ordinary happiness.

In the last song of *At the Hawk's Well* the poet questions ironically the meaning of praising "dry stones" and a "withered tree." Owing to the incantation of the mysterious Hawk Woman, Cuchulain loses

repose in his life. He is bewitched by the "unappeasable shadow" which, like the "unpurged images" of "Byzantium," desires to pass through purgation into the state of eternal rest. Were it not for this irresistible call, "he might have lived at his ease, / An old dog's head on his knees, / Among his children and friends." And the musician sings:

'The man that I praise,
Cries out the leafless tree,
'Has married and stays
By an old hearth, and he
On nought has set store
But children and dogs on the floor.
Who but an idiot would praise
A withered tree?'

Cuchulain sees that the old man, seeking for fifty years in vain to drink from the eternal well, has become as dry and decrepit as the withered tree standing by him. Soon the young Cuchulain himself may become like this old man. "Wisdom must live a bitter life," but why should a man choose wisdom rather than an innocent and natural life?

What were his life soon done!
Would he lose by that or win?
A mother that saw her son
Doubled over a speckled shin,
Cross-grained with ninety years,
Would cry, 'How little worth
Were all my hopes and fears
And the hard pain of his birth!'

Whether he loses or wins by this bitter life, whether such a life is worth his mother's pain of childbirth, the poet does not give an answer. All that we can say here is that the seeker's image is presented before us with the austerity and intensity of a tragedy.

Between the world of nature and the world of art, Yeats seems to have chosen the latter. "He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs."¹ The search for the counter-self, however, had it not been for the artist's desire to live in the greater

¹ "Anima Hominis," *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, p. 494.

“Self,”¹ would have fallen into sentimentalism or escapism. The lifelessness of a withered tree, the physical decay of old age, or the cold impersonality of a stone—those images would not have had such tragic bitterness and intensity if there had not been some great, comprehensive vision for the realization of which the poet dedicated himself. The poet’s self-denial, therefore, cannot be defined simply as asceticism. In his “Discoveries” the poet gives the distinction between the two kinds of asceticism—the asceticism of the saint and that of the creative writer:

The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himself—to the neglect of his own soul, alas!—with the soul of the world. . . . Those things that are permanent in the soul of the world, the great passions that trouble all and have but a brief recurring life of flower and seed in any man, are indeed renounced by the saint, who seeks not an eternal art, but his own eternity. The artist stands between the saint and the world of impermanent things. . . .²

The artist and the saint, according to *A Vision*, belong to almost opposite phases on the Great Wheel. The ascetic as a saint renounces the world totally, pleased to become, and to feel, nothing; but the artist, merging himself into the soul of the world, struggles to create the image of his desire. He wishes to be delivered from his own self, for only by doing so he is able to communicate with the universal humanity. The paradoxical fact is that in order to lose his individuality and to speak for the world, he has to be isolated from the world. To attain something objective and lasting, he has to turn back to his visionary experiences.

Louis MacNeice, in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, gives an interesting account of the two meanings of Yeats’s dream-world. He refers to the line, “In dreams begins responsibility,” which is the epigraph to *Responsibilities*, and points out the change of outlook that took place in the ageing poet. He says:

The bulk of his early poetry belonged to the dream-world; but that world was essentially irresponsible, implies a reversal or abnegation of the values of the physical world we live in. . . . Now the wheel has moved round; the dream-world is taken as a sanction of the world we live in, which latter for Yeats as for Plato is

¹ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 518. Yeats identifies the word with “Unity of Being” and also with Blake’s “Imagination.”

