

PHILLIPS, MATTHEW MICHAEL, M.A. Entropy and Equilibrium in Jean Toomer's *Cane*. (2016)

Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 44 pp.

My reading of *Cane* is based on Jean Toomer's use of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics within the text in order to communicate his political aim of a racial equilibrium. Toomer uniquely defined his race as "purely American," and this was the vision he had hoped to share with the nation by way of his text. He was inspired to write *Cane* after a stint in Sparta, Georgia, resulted in a formative encounter with what he called the "folk-spirit"—a cultural energy that, even at his first encounter, he found to be degenerating. My research shows that his hope for *Cane* was to show how the eventual heat-death in the text mirrors his conception of racial equilibrium for the nation. My analysis of the events in *Cane* shows that Toomer uses his text to lament the folk-spirit that he saw as precious yet inexorably linked to outmoded social and racial models. Toomer sought to dissolve racial barriers through his personal proclamation of his race as purely American, and *Cane* harbors the creative force of an author freshly inspired by the folk-spirit.

PHILLIPS, MATTHEW MICHAEL, M.A. *The Peasant Visionary, the Dying God: Sacrifice and Rebirth in W. B. Yeats's The Wind Among the Reeds*. (2016)
Directed by Dr. Anthony Cuda. 39 pp.

My thesis shows that the central theme of Yeats's *The Wind Among the Reeds* is one of creation through destruction. My work centers upon one of his lesser-known poems, "The Valley of the Black Pig," but also focuses on other works from the volume, such as "The Song of Wandering Aengus," as well as the poem turned play, *The Shadowy Waters*. I analyze how Yeats's stylistic choices in his poems and plays reflect his intellectual processes at the time of their composition. The stability of bibliography allows me to read an imaginative context into these works while remaining grounded in evidence that is strongly supported by chronology and publication data. Much of the research that I have done makes use of both published and unpublished manuscripts of Yeats's poems and plays. The information I glean from early drafts allows me to trace Yeats's intellectual process through several revisions of each text. Through this method I am able to show that the regenerative cycles of creation through destruction—rebirth via sacrifice—in 1899's *The Wind Among the Reeds* are the result of a creative process that Yeats began as early as 1884, with the composition of the earliest unpublished draft of his play *The Shadowy Waters*. He ultimately finds empowerment and stability of identity through the embodiment of diverse personae throughout his body of work.

ENTROPY AND EQUILIBRIUM IN JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*
AND
THE PEASANT VISIONARY, THE DYING GOD: SACRIFICE AND REBIRTH
IN W. B. YEATS'S *THE WIND AMONG THE REEDS*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2016

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ENTROPY AND EQUILIBRIUM IN JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

In the years leading up to the completion of *Cane* in 1922, Jean Toomer was surrounded by physical and cultural decline and degeneration. Toomer's own physical collapse from overwork in 1919 was followed by the death of his grandfather—whom Toomer lived with and cared for—in December of 1921. Toomer writes about the entropic degradation of his grandfather, which eventually results in stasis: “[g]randfather gradually declined—a tragic sight—and one day he broke. After that, he was a doddering old man, not dying, not living, yet hanging on” (“*Cane Years*” 116). Significantly, after the death of Toomer's grandfather, his grandmother “blossomed magnificently . . . into a woman of high humor, memorable tales, satiric jibes at anything and everything (Walker 62), and Toomer would go on to dedicate *Cane* to her. The renewal that his grandmother experiences here foreshadows the paradigm of rebirth through entropy that he puts into *Cane*.

Just prior to his grandfather's death in December, Toomer had taken a two-month position as acting principal at an industrial and agricultural school for African-Americans in Sparta, Georgia. Toomer's sojourn in “the heart of the South” marked his first authentic exposure to the regional folk-songs and spirituals exemplary of the southern “folk-spirit,” a vital energy that—even at his first encounter—Toomer believed to be “walking in to die on the modern desert” (“*Cane Years*” 123). But despite his already

mournful attitude during this experience, Toomer considered it the “starting point of almost everything of worth that [he did]” (Liberator 70). However, not all of the locals considered this folk-spirit as precious as Toomer did, and many of them had chosen to replace folk-songs and spirituals—what they had come to call “shouting”—with “victrolas and player-pianos,” an embracing of an industrialized modernity that, for Toomer, sounded the death knell for the folk-spirit (“*Cane* Years” 123). Yet Toomer finds creative impetus in his understanding of this folk-spirit as a moribund energy, a “rich dusk beauty,” burning brightest just before it reaches its zenith and is extinguished (Liberator 71). Indeed Toomer's anxiety about the entropic forces primed to lay waste to the southern, African-American folk-spirit is central to our understanding of *Cane*; however, Toomer sees promise for racial equilibrium in the resulting heat-death.

Entropy, Beauty, and Tragedy

Whenever energy is transferred within the universe, or any closed system, the entropy within that system increases.¹ The entropy within closed systems continuously builds. Entropy plays out in the background of all natural processes, gradually moving them toward equilibrium. Toomer uses entropy within *Cane* to stress the similarities shared among all closed systems in the text. The system Toomer is most interested in is the outmoded yet often orderly world of the folk-spirit. The approaching era of modernization threatens this way of life and introduces disorder into the system.

¹ [T]he entropy of a system is the measure of the unavailability of its thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work. . . . The entropy of a system = the sum of the entropies of its parts, and is always increased by any transport of heat within the system: hence ‘the entropy of the universe tends to a maximum’ (Clausius) (“Entropy,” def. 1).

Although Toomer's conception of the folk-spirit is often attached to the southern, African-American population, even this close-knit system was ruptured by the disorder introduced by modernization. Toomer describes this rupturing of the order of the folk-spirit as he encountered it in Sparta:

The setting was crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful. . . . A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. . . . So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city—and industry and commerce and machines. ("*Cane Years*" 123)

Although it is an important distinction in the text, the entropic force Toomer instills into *Cane* is not bound to a racial delineation of white versus black, for even the close-knit community of Sparta had begun to rupture by the time of Toomer's stay. The main opposition Toomer is concerned with is that of old versus new—the moribund order of the folk-spirit that is further threatened by the chaos of modernization. What Toomer does in *Cane* is show us his conception of the way forward in the wake of inevitable entropic decline.

Cane is full of ritualistic endeavors that show the characters within attempting to maintain order by clinging to the tenets of the folk-spirit. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas examines various primitive and modern cultures' idiosyncratic engagements with “rituals of purity and impurity” that

ultimately, she argues, “create unity in experience.”² Douglas focuses on “dirt” in her anthropological study as a representation of “disorder” within a system: “Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to [organize] the environment” (2). The ritualistic moments in *Cane*, such as the separation of “the white woman who had two Negro sons” from the rest of the town in “Becky” (9)—“[t]he separation of . . . consecrated . . . persons from profane ones” (Douglas 10-11)—are attempts to sometimes reorder, sometimes altogether purge disorder from within an ostensibly ordered system, in most cases, the old world of the folk-spirit. Toomer's reliance on the significance of the folk-spirit is a symptom of, to borrow Douglas's words, a “belie[f] in dangerous contagion” (3); that is, a regression to the confines of a familiar system in light of an emerging threat—in Toomer's case, the threat of industrialized modernization. We see this same fear of contagion play out within *Cane*.

