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Abstract

Examines the significance of symbolism of transcendence in several works by Yeats and Joyce, and ties this to theories of consolation and eucatastrophe in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories." Finds Tolkien's theory of sub-creation more fulfilling than their view of the artist as a creator.

Additional Keywords

Art and Christianity; Creativity and religion; Joyce, James. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—Christian symbolism; Sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Yeats, William Butler. Poetry—Christian symbolism; Sarah Beach

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The Artist as Magician: Yeats, Joyce, and Tolkien

Dominic Manganiello

Yeats must have been writing ironically when he referred to himself in "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" as on of "the last romantics" who "chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness." It is a curious statement from one who spoke for many of his contemporaries and ours when he insisted in the same breath that the word "belief" did not in any way belong to our age.[1] Deprived of a form that could render coherent belief, Yeats, like most moderns, attempted to make of his own imagination such a form, perhaps affirming with Blake's Los, "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's." Yeats called this system "an almost infallible church of poetic tradition."[2] In Blake's time, he explained, "educated people . . . 'made their souls' by listening to sermons and by doing or not doing certain things . . . In our time we are agreed that we 'make our souls' out of some one of the great poets of ancient times, or out of Shelley or Wordsworth, or Goethe, or Balzac, or Flaubert, or Count Tolstoy."[3] This desire to be "self-born, born anew,"[4] or to remake himself, led Yeats to distinguish between two kinds of asceticism: "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." The saint seeks not an "eternal art," or the "artifice of eternity" in the phrase of "Sailing to Byzantium," but his own eternity."[5] Or, to put it another way, the artist seeks an eternity for a soul, his mask or double, made in his own image and likeness; the saint seeks an eternity for a soul made in the image and likeness of a Maker. The difference lies, in a word, between "self-renewal" and "being renewed." T.S. Eliot, who engaged in an ongoing debate on such matters, remarked that, in doing so, Yeats was subscribing to the Arnoldian tenet, poetry can replace religion.[6]

Yeats, in fact, maintained that symbols admitted the poet to a world which was inaccessible to the scientist, the clergyman, or the philosopher. Symbolism would itself become a religion, he predicted, and would usher in "the new sacred book" of which all the arts of his time were beginning to dream.[7] This point of vantage can help to explain why in 1890 he joined the order of the Golden Dawn whose secret doctrine proved to be the major influence on his thought up to perhaps his fortieth year. He chose, rather revealingly, the order name *Demon est Deus inversus*-a demon is an inverted god. At this time he contributed articles to Madame Blavatsky's theosophical review entitled (appropriately enough) *Lucifer*, and became fascinated by Magic. He was also genuinely pleased by a friend's suggestion of building a chapel for fairy worship so that Catholics might "become worshippers of the Sidhe without knowing it."[8] As a result of these related activities, Yeats concluded that the artist, successor to the magician, possessed the greates of all powers in symbols, and was, like God whom he called at once "the Supreme Enchanter," and "Eternal Darkness" "a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils."[9] The affinity of this position with that of Faustus did not deter Yeats from claiming the Golden Dawn was a Christian order: "progress lies not in dependence upon a Christ outside yourself but upon the Christ in your own breast, in the power of your divine will and divine imagination and not in some external will or imagination however divine. We certainly do teach this dependence only on the inner divinity but this is Christianity."[10] Yeats's is an affirmation of the god within, not of the God without, however, an inversion of the traditional Christian view.

Christ is divine for Yeats because, as in Blake's view, a symbol of the artistic imagination. Yeats points out that Blake had learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that "imagination was the first emanation of divinity, 'the body of God.'"[11] As such, the imagination is presented as both incarnation, the Word made flesh, and eucharist. Like Christ, the artist, by a rather extravagant analogy, gives his own body, the imagination, to nourish and transform those who "communicate" and enter into a covenant with him. This belief in the modern imagination as a means of grace and redemption prompted Eliot to respond by quoting Maritain: "It is a deadly error to expect poetry to provide the superstantial nourishment of man."[12]