² *Essays and Introductions*, p. 286.

governed by eternal patterns outside itself. Yeats is now shaking free of the concept of transcendence; the relationship between the two worlds is not to be a one-sided one.¹

The "dream" in the above quoted epigraph, it seems to me, was the meeting place of the visionary and the intellectual. In it is founded his "system" which is highly symbolic. His dream-world can also be defined as the place where one encounters the "corrective consciousness," or in Yeats's own words, the "emotion of multitude." His regard for the ancestral people such as we see in the opening poem of *Responsibilities*, and his interest in traditional, legendary things which sometimes appears as a sort of cultural nationalism, are both based on his desire to come in contact with the souls of the ancients and thus grasp the truth existing in the "Great Memory." As regards the art of writing, he repudiates the tendency towards the singularity of expression especially when it is simply for the sake of being called "original." In "General Introduction to My Work" he discusses "originality" and says: "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a cloud, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing."² More than twenty years before this he wrote that all arts should be conservative, that "they are not radicals, and if they deny themselves to any it can only be to the *nouveau riche*, and if they have grown rebellious it can only be against something that is modern, something that is not simple."³ It was an unchanging stone in the stream of generations that the poet always wished to discover.

A work of art, once created, becomes a world to itself. And yet Yeats was fully aware that art should have its root in the physical world.

¹ MacNeice, Louis, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1941, p. 110.

Allen Tate, in his essay, "Yeats's Romanticism: Notes and Suggestions," discusses the two meanings of "myth." He observes that in earlier years Yeats was interested in the ancient myths or fables of Ireland, using them as the materials for his writings. But in later years, as the poet began to take interest in his "system," the myths or legends began to disappear from his work. His "system," however, was nothing but "putting *myth* back into philosophy." In this way Tate distinguishes between myth as fables and myth as the permanent symbol. *The Permanence of Yeats*, 103.

² *Essays and Introductions*, p. 522.

³ "Arts and Ideas," *Ibid.*, p. 350.

There was, in fact, "little separation between holy and common things"; any image, however lovely and unearthly, would not have value unless it speaks to the common people. He says that poetry must be the deduction from the common thought:

One of the means of loftiness, of marmorean stillness, has been the choice of strange and far-away places for the scenery of art, but this choice has grown bitter to me, and there are moments when I cannot believe in the reality of imaginations that are not inset with the minute life of long familiar things and symbols and places.¹

The same idea is seen in "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Leaving the poet as a "broken man" the created animals act on the stage. He wrought those images and characters out of old legendary themes and out of his own life experiences—Oisín, Cúchulainn, Countess Cathleen and his love Maud Gonne—but when they were consummated into a work of art, it was the dream itself—the aesthetic vision itself—that enchanted him. What took all his love was his "players and painted stage," those images of his own creation, and "not those things that they were emblems of." And yet he goes on to reflect:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

Though the ladder now seems to have gone, the physical and the imaginative worlds are organically related, feeding and consuming each other. The "tattered coat upon a stick," that husk-like image which the living body has deserted, has a ghostly and tragic effect because it implies the pain of begetting something beyond the limitation of the natural powers. It is the reconciliation, and not the renunciation, that the poet strives to attain, and without this fact the dynamic strength of the "Byzantium" images could not have existed. The following lines

¹ "Discoveries," *Essays and Introductions*, p. 296.

from David Daiches are pertinent to explain the nature of paradox in Yeats's creative process:

The poet has sailed to "the holy city of Byzantium," symbol of abstract intellect, of the "artifice of eternity" which is opposed to the changing natural world. Yet because the abstract intellect can construct the inclusive pattern which reconciles the opposites it becomes something more than simply one side of the contrast—it is also the means of getting rid of the contrast.¹

III. THE VISION OF REALITY

*And yet, and yet,
Is this my dream, or the truth?
(from "Men Improve with the Years")*

As we have seen Yeats often chooses youth and old age as the theme of his poetry. In "Sailing to Byzantium" the young live in the world of senses and of physical power, while the old pass into the world of wisdom and artifice. An inner transformation occurs in a person from the state of power to the state of wisdom, while his body is gradually changed from the lush green to the withered grey.

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;²
Now I may wither into the truth.
(“The Coming of Wisdom with Time”)

In another poem he says:

O heart, we are old;
The living beauty is for younger men:
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.
(from "The Living Beauty")

We have seen that "truth," though born of "living beauty," is incompatible with the latter. The "truth" which Yeats found in symbols

¹ Daiches, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

² The "sun" in his visionary philosophy is the symbol of the *primary* phases of life while the "moon" symbolizes the *antithetical* phases. The "sun" implies the full sway of human powers, contrary to the case of "moonlit dome" of "Byzantium."

and images was the “artifice of eternity” that “disdains all that man is.” Is truth for Yeats, then, something higher and more valuable than natural beauty? Has he found the final solution of the conflict in the golden bird of Byzantium?