Toomer often used scientific terminology to express his personal ideas. He explains the type of entropic degradation of a system that he instills in *Cane*, what he calls “constructive crises,” in scientific terms which are more applicable to society more broadly:

Life, and any living organism such as a human society, is a field of force, a situation of tensions of forces. In society these tensions must exist. The trouble is, the tensions which now exists arise in the main from artificial oppositions, from unnatural prejudices, preferences, and mutual antagonisms, such as national differences; false patriotism, class and caste lines. They eventuate in destructive crises, such as wars. The tensions should arise from natural oppositions—force

² The comparison of the characters in *Cane*—and, by extension, the inhabitants of Sparta, Georgia—to the “primitive” cultures from Douglas's study is problematic, but, “[f]or all its complications, *Cane* not only allows for but in fact requires the existence of a racialized southern 'Negro' peasantry, one whose existence is threatened by encroaching modernization, new technologies, and racial amalgamation” (Nunn 180).

against inertia, . . . the new against the old, . . . will against body They should eventuate in constructive crises, namely, in periods of especially active creation during which the culture of man is greatly advanced. (“Reflections of an Earth-Being” 20)

Toomer's statement here summarizes his use of entropy in *Cane* to suggest a constructive crisis that would lay waste to the outmoded racial views of the present society and greatly advance the culture. *Cane* itself is the locus of this especially active creation, from the genre-defying form, to the wild energy and even the atrocities within it.

The juxtaposition of beauty and tragedy is essential to *Cane*. Toomer, writing about the death of the folk-spirit that inspired *Cane*, says, “that [folk-] spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song. It was the song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that . . . is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life” (“*Cane* Years” 123). The relationship between beauty and tragedy within *Cane*—unlike that between the forces of old and new—is not one of opposition. Instead, the two forces intermingle in a way that reveals to us Toomer's complex understanding of the folk-spirit, a concept that he continually questions but ultimately understands to be a source of creative inspiration. In the final, quasi-autobiographical section of *Cane*, “Kabnis,” Toomer writes, “I've been shapin words after a design that [is] branded . . . [on my] soul. . . . [S]ometimes theyre beautiful an golden an have a taste that makes them fine t roll over with [m]y tongue. . . . [Other times they're] [m]isshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words” (109). Toomer experiments with language, images, and themes that are representative of both sides of his dialectical understanding of the folk-spirit in hopes of

synthesizing a salient conception of what he calls a new “race which will be at once interracial and unique” (“The Crock of Problems” 58).

Douglas's conception of dirt is analogous to the waste energy that constantly builds up within any closed system, and the ritualistic endeavors of the characters within *Cane* are attempts at maintaining order within an entropic environment that tends toward new equilibrium. The entropic characteristics in *Cane* are abundant: an erratic narrative structure, various depictions of wanton violence, a buildup of waste, an energy perpetually building toward climax. Charles T. Davis claims that *Cane's* form is a direct result of Toomer's “preoccupation with . . . problems of consciousness” (256). He says that what “haunts Toomer's mind is . . . a broken circle, since the author does not reach the point in *Cane* of successful prefiguration, the anticipation for the full existence for man” (256). The erratic structure of *Cane*, then, is the result of the author's consciousness reacting to being bound up in a degenerative cycle of old forms that nevertheless struggle to regenerate themselves. Toomer himself is caught between the old world of the folk-spirit and the new industrial landscape that imposes on it—“[s]outhern realities” versus “[n]orthern intelligence,” as Davis puts it (256). What Toomer shows us in Part I of *Cane* is this struggle. Davis writes that the “external” trajectory of the three-part work is “South, North, South,” (257) with Toomer returning to the world of the “Georgia tales” at the end in “Kabnis” (256), and this is the trajectory that I explore in this thesis. Of course, there are other readings. In a letter to Waldo Frank from December 12, 1922, Toomer himself writes that “*Cane's* design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North,

and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return to the North” (101). Toomer's return to the South and simple forms at the end, I argue, is significant, for it shows us that Toomer and his South remain somehow captive to the folk-spirit, as far as *Cane* is concerned. There is no momentous resolution in Part II or III of the novel. What we see is Toomer's continued exploration of the possibility of what he terms a new race, the result of potent bursts of energy, what Toomer calls “wild flash[es],” sparked amidst the violent breakdown of outmoded forms, breaks in the cycle of the folk-spirit to which Toomer dedicates his swan song (*Cane* 5).

Karintha

As Catherine L. Innes argues, “the symbol which . . . dominates the whole of Part I [of *Cane*] is that of the dusk Dusk . . . refers to the last glow of the setting sun, . . . that moment when the sun's glow is poignantly beautiful because it is fast disappearing” (235). Toomer uses this symbol to emphasize the instability of the extant system within the novel that, despite its allure, masks a growing accumulation of waste. Toomer opens Part I of *Cane* in Georgia, with the story of Karintha—a twelve-year-old girl said to radiate a “beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (5). The men in Karintha's story are drawn to her peculiar radiance, and they too possess an aggressive energy, shown in their “wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon,” to goad Karintha into a hasty maturity (5). Karintha exists as a “wild flash”; she is an unruly child, yet her vitality keeps those around her enamored, always seeing her as “innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (5). But the disorder introduced by Karintha cannot be ignored forever. Her vitality combined with her mischief eventually reaches a maximum, and she burns

out just when she is at her brightest. Just as the folk-spirit encountered by Toomer in Sparta, with all of its danger and energy, was eventually absorbed into the machinery of industrialization and made to persist in sterilized stasis, the energy surrounding Karintha pushes her toward degeneration. Enclosed in her small, “two-room” Georgia home, Karintha “had seen or heard, perhaps she had felt her parents loving” (5). Her exposure to this exchange results in Karintha attempting to “imitate” it, and once Karintha does this— “[s]he play[s] 'home' with a small boy”—something changes about her: “[o]ld men could no longer ride her hobby horse upon their knees” (6). Karintha enters into early maturity, powerless against the deterioration surrounding her. She enters stasis: she is “married many times,” and money is no object for her because the men of the town insist on giving it to her, presumably for sex. She eventually produces a child, but even her offspring is wasted: “[a] child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine needles in the forest” (6).

Karintha's transition from maximum entropy to stasis is a reflection of Toomer's building anxiety about the sweeping force of modernization. Jennifer D. Williams writes,

Readers witness Karintha transition from a vibrant youth . . . to a stationary woman with derision for the men in her community whose privilege of travel and commerce facilitate their journeys to the city and to college and aid their desire to bring Karintha money for sex. These men, who treat Karintha like an exchangeable commodity, model modernity's destructive impulses against folk nature and folk ideals. . . . [Further, sexual] acts in “Karintha” . . . are punctuated with violence and are . . . nonreproductive. These aborted acts of conception stress the impossibility of cultural rebirth, and of mending the ruptures that modernity has wrought. (409-10)

Karintha is a representative of the stationary world of the folk-spirit. She is violated by the disorder of the modernizing world that is transplanted into her system via the

empowered, mobile men who commodify and abuse her. Indeed, Karintha's narrative results in a disturbing image of nonreproductive waste; however, Williams' reading does not allow for an interpretation of the impossibility of cultural rebirth as a result of an equilibrium that Toomer ultimately saw as positive, what he might phrase as "Harmony" (Liberator 70). Douglas writes that for today's reader "sacred things and places" exist in a privileged space, "protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles" (7). This has not always been the case, however, and our present conception "reveals a gulf" between our contemporary understanding of the "distinction between sanctity and uncleanness" and that of other societies throughout history (8). The abjectness within *Cane*, "[reflections] on dirt"—to borrow Douglas's words—in fact "involve[s] reflection[s] on the relation of . . . being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death" (5). Exploring these far-reaching subjects in these terms forces us to consider the possibility that the dirt, or disorder, within a system ultimately becomes inextricably embedded within it, and the only way forward is the construction of a new system. As Susan Edmunds writes, by "[i]mporting into written form the oppositional sensibility born of a black oral tradition, [Toomer] sought a mode for transmitting the nation's past into its present that would radically transform both" (165). Toomer's appreciation of the folk-spirit and way of life—"crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful," like Karintha—is linked to an understanding of disorder as a necessary means to progression; in other words, the folk-spirit of the past serves as a touchstone that represents all that came before it and informs all that will follow.