What we see is that the interiorization of a self-generated transcendence in Carlyle and in other nineteenth century figures develops in Yeats the need for a liturgy. Or, in the words of Forgael in *The Shadowy Waters*, "I have but images, analogies, / The mystic bread, the sacramental wine."[13] We can also understand wy for Yeats the priest is merely the poet's "shadow".[14] In "The Host of the Air," for example, fairies try to charm O'Driscoll with bread and wine in order to steal him away to the immortal realm where they will take Bridget, his bride. The pact, however, considers the bread and wine as having a "doom". O'Driscoll is left to sit and play "in a dream / Of her long dim hair," a symbol of a mixed Platonic and Gnostic eros-longing, not yet transformed into the Christian *agape*. This aspect of symbolist theory in Yeats lends itself to what Frank Kermode calls a "sacramentalism" which is Catholic or theurgic:[15] "Did God in portioning wine and bread / Give man His thought or His mere body?" asks Yeats in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer." The sacramental process, however, instead of being just the same as magic, according to Ronald Knox, is the precise opposite: "Magic, surely, means using supernatural means-or so they are regarded-to produce a natural effect . . . Whereas the sacramental process is using a natural means to produce supernatural effects."[16] It is interesting to note in this regard that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the notion that *hocus pocus* was a parody of the Latin words used by the priest during consecration, *hoc est corpus*, gained some currency. The opposite tendency to this magical formula in modern literature is represented by D.H. Lawrence who baldly declared in his essay on Melville's *Typee* that a cannibal feast seemed to him a more valid sacrament that the Eucharist. With reference to Yeats, however, Eliot felt compelled once again to comment on his tendency

to link poetry and magic by stating simply, "You cannot take heaven by magic, especially if you are, like Mr Yeats, a very sane person."[17]

The imagination, nevertheless, enabled Yeats to fashion not only a spiritual but also a material alchemy. The poet, he tells us in *The Symbolism of Poetry* (1900), makes the world his instrument, and through the power of the written word the world itself is transformed: "Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not 'the eye altering alter all'?"[18] So the poem is a *miracle*, as Valery calls it, and he reminds us, "It should not be forgotten that the poetic form has been enlisted, down the ages, in the service of enchantment."[19] Yeats reiterated this claim in "The Tower":

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

For Yeats the imagination is not merely "primary" in Coleridge's sense, but the primal force having power over life and death. It is not only the measure but the creator of all things. The similarity of Yeat's thought to his father's is strikingly illustrat- ed, as Richard Ellmann points out, by a new catechism which J.B. Yeats sent his son about 1915: "What is necessary to salvation? To believe that I myself am the centre of the Universe for which it exists . . . That I love myself with my whole soul and strength."[20] This insistence on having its general frame of reference within itself prompted Allen Tate to accuse the modern imagination of practicing solipsism or the belief that we create the world in the act of perceiving it.[21] This catechesis of the self is carried on by Yeats in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". The "tower" here as in "The Blood and the Moon" and other poems is called "blessed" by the poet and leads him to contemplate the goodness of what he has made in the manner of God in the original creation. The self, representative of the creative power of the poet, is allowed to triumph over the soul, which is struck dumb by the thought of transcending life, and achieve a kind of "secular blessedness". With this triumph the dialogue of self and soul becomes a monologue of self. The difference between traditional and self-conferred sanctity is nowhere more apparent. Yeats wrestles with the same dilemma faced by Tarrou in *La Peste*: can modern man become "a saint without God?" A peculiar mixture of paganism and Christianity haunts much of Yeats's early and later writing, culminating with his statement of "Vacillation", "What theme had Homer but original sin?"

We might be reminded here of Stephen Dedalus who rejects "the secret knowledge and secret power" of the Catholic priesthood to don the mantle of hieratic alchemist. His mission as fabulous artificer empowers him to "transmut[e] the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life." The choice of the word "transmute" instead of the expected "transubstantiate" is deliberate. Allying himself with the conviction that poets are "hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration", Joyce takes his cue from Shelley's *Defence* where poetry, the latter maintains, "*transmutes* all that it touches and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life."[22] In the first draft version of *A Portrait of the Artist* Joyce also describes the artist as "an alchemist . . . bent upon his handiwork, bringing together the mysterious elements, separating the subtle from the gross."[23] Joyce borrows his phrasing from Paracelsus who posited the view that human creativeness in art repeats the primal act of creation.[24] Stephen agrees with both Shelley and Paracelsus that secret alchemy transforms the gross into the beautiful, and sees himself as engaging in a literary version of Christ's redeeming the fallen universe and reconciling it with God.