It seems to me that what the poet calls “truth” exists in the moment in which the “living beauty” is captured and fixed. Art is above nature in the sense that it synthesizes nature’s diverse elements and thus transcends the casualness of their existence. Nevertheless, art, in its detachment from the world, always aspires to be received by a human soul and thus be reanimated into the condition of nature. The poet labours to create a mask of “marmorean stillness” but at the same time he aspires for the state of living beauty in which he sees the unconscious embodiment of “truth” he is so toilfully searching for. And sometimes he can hardly distinguish “truth” from “beauty.”

The following poem is entitled “Men Improve with the Years”:

I am worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady’s beauty
As though I had found in a book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years;
And yet, and yet,
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.

The poet, worn out with the toil in search for beauty, has become like a triton among the streams. The “weather-worn, marble triton,” suggests the worn out body of the artist and at the same time the marble like nature of the created art. The human passion of the artist has been

solidified into a stony body so that even a living form of beauty is seen as if it were a piece of art. The quiet gaze of the intellectual eyes, however, breaks in the last part of the poem into a passionate cry of longing for youth and the spontaneity of feeling. Which is the dream, or which is the truth, the intellectual or the natural beauty? Or else, the dream and the truth are the same thing after all? After the cry of the heightened emotion the poem ends with the repetition of the first three lines, suggesting the withdrawal of passion again into the state of detachment.

Though similar in the feeling of ambivalence to "The Dolls" discussed in the preceding section, "Men Improve with the Years" presents the problem of paradox in a clearer and more generalised form. The thesis-antithesis relationship of art and nature appears in a highly intricate form in "Among School Children" of which I am going to make an analysis at some length.

"Among School Children" opens with the portrait of the poet himself inspecting a classroom of schoolgirls as a "smiling public man." While watching the children perform their work, his mind floats into a reverie—he remembers the woman he loved, who once told him about her childhood. He looks at the school children thinking whether that woman once looked like one of those little girls. Then her youthful image comes to his mind as if she were a real living girl standing before him. After this brief moment of exaltation his mind goes back into reflection: he thinks of the change that took place within himself and also within the beloved girl. Her present image in his mind, though not of the blossoming youth any more, has the atmosphere of unearthly spirituality reminding the poet of some masterpieces of Renaissance art. The poet also had "pretty plumage" once in his youth, but now he is merely a "comfortable kind of old scarecrow," a spiritless old man who only smiles back to the innocent smiles of the children. The youthful lovers were once in the self-enclosed world of unity like the "yoke and white" of an egg, but their present forms show the contrast—the one has attained the artistic and even supernatural beauty, while the other has become the worn out remains of a body after the labour of creation. Here the poet seems to suggest the breaking of the primitive unity into

the dichotomy of man and art, the mortal and the immortal.

In the latter half of the poem the poet develops the theme in a more generalised discussion. The poet, as in *At the Hawk's Well*, questions what a young mother would think if she were to see her child after sixty years. Would her birthpangs be compensated by seeing her child become a "scarecrow" of an old man? Then he thinks of three Greek philosophers, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, who searched for truth through different ways of approach. By a very brief description of their characteristics Yeats suggests that Plato sought for truth in the world of abstract wisdom, Aristotle in the act of observing and working upon nature, and Pythagoras in his discovery of the cosmic harmony. But immediately after this comes again a "scarecrow" image—the philosophers, in pursuit of truth, have become like "old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird." The tattered scarecrow is the ultimate state of the sage about whom his poor mother had nourished many dreams.

In the last two stanzas the different spheres of truth show an intricate relationship to one another, now contrasted and now paralleled. A contrast is seen between the world of nuns and the world of mothers, the one worshipping the religious images which "keep a marble or bronze repose," and the other worshipping their own babies that "animate [their] reveries." The images which the nuns worship are not mortal like human babies; and yet Yeats says "they too break hearts." Just as a human child denies his mother's dream when he grows old, those marble images deny human comfort. The poet here seems to imply that even the images of religion and of art are not in themselves the ultimate manifestation of reality. Where, then, is the true "unity of being" to be found?