The events surrounding Karintha are depicted in a way that urges the reader to consider them unavoidable products of her environment. Gino Michael Pellegrini writes of Karintha (whom he reads to be mixed race herself) and the overwhelming influence her environment and those within it have on her: “[T]he development of her unique human potential . . . is arrested and then redirected in relation to the racialized milieu that surrounds her” (10). Pellegrini says that “Toomer’s use of ellipses and antithesis” during the birth of Karintha’s baby in *Cane*—“[p]ine needles” that “are smooth and sweet” and “elastic to the feet of rabbits” (*Cane* 6)—paired with the abortive imagery removes the reader somewhat and “signals [him or her] to think critically about the social significance of [Karintha’s] act, and perhaps reach the conclusion that her act is as much socially prompted as individually chosen” (10). Moreover, since Karintha has been separated from the rest of the community, she is able to carry out this act unnoticed (10). Her status as neither white nor black has resulted in an attempt by the other townsfolk to purge her from the system. But the dirt has not been successfully done away with by merely banishing Karintha, by making her invisible; it still exists within the system and continues to build up, now exemplified by the smoldering sawdust mound in which “Karintha places the body of her baby” (11). Since the waste continues to build within this system, equilibrium is imminent, and we see “the body of her baby, . . . undetectable in the smoke, [equally distributed among and] breathed in by the townspeople” (11).

The transition of Karintha's child from living thing to anonymous matter is a significant one, as the following excerpt from Douglas makes clear:

In the course of any imposing order . . . the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recogni[z]ably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from . . . This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of [decomposition] awaits any physical things that have been recogni[z]ed as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish. . . . So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. . . . Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement. (160)

As long as Karintha's baby is alive, it exists as a representation of the battle between order and disorder that spawned it. Once the child becomes a part of the “mass of common rubbish,” its identity ceases to be, and the threat it poses to the system is mitigated.

It is predicted that once our universe reaches maximum entropy, a proposed end-of-the-universe event will take place: “a 'heat-death' in which the total energy of the universe is uniformly distributed, and all the substance of the universe is at the same temperature.”³ Heat-death functions within *Cane* as an equalizing force that mirrors Toomer's conception of race. In “Karintha,” we see Toomer embrace the concepts of dirt, equilibrium, and heat-death as means to communicate his ideas. In a letter to the *Liberator* in 1922, he writes of striving for “a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling” (70). He tells us that his ideal conception of race was in fact an amalgamation of many races; he saw himself as “naturally and inevitably an American”

³ The second law of thermodynamics predicts that there can be but one end to the universe—a ‘heat-death’ in which the total energy of the universe is uniformly distributed, and all the substance of the universe is at the same temperature (Heat,” def. C4).

(70). The creative inspiration that Toomer derived from his time in Sparta is integral to the work that he produced thereafter, but he nevertheless always understood the folk-spirit to be fading. The discriminatory aspects of such an outmoded way of life practically overshadowed the positive possibilities it carried. In this way, Karinth's story can be seen as the inevitable culmination to a southern narrative based in notions of an essentially race-specific folk-spirit. For no matter how vibrant Karinth was in her youth, she faded-out and became a part of the violent system responsible for her early decline. On the other hand, the ruptures introduced into the world of the folk-spirit by modernity, which would inevitably fragment even the stationary institutions of race, promise the same result. And although Toomer laments the rich dusk beauty of the South, he calls for a new narrative that is based in racial equilibrium, a narrative that is simply American.

November Cotton Flower

Toomer follows “Karintha” with “November Cotton Flower,” a poem that highlights the productivity of disorder. Change is coming in the poem: “winter's cold” is making “cotton stalks look rusty,” and the “cotton [is] vanishing” (8). “Drouth fighting soil has caused the soil to take / All water from the streams; dead birds were found / In wells a hundred feet below the ground—” (8). The soil has become dangerous to this system and has drained all of the life from it. Yet, this absence of order and destruction spurs new life, for “[s]uch was the season when the flower bloomed” (8). Out of the waste has risen the symbol of a new source of power. “[T]hough we seek to create order,” writes Douglas, “we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power”

(94). The poem continues, “Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed Significance” (8). The folk-spirit has been changed by the introduction of disorder into the old system that can no longer last: “Superstition saw . . . Beauty so sudden for that time of year” (8). Later in Part III of *Cane*, “Kabnis,” Toomer writes that “th[e] souls of old folks have a way of seein[g] things. . . . I’ve heard them call that superstition” (113). In “November Cotton Flower,” [s]uperstition, or the outmoded conceptions of the old folk-spirit, are introduced to a being (probably Karintha) who does not comprehend, at least for a time, the anxieties of the world that she has been brought into. Davis writes that Toomer in fact saw the South as a “beautiful land of pine trees, mist, and red soil, a land in which fertility was . . . stronger than terror, though moved by a threat of violence that seemed all-pervasive” (253). The equalizing feelings of “brotherhood and community” (258) fostered by the folk-spirit are fundamentally uncertain because they are ultimately dominated by outmoded conceptions of racial hierarchy and dominance. Toomer, then, constructs a South wherein his characters serve to disrupt the cycle of oppression by taking their subjection to its logical conclusion. As Davis writes, the

signs of degeneration are present everywhere—in the lack of coordination of body and spirit, in sexual excess, and in mystical hysteria. They are external as well as internal, with the menace of physical violence, with death by lynching always close. The forces of degradation may kill the body but not destroy the integrity and the spirit of the truly strong. (254)

Karintha, then, is restored to a vibrant wild flash, unaware of the events leading to her destruction. In Karintha, Toomer constructs a character who embodies the integrity and spirit of the strong southerner whose outer body has been destroyed by violence, yet goes

on to exists as a “[s]omething . . . never seen before: / Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,” a symbol of Toomer's model of a nation free of race and, by extension, racial violence (8).

Becky

Toomer follows “November Cotton Flower” with “Becky,” a narrative describing the ritualistic banishment of a woman thought to be introducing disorder, or pollution, into her environment.⁴ Becky has been impregnated by a presumably African-American man, but his identity remains elusive throughout the story: “Becky had one Negro son. Who gave it to her? . . . She wouldn't tell” (9).⁵ Because of her offense of the taboo against miscegenation, Becky becomes a pariah in her community. As Douglas might say, Becky exists in a “marginal state”: She is “left out of the patterning of society, . . . placeless. [She] may be doing nothing morally wrong, but [her] status is indefinable” (Douglas 95). The townsfolk thus decide that she will be allowed to live in a cabin that they construct for her “on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” (*Cane* 9). They then proceed to perform a ritual intended to rid themselves and the community of her further influence. Significantly, all of the townspeople unite in this decision, regardless of their race: “White folks and black folks built her cabin, fed her and her growing baby, prayed secretly to God who'd put his cross upon her and cast her

⁴ Douglas writes that, “[P]ollution . . . inhere[s] in the structure of ideas itself and . . . punish[es] a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined” (113).

⁵ Jennifer Williams suggests that “Becky's refusal to reveal the identity of her black lover(s) hints at the violent retribution [namely, lynching] that would follow this discovery” (413). For lynching as ritual, see Harris.

out” (9). This intermingling of races here reflects Toomer’s inchoate model of racial amalgamation, though at this point it remains bound to a history of discrimination and violence. The townsfolk are apparently absolved of these actions, for they claim that “God . . . cast her out” (9). “The accusation is itself a weapon for clarifying and strengthening the structure,” writes Douglas (107). “It enables guilt to be pinned on the source of confusion and ambiguity” (107). Once Becky and her son are separated from the rest of the town, they inhabit a space that serves as a collection place for all of the waste produced by the inhabitants of the town, as well as the people passing through on trains. By sectioning off this space for Becky to inhabit, the waste of the town becomes invisible—“[n]o one ever saw her”—but it continues to build (10). As the “six trains each day rumble past” her cabin, “trainmen . . . and passengers . . . [throw] out paper and food. [And] little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers” (9). The townsfolk likewise continue to bring ultimately wasted offerings to this desecrated altar as they take “turns . . . bringing corn and meat and sweet potatoes,” muttering prayers under their breath: O thank y Jesus” (9). The buildup of waste reaches a maximum once Becky’s son turns five, and she gives birth to another “Negro” son (9). This event perhaps surprisingly causes no backlash from the town—“nothing was said, . . . [and] if there was a Becky, that Becky now was dead” (10). This stifled reaction is a result of the fear of the townsfolk in the wake of a destructive force against which all of their efforts have failed.