Joyce begins by fusing Christian and pagan elements in the name "Stephen Dedalus". St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, serves as an analogue for Stephen, the first Irish "martyr" for art, and furnishes a key to Joyce's method of converting Christian doctrine to his own curious system of metaphors. But it should be clear that in Joyce the yoking together of Christian and pagan elements is not the traditional western synthesis it might at first appear to be. There is no mediation between the rational / aesthetic and the theological / spiritual as is found, for example, in the *Divine Comedy*, where the Christian imagination reconciles itself to the classical world while still preserving its distinctness from that world. Dante, like Erasmus, Petrarca, Boccaccio and many others, adheres to the well-known principle involving "Egyptian gold" enunciated by St. Augustine in *De doctrina Christiana* (2. 40. 60). His dual role as alchemist and priest of eternal imagination permits Stephen to superimpose pagan upon Christian belief, Ovidian "metamorphosis" being the profane equivalent of "transubstantiation". The sacred host is not for Joyce as it is for, say, David Jones a vital sign, but a mere formal symbol. Daedalus "applying his mind to unknow arts" parallels the priest as confessor who, through his holy office, comes to "know obscure things, hidden from others." Like Yeats, Stephen's name could be *Demon est Deus inversus* for, by declaring his *non serviam*, he sides with the fallen Lucifer while, suspecting the betrayal of his friends, he calls himself Jesus.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man has, as Kenneth Burke puts it, "all the accoutrements of a gospel, with Stephen as Logos, plus corresponding history and passion."[25] Joyce translates incarnation history as the unfolding of the artist's, rather than God's, word in time: "in the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh." What seems trivial in the perceptual world has not been redeemed by a single event in past time; its historical and transcendent dimension is discarded. Joyce, unlike Dante, interprets the chief function of the imagination to be not the apprehension of ultimate truth,

but its embodiment. The self-contained and self-referential process which is the essence of Stephen's creation leads to a worship of the man-made sign for its own sake, a form of idolatry, and runs counter to the sacramental process which points beyond itself to the Word made flesh. We see that the burden of truth rests entirely on Stephen's shoulders, as he takes it upon himself to re-enact the history of salvation, to merge the roles of the Holy Trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary into one. Stephen engages in *l'alchimie du Verbe* but, unlike his predecessor Rimbaud, Joyce will not retract but exalt his hero's ambition of transmogrifying the Word into magician's gold. In *A Portrait*, the artist is compared to both Christ and God the Creator, and in *Ulysses* Stephen is presented, in addition, as master of resurrection: "If I call them into life across the waters of Lethe, will not the poor ghosts troop to my call? Who supposes it? I, Bous Stephanoumenos, bullock-befriending bard, am lord and giver of their life."[26] Despite the Catholic scaffolding, Stephen ultimately chooses to divorce his story from the Christ story, turning it inside out. We, the readers, are here because the artist has called us into existence. Stephen assumes the power of the Holy Spirit, referred to as the Lord and giver of life in the Nicene creed, as well as that of Cornelius Agrippa. He claims that the imagination brings to life those Spectres of the Dead, as Blake calls them, who inhabit the memory. Joyce conflates the models for Stephen to subsume Faustus the "overreacher" as well as Daedalus and Simon Magus. The host of religious terms that Joyce has secularized and enshrined as part of our critical vocabulary, *epiphany* and *epiklesis* among others, attests to his fundamental view that literature is the true scripture. Leslie Fiedler's response to *Ulysses* is representative of this view: "*Ulysses* was for my youth and has remained for my later years not a novel at all, but a conduct book, a guide to salvation through the mode of art, a kind of secular scripture."[27] To reinforce this reading a recent book on Joyce bears the telling title, *The Book as World*.

In this regard Joyce might agree with Northrop Frye who points out, "The secular scripture tells us we are the creators; other scriptures tell us we are actors in a drama of divine creation and redemption."[28] Such a perspective requires of us to be artificers, and of the artist to be the Supreme Artificer, to make an alteration in what Tolkien calls the Primary World, or a "tyrannous re-forming of Creation."[29] Magic, according to Tolkien, "is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills." The artist's power, as a result, becomes self-centred, that of the mere Magician. Enchantment, the elvish craft towards which fantasy aspires, seeks instead "shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves." The art of the sub-creator in a secondary world is a human right: "we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[30]

One of the driving forces of modern literature is a desire to achieve consolation. We watch in the elaboration not only of a personal mysticism but in the building of a poetic church, the formation of liturgies and the creation of litanies a desire for a self-induced, but nevertheless keenly wanted consolation. What is ironic about Yeats or Joyce is the ascetic dimension of their theory. Their extreme retreat into the self constitutes ultimately a rejection, not a celebration, of the world. There is no direct sense of participation, no primal victory where history and mythos meet and fuse. As Tolkien puts it, "Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story."[31] In the secular scripture where we are all creators and redeemers the consolation of a happy ending remains only a slim fictive possibility, scarcely even a possible vicarious experience. What Tolkien tells us about the Supreme Artist's *eucatastrophic* story which reaches beyond the limits of the human tragedy for a grace which is the divine comedy is that it offers such a consolation:

> The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist" nor "fugitive". In its fairy-tale–or otherworld–setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.[32]

Notes

[1] See Richard Ellman, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 239.