In the last half of the seventh stanza and the first half of the eighth stanza the poet presents the two worlds again—first the world of "Presences" and then the world of living power. The "Presences" to which the poet speaks, it seems to me, are the glimpses of reality involved in "passion, piety or affection," which respectively refer back to the philosophers, nuns and mothers. The "Presences" are also defined as the symbols of "all heavenly glory" and, like the Byzantine artifice, are

“self-born mockers of man’s enterprise,” those abstract beings that scorn the transient nature. We have to note that the world of religious piety and the world of motherly affection, which were contrasted to each other in the foregoing lines, are here brought together in the same category in the sense that they are both the worlds in which the “Presences” exist. Another way to attain the “Presences” is philosophic inquiry, for the philosopher’s aim is to search for some unchanging law revealed through nature and humanity.

The vision of truth which the philosophers, nuns and mothers approach through different phases of human nature seems in the last stanza to be overbalanced finally by the world of nature:

O Presences

That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
O self-born mockers of man’s enterprise;

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?

Does the poem then intend to say, contrary to the case of “Sailing to Byzantium,” that the world of *becoming* is ultimately valued higher than the world of *being*? It seems to me that the vision of life embodied here in the blossoming chestnut tree is not on the same level of meaning as the flesh-and-blood nature of Byzantium poems. In the latter case the human body cannot avoid being “bruised to pleasure soul,” nor will beauty be born without human despair; but in the above poem “labour is blossoming and dancing.” There the human toil results in the stillness of gold and bronze, but here it culminates into “blossoming” and “dancing,” an unconscious unity of art and living power. The two worlds, therefore, come to a delicate balance in the last two stanzas of the poem. The “Presences,” those images of “unageing intellect,” are

what transcend physical nature, but their value is counterpoised again with the power of living nature. The nature in the last sense does not mean "dying generations" but it means a body of organic unity where the "leaf," the "blossom" and the "bole" are one, and where the "dancer" (the human body) and the "dance" (the art) are inseparable.

In the first half of the poem the state of unity develops into the state of division and contrast, while in the last half the divided elements are gradually reunited. Opening with the scene of the innocently working children, the poem ends with the image of a wild chestnut tree whose labour is to blossom and to dance in the air. The primitive unity is once broken into the contrast of man and art, the creator and the created, or the human and the non-human, but their unity is regained on another level. Nature is contrasted with art, as transience is contrasted with eternity, but paradoxically, it is in nature that the poet finds the ideal form of beauty which his art should strive to attain.

The "golden bird" and the "blossoming tree," taken on the symbolic level, are not contraries but are the two phases of what the poet calls the "unity of being." Cleanth Brooks, in his illuminating essay in *The Well Wrought Urn*, explains the two phases as the state of "knowing" and the state of "embodying," and he points out the paradox inherent in the nature of art:

The golden bird whose bodily form the speaker will take in Byzantium will be withdrawn from the flux of the world of becoming. But so withdrawn, it will sing of the world of becoming. . . . Removed from that world it will *know* as the chestnut tree immersed in life, drenched in the world of becoming cannot know . . . the price of being able to see it is not to possess it in one's self.¹

There are, as we have seen, many instances where Yeats explains art as the sublimation of the physical into the spiritual, the concrete into the abstract, or motion into stillness. We should remember here at the same time that art in Yeats is also defined as the physical embodiment of something abstract and visionary. The world of diversity and change aspires towards the world of absolute being, while the world of vision desires

¹ Brooks, Cleanth, "Yeats's Great Rooted Blossomer," *The Well Wrought Urn*, A Harvest Book, New York, 1963, p. 190.

its manifestation through something physical and concrete. As Michael Robartes talks to the Dancer, truth is revealed not through the intellectual argument but through physical power and beauty:

She. And must no beautiful woman be
Learned like a man?