Becky herself enters stasis early in the narrative: “Taking [the townsfolk’s] words, they filled her, like a bubble rising—then she broke” (9). But the waste within this system cannot be done away with, only rearranged. Becky’s initial banishment by the townsfolk

is followed by another expulsion when her two sons grow up and ostensibly exile her from the cabin: “It seemed as though with those two big fellows there, there could be no room for Becky. The part [of the townsfolk] that prayed wondered if perhaps she'd really died, and they had buried her” (10). But the townsfolk maintain their reverential silence: “No one dared ask” (10). Becky's sons eventually leave town, but it appears that someone is still living in the cabin: “Becky? Smoke curled up from her chimney; she must be there” (10). The townsfolk resume their ritual offerings to Becky, but they “quit it soon because they had a fear. Becky if dead might be a hant [ghost], and if alive—it took some nerve to even mention it” (10). The townsfolk fear the destructive influence of Becky, for even after numerous attempts to do away with her, she is only moved around, never really removed.

The entropic force in the narrative peaks when eventually the periodic rumbling of the passing trains causes Becky's chimney to collapse onto the cabin. This event implicates all of the townsfolk in Becky's presumed final demise, for they are the ones who originally constructed the cabin. The ritualistic exiling of Becky to the cabin provided a means of doing away with Becky without direct violence, but eventually the disorder catches up with the town and inundates it. The townsfolk remain safely detached from Becky even after the chimney has collapsed, but soon they can no longer avoid being implicated: The “thud [of the chimney] was like a hollow report, ages having passed since it went off. [But then two of the townsfolk] were pulled out of [their] seats. Dragged to the door that had swung open. Through the dust we saw the bricks in a mound upon the floor. Becky, if she was there, lay under them” (10-11). The townsfolk can no

longer rearrange the waste in their town; it is spreading out and taking over. They fear Becky more than ever. According to Douglas, “[i]nitiands coming out of seclusion [are often treated] as if they were themselves charged with power, hot, dangerous, requiring insulation and a time for cooling down” (97). One of the townsfolk—in an act that is simultaneously an attempt at ritual sanctification as well as an active addition to the waste and disorder in the system—“mumbling something, threw his Bible on the pile” (11). But the town has already entered motionless stasis: “There was no wind. The autumn sun, the bell from Ebenezer Church, listless and heavy. Even the pines were stale, sticky, like the smell of food that makes you sick” (10).

All of the destruction and disorder in “Becky” suggests a burlesqued equilibrium of race relations akin to Toomer's vision of “racial intermingling.” Becky's taboo sexual encounter with an African-American man introduced unrest to the community that extended beyond race divisions: “Common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench, said the white folks' mouths Poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouths” (9). As mentioned above, all of the black and white inhabitants come together to build Becky's cabin and section her off from the rest of the community: “[T]he white folks said they'd have no more to do with her. And the black folks, they too joined hands to cast her out” (9). Again, we see Toomer working out his broader conception of racial intermingling that at this stage remains bound to a history of discrimination and violence. Becky's sons exemplify disorder just as their mother does, but to a stronger degree. They not only ostensibly banish her from the cabin, they lash out violently at others, seemingly with little or no provocation: “They'd beat and cut a man

who meant nothing at all in mentioning that they lived along the road” (10). Yet their violence is not race-biased; in fact, it is entirely mindless, for they have too reached a point of stasis: “White or colored? No one knew, and least of all themselves. They drifted around from job to job. They answered black and white folks by shooting up two men and leaving town. “Godam the white folks; godam the niggers,’ they shouted as they left town” (10). All of the abjection and violence in the narrative compound to show that the ritualistic attempts by the townsfolk to “positively re-orde[r] [their] environment, to mak[e] it conform to an idea” (Douglas 2), are in themselves fruitless. But the end result is the same as what was initially intended: “Becky was a white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they've gone away . . . The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound” (9). The townsfolk indeed purge the community of the disorder introduced by Becky, but it isn't through ritual or superstition—relics of the folk-spirit; it is by a commingling of the racially disparate townsfolk, unwittingly united in an effort to do away with an outmoded taboo. Here we see Toomer testing the limits of racial intermingling through his characters. These characters ultimately remain a part of the world of the folk-spirit that is bound to discrimination and violence. And while the flashes of possible racial intermingling may ultimately fail in “Becky,” we must remember that Toomer uses *Cane* to explore possible options of a way forward in the midst of entropic forces—a way forward that is, even to Toomer, completely new.

Song of the Son and Blood-Burning Moon

Toomer continues to lament the folk-spirit while suggesting hope for a new beginning in a subsequent poem in the volume, “Song of the Son.” In this poem Toomer

“equates the ‘[p]assing’ of the African American folk-song tradition with the ‘parting soul’ of a lynched slave” (Edmunds 153). “Song of the Son” is a lyrical expression of Toomer's experience during his sojourn to the South that foreshadows a subsequent narrative, “Blood-Burning Moon,” which peaks with a lynching ritual: “O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree, / So scant of grass, so profligate of pines, / Now just before an epoch's sun declines / Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee, / Thy son, I have in time returned to thee” (16). Erich Nunn writes:

[“Song of the Son”] mourns the passing of [the folk-spirit], and at the same time claims a filial relationship between [it] and the narrator The dying folk culture that the [poem] represents provides a kernel for new artistic expression: 'Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums' provide a 'seed,' which 'becomes // An everlasting song, a singing tree / Caroling softly souls of slavery. . . .' [The poem] distances itself formally from the songs sung by 'Negro slaves.' [It] is written in unbroken iambic pentameter, and its stylized, formal diction distinguishes it from the songs whose passing it evokes. (183-84)

In this poem, we clearly see the way that Toomer uses the creative impetus he draws from the “rich dusk beauty” of the moribund folk-spirit as means to create in a new mode. Indeed, this poem, as Nunn puts it, “can productively be read as a microcosm of *Cane* in its invocation of a dying folk heritage that [Toomer] transmutes into modernist literary art” (183-84). In this way, Toomer, having internalized the qualities of the folk-spirit, acts as surrogate and translator, taking it upon himself to show not only “[w]hat they were, [but also] what they are to [him]” (16).⁶

⁶ Bernard Bell writes that “[t]he key to the irony and yoking together of disparate elements in this poem is found in the play on the word 'son' in the last two lines of the [second] stanza. The pun is a subtle allusion to the Son of God, which in the context of the rapid association of ideas in the poem, stresses the Christian paradox that in death there is life” (231).

Toomer closes Part I of *Cane* with “Blood-Burning Moon,” a narrative about an interracial love triangle that ends in a tragic uproar of racially-charged violence. The story opens with a depiction of a “pre-war cotton factory” in a state of decay: “Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards . . . , dusk came” (31). The image of the “full moon” illuminating the “great door” of the factory functions as “an omen” that signals the end to the world the characters presently inhabit, and the “Negro women improvised songs against its spell” (31). This ritual, however, is another failed attempt at staving off disorder.