[2] *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 77.

[3] "William Blake and the Imagination" in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier, 1968), p. 111.

[4] This phrase is from the poen "Stream and Sun at Glendalough". Cf. "Myself must I remake" in "An Acre of Grass".

[5] "Discoveries" in *Essays and Introductions*, p. 286.

[6] *After Strange Gods* (New York: Harcourt, Court and Brace, 1933), p. 48.

[7] "The Symbolism of Poetry" in *Essays and Introductions*, p. 162.

[8] *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 51.

[9] "Magic" in *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 49-52.

[10] Quoted in *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 51.

[11] "William Blake and the Imagination", p. 112. For a related treatment of this point see Daniel S. Lenoski, "W.B. Yeats: God and Imagination," *English Studies in Canada* VI (Spring 1980), 84-93.

[12] *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 124.

[13] *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 152.

[14] "The Symbolism of Poetry", p. 158.

[15] *Romantic Image* (London: Collins, 1971), p. 176.

Continued on page 25

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The Artist as Magician: continued from page 15

[16] *The Hidden Stream* (New York: Image Books, 1964), p. 162. I owe this point to Rex Trotter.

[17] *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 140.

[18] "The Symbolism of Poetry", pp. 158-9.

[19] Quoted in *The Critic's Alchemy*, ed. Ruth Zabriskie Temple (New Haven, 1953), p. 14.

[20] *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 309.

[21] "Narcissus as Narcissus" in *The Creative Process*, ed. Brewster Ghiselin (New York: Mentor, 1952), p. 136.

[22] In *Prose of the Romantic Period*, ed. Carl R. Woodring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 510. For a fuller treatment of this and related matters see my forthcoming article in *Renascence* entitled "The Earthbound Vision of *A Portrait of the Artist*".

[23] Reprinted in *A Portrait of the Artist* as a *Young Man*, ed. Chester Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 261.

[24] See *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healey (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 146: "Paracelsus said that the artist must do nothing but separate what is subtle from what is gross, what is pure from what is impure." Cf. Yeats in "The Symbolism of Poetry" (p. 158), "we must believe that the gross is the shadow of the subtle."

[25] *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univer- sity of California Press, 1968), p. 241.

[26] *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 412.

[27] "Bloom on Joyce; or, Jokey for Jacob", *Journal of Modern Literature* I (1970), pp. 19-29.

[28] *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 157.

[29] *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 146.

[30] "On Fairy-Stories" in *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wooton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorthelm's Son* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), pp. 54-5, 57.

[31] *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, pp. 100-1.

[32] "On Fairy-Stories," p. 68.

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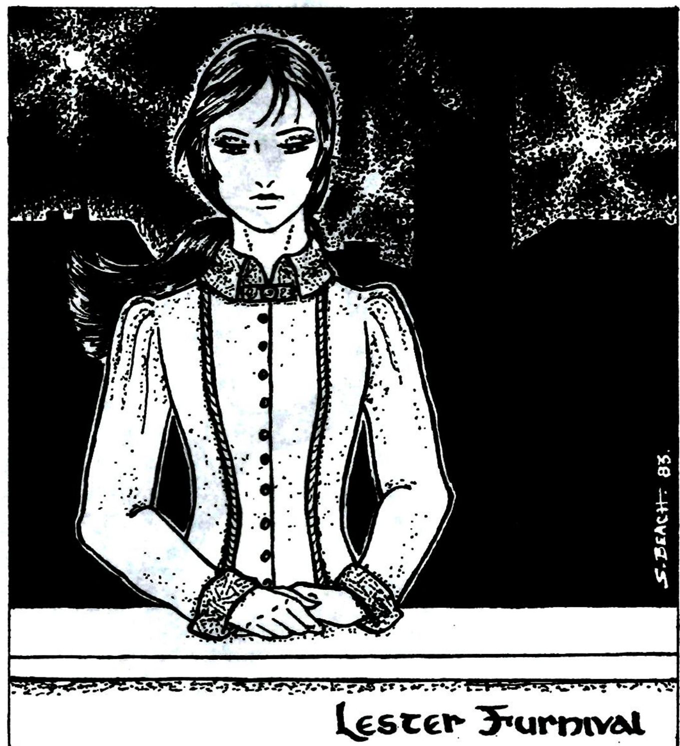

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