He. Paul Veronese
And all his sacred company
Imagined bodies all their days
By the lagoon you love so much,
For proud, soft, ceremonious proof
That all must come to sight and touch;
While Michael Angelo's Sistine roof,
His 'Morning' and his 'Night' disclose
How sinew that has been pulled tight,
Or it may be loosened in repose,
Can rule by supernatural right
Yet be but sinew.

She. I have heard said
There is great danger in the body.

He. Did God in portioning wine and bread
Give man His thought or His mere body?

(from "Michael Robartes and the Dancer")

The Dancer is perplexed to hear Micheal Robartes because she interprets "body" merely on the physical level while Robartes understands it as a symbol. In his essay, "Personality and Intellectual Essences," Yeats also says that art should be the expression of the entire workings of the human body:

An exciting person, whether the hero of a play or the maker of poems, will display the greatest volume of personal energy, and *this energy must seem to come out of the body as out of the mind*. We must say to ourselves continually when we imagine a character: 'Have I given him the roots, as it were, of all faculties necessary for life?'¹ (The italics are mine.)

As one of earliest poets of the twentieth century, Yeats felt strongly that the world of art was becoming separated from the ordinary life of

¹ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 266.

people, as it grew unsubstantial and fantastic. The most perfect form of the unity of human faculties, he says, exists in the art of Byzantine culture and of Renaissance. There a work of art is not merely a personal possession of the artist but of the whole people. The visionary experience was not in the world of artist's jargon but was shared and enjoyed by the multitude. There "intellect and emotion, *primary* curiosity and *antithetical* dream, are for the moment one."¹ The following is the often quoted passage about the art of Byzantium:

I think that in early Byzantium . . . religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers—though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract—spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people.²

Like the widening gyre of "The Second Coming" the united elements have fallen apart; "The seeking of Unity of Fact by a single faculty, instead of Unity of Being by the use of all, has separated a man from his genius."³ It was on the basis of this historical consciousness that Yeats made an effort to create a form of art in which all human faculties participated. The main result was his new experiment in theatrical presentation.

As an attempt to combine the physical and mental faculties of man, Yeats emphasizes the alliance of the functions of speech, music and dance in his plays. This dramatic theory is especially important in his later dance plays where he applies the technique imitated from the Japanese Noh drama. He says that in his dance plays "the expression [should be] mainly in those movements that are of the entire body."⁴ The music and the dance are the art of expressing the exalted emotion, and are meant to give dimensions and substance to the floating emotion conveyed in words. The combination of words, music and dance, he

¹ *A Vision*, p. 293.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴ *Four Plays for Dancers*, London, Macmillan, 1921, p. 87.

says, must be done very naturally without any intentional effort to put them together. The form of music and of dance should grow from the inside of the emotion itself, and should not be applied mechanically from outside. He says, for instance, about the combination of words and music: "My ears are only comfortable when the singer sings as if mere speech had taken fire, when he appears to have passed into song almost imperceptively."¹ In the preface to *Four Plays for Dancers* he also remarks: "On no account must the words be spoken 'through music' in the fashionable way."² To him the music should be just so much as he can "discover on the wings of words."³ The dance should also be an unconscious culmination of emotion; instead of imitating the natural cry, laugh or anger, the players should express the passion through the rhythm and movement of the whole body.

His attempt to create the organic unity of arts, in this way, resulted in a form of drama which is highly stylized and symbolic, and quite different from the naturalistic presentation. The words spoken in half-chanting are neither like speech nor like singing, and the mask he uses for the main players on the stage adds to the artistic and supernatural atmosphere. The dance itself, which is meant to express the climax of human emotions, is far from the natural human movement of exaltation; to Yeats every form or position of the body must be the symbol of a certain spiritual condition. The following is what he writes about the Noh Drama:

At the climax, instead of the disordered passion of nature, there is a dance, a series of positions and movements which may represent a battle, or a marriage, or the pain of a ghost in the Buddhist Purgatory. . . . [The players] seem to associate with every gesture or pose some definite thought.⁴

But to keep this distance from the actual life is for Yeats a way to search for a place where the souls of people are united in some elemental sympathy. Like the Japanese dancer he praises, he recedes from actual

¹ "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," *Essays and Introductions*, p. 223.