In the story Louisa, an African-American, is loved by two men, Bob Stone, who is white, and Tom Burwell, or Big Boy, who is Black. Louisa lives in “factory town,” but works for Bob's family at a once thriving plantation (31). Louisa too is marginalized, for she continually crosses the boundaries between the industrialized world and the world of the folk-spirit. Although the plantation way of life has passed, the notion of the master-slave dynamic still lives on in Bob's mind: “His family had lost ground. Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically” (34). Writing about Thomas Sutpen from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Alia C. Y. Pan writes that the “plantation complex provides [him] with his appearance of dominance and psychic imperviousness” (417). The same could be said for Bob, who clings to the memory of the plantation way of life. However, the debris of the old way must be cleared in order for a change to take place. The barrier that the plantation system provides Bob must be completely broken down, and this happens via Tom, who shows Bob that he is no longer in control as in the plantation days.

The potential for racial intermingling presented in the tentative relationship between Louisa and Bob is stifled by the love that Tom shows for her, and this tension keeps Louisa marginalized, unable to fully integrate into a racially mixed world: “[T]he fact was that [Tom] held [Louisa] to factory town more firmly than he thought His black balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them” (31). Neither Bob nor Tom interest Louisa to a great degree on their own, “[b]ut for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon” (31). As Louisa gazes at the looming omen, the idea of racial intermingling, the idea that Bob and Tom are somehow one, causes a “stir” of both excitement and fear with her (31). The ritualistic song she had been “[singing] softly at the evil face of the full moon . . . [grows] agitant and restless,” as do the “hounds” and “[c]hickens . . . all over the countryside . . . as if heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening” (31). Louisa, Bob, and Tom all exist in a marginal state, threatening the old way of life. As their identities merge, the possibility of intermingling spreads and provokes the natural world of the animals and even the moon-lit heavens. The old system can no longer sustain itself, and a violent culmination is at hand.

The violence carried out by Tom in “Blood-Burning Moon” likewise crosses racial boundaries, as Toomer again uses scenes of abjection to highlight latent disorder of the folk-spirit. Tom lashes out at African-Americans several times before he goes after Bob. He says that he “already cut two niggers. . . . Niggers always trying t make somethin out a nothing” (33). His violence acts as an equalizing force; it is not racially biased. He goes on to say that “white folks aint up t them tricks so much nowadays”—a sign that

change has already begun within this system (33). Yet Tom does not hesitate to threaten violence against whites as well, vowing that he would “[cut them] jes like [he] cut a nigger” (33). Although Tom's most significant act of violence is against a white man, he shows no prejudice when wielding his blade.

Toomer instills the sense that race division requires conscious effort to maintain in “Blood-Burning Moon”. The scene opening Part III of the story shows Bob straining to stave off the dissolution of his static whiteness: “The clear white of [Bob's] skin paled, and the flush of his cheeks turned purple. As if to balance this outer change, his mind became consciously a white man's” (34). Bob's frenzied interrogation of racial boundaries continues throughout this scene. He rationalizes his feelings for Louisa to himself:

He was going to see Louisa to-night, and love her. She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew. Must know. He'd known her long enough to know. Was there something about niggers that you couldn't know? . . . Looking at them didnt tell you anything. Talking to them didn't tell you anything . . . Nigger was something more. How much more? Something to be afraid of, more? . . . [Louisa] was worth it. Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not, just gal? No, it was because she was nigger that he went to her. (34-35)

Bob's internal struggle highlights his uncertainty concerning race division. Subsequently his emotions reach a fever-pitch, and he makes his way out to factory town to find Louisa. On the drive, Bob wrecks into the “bordering canebrake” when a “blindness within him veer[s] him aside” (35). He is cut by cane leaves in the crash, and he tastes blood. He gets down and buries his fingers in the dirt of the earth, taking on the pure form of disorder, fully abandoning his whiteness. He merges with Tom, as he “bites down on his lips” and tastes “[n]ot his own blood; Tom Burwell's blood” (35). The animals

continue to echo this crescendo as “[t]he hound yelped. . . . Chickens cackled. Roosters crowed, heralding the bloodshot eyes of southern awakening” (35). The “[s]ingers in the town were silenced. They shut their windows down” (35-36). The ritualistic spell-casting has failed completely. A “chill hush settled upon the huddled forms of Tom and Louisa” (36). All that is left are the equalizing forces of violence and disorder.

The subsequent knife fight between Bob and Tom ends with Tom slitting Bob's throat. As Bob “stagger[s] toward . . . white town,” the “Negroes who had seen the fight slunk into their homes and blew the lamps out” (36). Louisa enters stasis, “dazed, confused, hysterical” (36). The people of the town know that their entire system has failed, and no ritual will stave off the ensuing heat-death. Bob soon makes his way to a crowd of white men and “collapse[s] in their arms” (36). In another ambiguous blending of identities, all that is uttered is “Tom Burwell” (36). A mob forms, a “silent” wave of “white men like ants,” their feet becoming one with the “thick dust of the road”: “The moving body of their silence preceded them over the crest of the hill into factory town. It flattened the Negroes beneath it. It rolled to the wall of the factory, where it stopped. Tom knew that they were coming. He couldn't move” (36-37). The “pressure” and “momentum” of this great force “drag[s] [Bob] to the factory” (37). The mob constructs a mound of waste—“[r]otting floor boards piled around”—a stake (37). Tom ceases to be; only the destructive flames are visible—“[w]hen there is no differentiation there is no defilement.” The yells of the mob drown out all other sound and multiply, echoing “[l]ike a hundred mobs yelling” (37). Louisa remains marginalized, neither inside nor outside, but “upon the step of her home” (37). Her eyes open, and she once again sees the full

moon, now “showering the homes of the folks she knew” (37). The moonlight bathes the town, dissolving all boundaries, illuminating the atrocities inherent in the old way for all to see. Louisa, however, automatically resumes her ritualistic singing, hoping to rid the town of the omen and bring Tom Burwell back, for “the full moon . . . was an omen which she must sing to: Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact'ry door” (37). But all of the rituals of the old way of life have failed. Racial division has brought only death and violence to the town. And as Tom burns at the stake, his identity mingles with that of Karintha's child and all of the other “common rubbish” within Part I of *Cane*. Once more, I turn to Douglas:

In its last phase then, dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness. But it is from its first phase that it derives its force. The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos. Ritual which can harness these for good is harnessing power indeed. (161)

The power generated by the “boundary transgressions” within “Blood-Burning Moon” is the impetus for the ultimate equilibrium achieved by the ritual lynching of Tom Burwell. Although the racial intermingling of Bob and Louisa comes to an abrupt end, the possibilities that this union introduced to the town linger. As the omen of the full moon bathes the entire town with its glow, Louisa's outmoded ritual is rendered mute, and all of those within the town are undifferentiated and without identity, pushed into the margins and awaiting what is to come: “Where were they, these people?” (37). Edmunds writes,

As the historical meaning of blackness comes to reside in involuntary muteness, *Cane* zeroes in on the core question of how to forge an authentic and self-emancipating mode of national black expression. Toomer's startling solution to this question is to redefine blackness itself as the sum of a historically changing and changeable relation between unconsciously and consciously articulated memories of racist atrocity. (146)

The rituals of the folk-spirit rendered useless, a new racial identity that encompasses all that has come before it must be forged—an identity that carries the memory of a rude past yet seeks to express it in a new way.