² *Four Plays for Dancers*, v.

³ "The Musician and the Orator," *Essays and Introductions*, p. 268.

⁴ "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 230-231.

life only to inhabit the deeps of the mind.¹ Through this feeling of distance, he says, we can make strange events credible, just as those supernatural heroes, "keeping always an appropriate distance from life, . . . seem images of those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and silence."²

For Yeats the ideal of dramatic form existed in Shakespearean times when poetry and art were still a part of the general life of people.³ But he was always conscious that the same form of art could not be restored in his age. In order that the whole audience may experience the oneness of emotion, he had to choose a small selected group of audience, poets and artists, in a private drawing room instead of appealing to the great public. "Whatever we lose in mass and in power," he had to admit, "we should recover in elegance and in subtlety."⁴ He also states as follows in "Personality and Intellectual Essences":

In literature, partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to the normal man, we have lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man—blood, imagination, intellect, running together—but have found a new delight, in essences, in states of mind, in pure imagination, in all that comes to us most easily in elaborate music.⁵

Here again we encounter the dilemma of art. The poet had to go into the world of "essences," "pure imagination," or "elaborate music" in order to recover the vision of unity. Though he dreamt of creating the image of organic unity, that of the blossoming and dancing chestnut tree, his art resulted in the symbolic form of dancing which is distinguished from the world of nature. A work of art was to him an effort to create a *vision of reality*,⁶ but the reality itself was always elsewhere.

Yeats, as we have seen, presents to us in various ways the unity and duality that are inherent in the nature of art. The many contraries we find in his writings—art and life, the original and the traditional, stillness

¹ "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," *Essays and Introductions*, p. 224.

² *Four Plays for Dancers*, p. 87.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 266.

⁶ Cf. Unterecker, John, *A Reader's Guide to W. B. Yeats*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1963, p. 192.

and motion, distance and intimacy—all those opposing concepts are interfused with each other and make his language highly ambiguous and suggestive. Take, for example, Yeats's use of the words, "personal" and "impersonal." In "The Thinking of the Body" he says:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. *Its morality is personal*, knows little of any general law.¹ (The italics are mine.)

The idea that art should be "personal," that it "knows little of any general law," may seem to contradict his words: "All that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt."² We may also remember that Yeats described the Byzantine artists as "almost impersonal," expressing the general consciousness of whole people. After the analysis I have made so far it is only a dull repetition to explain that these ideas are not contradictory. In the one case he rejects the mere mathematical abstraction and emphasizes the full sway of the entire faculties of human nature, while in the other case he expresses the importance of the objectivity in art which transforms the personal into the universal and thus endows the work with the eternal life. There are two sides to the function of Imagination, which Yeats himself put in a single short sentence: "Imagination must dance, must be carried beyond feeling into the aboriginal ice."³

We may have to admit that the way Yeats sought for the solution of the conflict was after all too visionary and abstract, and would not convince modern minds any more. The important thing is, however, that in Yeats we find the essential problem latent in the nature of art in all ages. Allen Tate remarks that "if one of the historic marks of romanticism is the division between sensibility and intellect, Yeats's career may be seen as unromantic . . . because he closed the gap."⁴ At least he

¹ *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 292-293.

² "Style and Attitude," *Essays and Introductions*, p. 522.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

⁴ *The Permanence of Yeats*, p. 98.

struggled hard to close the gap of the intellectual and the visionary, the subjective and the objective, although from the solution of one contrast still another contrast was produced. Yeats strove to attain the ideal images which had at once the living power of a dance and the solidity of a sculpture. Born in the age of "knowing," Yeats longed for the state of "embodying," but his longing had outgrown the realm of romantic dream and brought the poet into the incessant struggle of creation.¹

¹ In this paper I explained stillness and dance simply as two coexisting elements in Yeats's aesthetic vision. It should also be pointed out, it seems to me, that those elements not only coexist but they coincide with each other; the image of the dancing spirits in "Byzantium," for instance, involves at the same time the element of stillness. The problem is also discussed by Engelberg in *The Vast Design*. The analysis of this point, together with the analysis of the recurring "dance" images, is still left as the problem for my further study.

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