Kabnis

Part II of *Cane* differs from Parts I and III both aesthetically and regionally. Davis claims that Part II carries a “symbolic complexity” and a “level of abstraction” missing from the rest of the novel that reflects a “deliberate correspondence between Toomer's literary technique and the complexity of the Northern urban environment” (256-57). According to Davis, Toomer returns to the “reasonably straightforward narratives” of Part I in the concluding dramatic narrative of the novel, “Kabnis” (256). While Davis's claim may ostensibly minimize the depth of significance and artistry of the Georgia tales, especially in light of Nunn's lauding of “Song of the Son” mentioned above, I concede that “Kabnis” is indeed a return to form, a lucid, quasi-autobiographical account of Toomer's encounters with the folk-spirit that serves to reiterate the degeneration of the folk-spirit from Part I in even plainer terms. In the story, Ralph Kabnis, a fictionalized Toomer, is a possible candidate for the new “face of the South,” yet here, as does Toomer's burgeoning conception of an American race, his potential remains inchoate, still a “dream” (81). For Kabnis, the North, too, is a dream, a “fiction,” and whatever

possibilities offered there now amount to nothing more than a feeling of “impotent nostalgia” when faced with the violent fecundity of the South (83). Despite the steps that Toomer makes toward a salient conception of racial equilibrium in Part I, “Kabnis” is a race-focused tale, wherein the

winds, like soft-voiced vagrant poets sing:

White-man's land.
Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground. (85)

A version of the burlesqued racial equality we see concerning Becky's sons shows up again here as well, when teacher, preacher, and Georgia native Professor Layman says to Kabnis, “Nigger's a nigger down this away, Professor. An only two dividins: good an bad. An even they aint permanent categories. They sometimes mixes um up when it comes t lynchin. I've seem um do it” (87). Here Toomer again relies on violence as an equalizing force. This time, however, violence serves as a strictly negative force, for the mock equality spoken of here does not exceed racial barriers to equalize diverse racial groups; it serves only to deprive African-Americans of all identity. Layman goes on to recount to Kabnis the story of Mame Lamkin’s violent death, a “fictionalized treatment of the lynching of Mary Turner, which took place in Valdosta, Georgia, in 1915” (Byrd and Gates, Jr. 90). In which a pregnant woman and her unborn baby were murdered due to the mother's attempt to “hide her husband when [a mob was] after him” (*Cane* 90). Layman's

account here is crucial, for in this example, perhaps more saliently than in any other in *Cane*, we see Toomer blurring the lines between fiction and fact in an attempt to effect real change via his art. Reiterated here is Toomer's belief in the violent and the abject within his art—"split-gut, tortured, twisted words"—as means for him to (re)interpret racial atrocities in such a way that serves to show their place within his conception of a new race born from entropic violence and degeneration. Alas, in this example, the delivery is botched, as the violence fails to lead to an equilibrium: "They killed [Mame] in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay open there soppo in her blood . . . took an ripped her belly open, an the kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away" (90). Unlike Karintha's baby, hidden, buried, and equally distributed by the smoldering sawdust mound, Mame's is put on display for all to see. The regenerative qualities resultant of Karintha's ritual seen in "November Cotton Flower" are absent here, for the degeneration of the folk-spirit is spreading to all parts of Toomer's South. Gone is the rich dusk beauty, and in its place a

false dusk has come early. The countryside is ashen, chill. Cabins and roads and canebrakes whisper. The church choir, dipping into a long silence, sings:

My Lord, what a mourning,
.....
When the stars begin to fall. (91)

Amidst the calamity in "Kabnis," Toomer presents us with a series of character sketches for possible models of the new face of the South. First, of course, is

Kabnis/Toomer, an educated African-American man, who returns to the southern world of the folk-spirit from the North to teach. Though he tries to synthesize his experiences in the North with his southern reality, he ultimately becomes a “scarecrow replica” of himself, “[f]antastically plastered with red Georgia mud” (91). Like Bob in “Blood-Burning Moon,” Kabnis takes on the physical form of disorder, or dirt. He, too, exists as a liminal character, caught up in, to borrow Davis's words, his southern reality, despite his northern intelligence. Next we have Hanby, another character that exists on the threshold between self-assurance and subservience. Toomer describes him as a “well-dressed, smooth, rich, black-skinned Negro who thinks there is no one quite so suave and polished as himself. To members of his own race, he affects the manners of a wealthy planter. Or, when he is up North, he lets it be known that his ideas are those of the best New England tradition. To white men he bows, without ever completely humbling himself” (93). Hanby has what one might call a southern intelligence: he has devised ways in which to partially maintain his dignity while placating his oppressors. He exacts his “moral superiority” when he fires Kabnis from his teaching position for disobediently drinking on school grounds, citing his personal credo, “To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race. . . . I cannot hinder the progress of a race simply to indulge a single member” (93). In Hanby we see the logical end to the path guided by southern intelligence. Although he maintains some version of a dignified identity, he ultimately continues to bow to white men, never really bringing the two races closer to equilibrium. Next there is Lewis, “a tall wiry copper-colored man, thirty perhaps. His mouth and eyes suggest purpose guided by an adequate intelligence. He is

what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and in an odd faint way resembles him” (95). Lewis represents what Toomer/Kabnis would be if he were able to bring his unique conception of race out of the world of dreams and use it as a real influence in the physical world. Lewis is able to cross over to the physical world, for as Toomer writes, “as he steps towards the others, he seems to be issuing sharply from a vivid dream” (95). Lewis's potential makes itself fully know when he comes into contact with Carrie Kate, a Karintha-like character who “flashes vividly” even in her routine task of bringing the working men of the town lunch: “Their meeting is a swift sunburst. Lewis impulsively moves towards her. His mind flashes images of her life in a southern town. He sees the nascent woman, her flesh already stiffened to cartilage, drying to bone. Her spirit-bloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading (101). This commiserative encounter is cut short, however, as her devotion to the outmoded folk-spirit, which here in “Kabnis” takes on the corporeal form of the “old man,” draws her and urges her to “marc[h] with a rigid gravity to her task of feeding” him, keeping him alive (101).

The old man, Father John, The Folk-Spirit incarnate, is “like a bust in black walnut. Gray-bearded. Gray-haired. Prophetic. Immobile. . . . A mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a tongue-tied shadow of an old” (104). Certainly he is the latter: the “[d]ead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them” (104). Kabnis denies that the Spirit has become useless. He proceeds in Section V of the story to put on a mock service down in the cellar under the workshop where he now works, a ritual intended to get the mute old man to speak, to impart some sort of ancient knowledge that will show him how to bring the new face of the South out

of the world of dreams—a “futile effort to extract wisdom from . . . the old black man who is a vestige of the slave civilization,” as Davis puts it (260). “Kabnis, with great mock-solemnity, goes to the corner, takes down the robe, and dons it. He is a curious spectacle, acting a part, yet very real” (105). Lewis knows that ritualistic behaviors such as this are useless, that the old man no longer has anything to offer them, that he is but a “symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past” (106). Lewis's better judgment is ignored, however, and the scene further degrades until he “finds himself completely cut out. The glowing within him subsides. It is followed by a dead chill. . . . [T]he southern town descend[s] upon him. . . . He cannot stand it. He bolts from the table. Leaps up the stairs. Plunges through the work-shop and out into the night” (110). Toomer's most promising symbol of the new face of the South is thus banished by the overwhelming force of the southern town, the residual influence of *The Folk-Spirit*.

Toomer completes his exploration of the efficacy of the residual folk-spirit to incite racial equilibrium within the modern industrial landscape in Section VI of “Kabnis.” He opens the section with a description of the cellar in scientific terms reminiscent of cell-replication taking place on a slide under a microscope:

The cellar swims in a pale phosphorescence. The table, the chairs, the figure of the old man are amoeba-like shadows, which move about and float in it. In the corner under the steps, close to the floor, a solid blackness. A sound comes from it. A forcible yawn. Part of the blackness detaches itself so that it may be seen against the grayness of the wall. It moves forward and then seems to be clothing itself in odd dangling bits of shadow. The voice of Halsey, vibrant and deepened, calls. (110)

We can justifiably read this scene as a resolution to Toomer's dilemma. The possibility exists that what is described here is a version of the birth of the new face of the South. Here the solid blackness bears an offspring, who is at first distinguished against the grayness of the wall, but is then re-clothed in dark shadow: an entity that could be said to successfully synthesize southern realities and northern intelligence. This offshoot could be Halsey, who calls out, among other things, “[w]ork.” “Work” is significant if we consider Toomer's post-*Cane* devotion to the spiritual teachings of George Gurdjieff, which were heavily focused on physical labor, a point to which I return momentarily.

Alternatively, what we see in Section VI is the most concise and promising summary of the way forward for the new face of the South from a Toomer not yet influenced by the teachings of Gurdjieff. This summary is shown most aptly in the interaction between Kabnis, Carrie Kate, and The Folk-Spirit. In this section, we see how Toomer masterfully encapsulates the history of the South from the days of the folk-spirit up to the *Cane* years in this single section. The primordial introductory scene, which could easily take place in the mind of the sleeping, half- drunk Kabnis, leads into moments reminiscent of the earth's earliest societies. Halsey starts a fire; “[o]utside, darkness has given way to the impalpable grayness of dawn. . . . Halsey's coals throw out a rich warm glow.” Definite darkness is replaced with indifferent grayness that bears new possibility. As the girls present with Kabnis at the mock service the night before are “before the mirror, . . . doing up their hair. . . . [T]hey kneel there, heavy-eyed and dusky, and throwing grotesque moving shadows on the wall, they are two princesses of Africa going through the early-morning ablutions of their pagan prayers” (111). Time moves

forward, as captured in some ancient cave drawing. Kabnis, in his dazed state, launches a tirade against the old man, The Folk-Spirit, recapping the atrocities resultant of racial inequality: “[d]o y think youre out of slavery?” (112). Just then, Carrie, “lovely in her fresh energy of the morning,” joins Kabnis and the old man. Though the potential for change exists in her, she still believes wholeheartedly in the old man’s wisdom. The old man finally and surprisingly speaks near the end of the story: “Father John (remarkably clear and with great conviction): Sin. . . . O th sin the white folks [com]mitted when they made th Bible lie” (114). Kabnis, though unimpressed, says, significantly, “Lewis ought to have been here,” implying that some truth relevant to the new face of the South has been expressed (114). But Lewis, the most promising character sketch of the new face of the South, is long gone by this point. Thus the burden lands with Carrie, the only character apt to bear such weight. The heavy words of the old man that, despite his age and infirmity, have awakened something in the reluctant Kabnis, the botched son of the South. Carrie “turns [Kabnis] to her and takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hand. Her palms draw the fever out. With its passing, Kabnis crumples. He sinks to his knees before her, ashamed, exhausted” (114-15). Kabnis is powerless before Carrie, who, like Karintha, consumes the deadly superstition of the old spirit in her rich dusk beauty. Then, Carrie notices that Kabnis is still wearing the robe from his mock ceremony for the folk-spirit, be it wedding or wake: “She catches up to him, points to it, and helps him take it off. He hangs it, with exaggerated ceremony, on its nail in the corner” (115). Kabnis, finally, utterly, leaves the old way behind. And in this moment, the close of *Cane*, “the sun arises from its cradle in the tree tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the

sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (115). The final abandonment of the folk-spirit paired with the violent energy of the “nascent” (113) Carrie conclude in a birth-song that is primed to usher in the new face of the South.

This summary of the rebirth via entropic energy that Toomer instills throughout *Cane* may be too hopeful, however. Since many of the instances of racial intermingling in the text are either inchoate or burlesqued, Toomer’s overall conception of racial amalgamation expressed therein may ultimately result in failure. While Carrie appears capable of consuming the violence and discrimination of the folk-spirit in her fertile beauty, we have no way of knowing if the new face of the South will end up a part of the mass of common rubbish. Certainly the creative energy that Toomer derived from his time in Sparta appears to wane in the years following *Cane*, along with his possible candidacy as the new face of the South.

After Cane

The years following *Cane* were difficult for Toomer the author, as well as Toomer the man. The equilibrium he sought through *Cane* was not only political; it was personal. He writes, “[d]uring the winter of 1923, owing to a complex of causes, my writing stopped; and my disharmony became distressingly prominent. So it became clear that my literary occupations had not worked deep to make of me an integrated man. Had it done so for others?” (“The Gurdjieff Experience” 128). Toomer is faced with the same breakdown of culture that is central to *Cane* in these years. As the folk-spirit degenerates

in the novel, Toomer sees the world around him crumbling. “The modern world was uprooted,” he writes, “the modern world was breaking down, but we couldn't go back. There was nothing to go back to” (129, Toomer’s emphasis). He echoes the fear of modernity central to *Cane* when he writes that the “peasantry as America had had . . . was swiftly disappearing, swiftly being industrialized and urbanized by machines, motor cars, phonographs, movies” (129). It is clear that he believed that real change would come about through his art, and when this did not happen, he was confounded. This disappointment left him searching for stasis, what he calls “balanced development” (131). He would find means for achieving such private balance in the teachings of Russian spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff.

One cannot write about Toomer after *Cane* without at least mentioning his wholehearted devotion to George Gurdjieff that began in the mid-1920s and would continue throughout the rest of his life. Much has been written about Toomer's involvement with Gurdjieff and his combination of psychological and spiritual teachings paired with physical labor. For Toomer, Gurdjieff provided a scheme that “gave [him] direction and helped him move on the way out of the chaos of modern civilization” (131). While Toomer's devotion to Gurdjieff is not my focus here, suffice it to say that Gurdjieff's teachings were always playing in the back of Toomer's mind in the years following *Cane*. The influence of Gurdjieff on Toomer, however, should not be overstated, for Toomer writes that upon first learning about Gurdjieff's teachings, he felt that he had found “expressed, more completely and with more authority than with anything possible for [him], just the conditions of man which [he himself] had realized”

(131). Gurdjieff's teachings, then, while essential to our understanding of Toomer after *Cane*, were, for him, merely an alternative way of expressing a hope for harmony amidst the chaos and abjection of an inescapable past and an uncertain future that he himself had already been pursuing in *Cane* and elsewhere.

Toomer continued looking for ways to move forward by looking back after *Cane*. In the manuscript for an unpublished autobiography to be titled "Earth-Being," drafted in the late 1920s and early 1930s and later published in 1980 in Turner's collection of Toomer's writings, *The Wayward and the Seeking* as "Reflections of an Earth-Being," Toomer looks back on his early years in an attempt to devise a way to move ahead in the modern world. Here we see Toomer's plan for a racial equilibrium that is set out in *Cane* given, to borrow his words, "tangible here-and-now on earth embodiment" (19). As he visualizes his own birth in the essay, he writes that he is "fashioned on no antecedent" and that he will be a "prototype for those to come" (16). Toomer sees himself, due to his diverse racial heritage and unique belief that he was of a new race—simply American—as the prototype for the physical representation of racial equilibrium. He imagines here that he came from a place of stasis, "a unitary world," into a world of "contrasts and opposites" (17). He believes that he was destined to share his conception of equilibrium from birth. Although to his family baby Jean was "unmistakably a Toomer," he believed that he "resembled [him]self" (17). He does not find a reaffirmed individuality in this belief, however; it is quite the opposite. He writes,

As I grew up, as I began to develop and differentiate spiritually, as I became psychologically individualized, my expression and even my features underwent a

corresponding change. Now, at the present time, they are such that . . . I have the appearance of a sort of universal man. . . . All of this has served to nonidentify me from any special group and to contribute to the experiences of which give rise to my realization that I am a human being existing on this earth. (19)

Toomer chooses not to claim his universality as a distinguishing trait, but instead as a reflection of his belief in the commonness of all earth-beings. This is the vision he hopes to communicate in *Cane*. As he traces his development in the essay, he sets out his plan to change the here-and-now via his art. He writes,

[n]or has it been enough that I understand; I must see my understandings produce results in human experience. Productivity is my first value. . . . As an artist I must shape human relationships. . . .

I am building a world.

To build a world is . . . to make and shape a portion of the external world so that it progressively corresponds to one's own developing needs and functions. (19-20)

For Toomer, then, his art is but a means for him to communicate his political and cultural vision. For as he writes, “[he] would much rather form a man than form a book” (19).

This trait, while expressly clear in his post-*Cane* work, which in many cases exists as merely a platform for Gurdjieff's teachings, is, as Toomer admits here, likewise present in *Cane*. The difference being that he had yet to filter his ideas through Gurdjieff's in the pre-*Cane* years. Toomer's art, then, is and was always a platform for his beliefs, even before his devotion to Gurdjieff. *Cane* was always to be a catalyst for change.

About himself as an artist, Toomer writes that he is a “poetic realist,” who aims to “clothe and give body to potentialities” (20). Indeed, what we see in *Cane* is the breakdown of the folk-spirit, the outmoded models of race relations, through a series of constructive

crises. And although Toomer presents us with potential, the text itself does not leave us with clear examples of what possibilities such potential provides. Toomer's writings about race apart from the novel enlighten us to his view leading up to its writing, and these materials are a great help in terms of our understanding of Toomer's progressive racial views. Turning to such writings again will help to shed light on Toomer's evolving views on race in the post-*Cane* years.

In 1929, about the time that he was drafting his autobiographical "Earth-Being," Toomer published "Race Problems and Modern Society," an essay in which Toomer sets out his conception of the American within a changing racial landscape, his thesis being that "[m]odern society is in flux" (169). That Toomer believed himself to be purely American is clear, but such a classification is itself in flux within a changing country. Here he writes in his post-*Cane* mode, replacing the call for constructive crises through entropy found in the novel with his conception of the "cohesion" and "crystallization" that must take place, now that society has entered a state of constant change: "[T]he principles of cohesion and crystallization are being rapidly withdrawn from the materials of old forms, with a consequent break up of these forms, a setting free of these materials, with the possibility that [these principles] will recombine the stuff of life and make new forms" (168). Here he admits the persistent disharmony that exists within society, though the constructive crises set out in *Cane* have indeed taken place. He writes that "the movement of forces that have . . . broken from old forms . . . have not yet achieved stability in new forms" (169). Though Toomer is clearly still hard at work on his conception of racial equilibrium, he does provide us with at least one valuable

conclusion: “since race problems are social and psychological in origin, they can be fundamentally dealt with—they can be radically changed and even eliminated—by use of the proper social and psychological instruments” (65). These instruments coalesced for Toomer in *Cane*. It was in *Cane* that he expressed his inchoate conception of racial equilibrium in the face of what only later he would articulate as constructive crises. It is regrettable that by 1929 Toomer felt the need to abandon his mission to bring about real change via his art and to consider a new way of bringing about “racial . . . amalgamation,” by way of what he calls the “need and desirability of breeding on the basis of biological fitness” (74). *Cane* is ultimately the creation of a man who was searching for a way to solve race problems that would account for all aspects of race difference—be they beautiful or tragic, destructive or constructive—in an entirely new way. That he saw himself as a possible ambassador for the new face of the South is clear, but he never sought individuality, only harmony. He underlines the difficulty of such ambition when he writes, “man, the destructive being, still is stronger than man, the intelligent being. The destructive part of us is increasing, even while our intelligence expands. . . . And thus we face the possibility that we, who have . . . enough knowledge to separate the atom, may fail to separate men from their antagonisms” (75).

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THE PEASANT VISIONARY, THE DYING GOD: SACRIFICE AND REBIRTH
IN W. B. YEATS'S *THE WIND AMONG THE REEDS*

Yeats prefaces the original 1896 publication of his poem “The Valley of the Black Pig”⁷ with this illuminating anecdote: “[t]he Irish peasantry have for generations comforted themselves, in their misfortunes, with visions of a great battle, to be fought in a mysterious valley . . . and to break at last the power of their enemies” (“Valley” 109). “The Valley of the Black Pig” and “A Cradle Song” were published together in *The Savoy* under the heading, *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries* (1896). Yeats writes of “faery children” who “clap their hands” in “A Cradle Song,” but it is ultimately a poem haunted by “[d]esolate winds” and “many a whimpering ghost” (“Valley” 109). The years that followed would themselves be haunted by desolate winds and “apocalyptic imaginings” for the poet (Brown 112). But he welcomes the apocalypse, for it is a way for him to engage—and perish—in battle. *In Yeats and the Heroic Ideal*, Alex Zwerdling says that Yeats's life is characterized by a “desperat[e] . . . search for spiritual authority” (146). He therefore chose aspects from differing faiths in order to devise a belief system that would best serve his own understanding of the world. He internalized features of the mythology and teachings from diverse religions from across the globe, including ancient Ireland, Christianity, and Buddhism, among others. But this system was always evolving because for him, “life is a chaos, a world in constant motion, a flux, and a man’s spiritual

⁷ I use “Valley” to refer to this version of the poem, originally published in *The Savoy*.

search is not a desire to escape into stillness and serene contemplation”; indeed, for him, “the only absolute realm is itself in constant motion” (150). *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) exemplifies this fact, for in this volume he consistently uses symbols and images representative of all of these myths and religions but only in ways which reinforce his peculiar understanding of the potential for power they promise him as heir. He relies heavily on the myths of his native Ireland, for the “supernatural world of Tir-na-n-Og . . . was close enough to human experience and the ordinary life of man to make it particularly useful for a poet who was trying to emphasize the relationship between the two.” More importantly, the Irish “hero becomes godlike as the gods become human” (147). This fact is central to his use of myth and lore in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, specifically in the underrated and often overlooked “The Valley of the Black Pig,” as well as in the well-known “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” wherein he challenges the “Master” with his sacrifice in order to be reborn with new, supernatural power (“Valley” 109).

Yeats’s Fascination with Death

Yeats's belief in the possibility of renewal via sacrifice can be traced back to a fascination with death that he developed early in his life, a fact that becomes clear when we read his reflective biographical essays. He was a lonely, melancholy child. “Indeed,” he writes in “Reveries over Childhood and Youth” (1916), “I remember little of childhood but its pain” (45). As a result of his albeit inexplicable depression—he admits that “[t]here was no reason for [his] unhappiness”—he developed a fixation on death that lasted throughout his life. “Having prayed for several days that I might die,” he writes, “I

had begun to be afraid that I was dying and prayed that I might live” (41). His fascination with tempting death would continue after this scare, and what had started as a bastion of escapism for young Yeats soon developed into a potential source of power for him, as he recounts when he writes, “one day when I threw a stone and hit a duck in the yard by mischance and broke its wing, I was full of wonder when I was told that the duck would be cooked for dinner and that I should not be punished” (42). We see here in this anecdote that he began to understand death as a controllable force of change in his world from a young age. He would soon fantasize about using this power to claim the glory that he felt was missing from his natural lineage for himself. He goes on to say,

[l]ater on I can remember being told, when there was a rumour of a Fenian rising, . . . when I had begun to dream of my future life, I thought I would like to die fighting the Fenians. I was to build a very fast and beautiful ship and to have under my command a company of young men . . . , and there was to be a big battle on the sea shore . . . and I was to be killed. (47)

Shortly after Yeats was born, his father, John Butler Yeats (1839-1922), gave up his career in law in order to become a painter in London. His father's choice of a bohemian lifestyle ensured that young William and his siblings had to tolerate an air of superiority from lookers-on in Sligo, where they spent much of their time during those years (Foster, “Background and Youth”). On his father's side, mostly made up of “clergyman,” “lawyers,” and the like, Yeats was a descendant of the “great Norman clan of the Butlers,” but ties to any real nobility are dubious (Foster, “Background and Youth”). On his mother's side—the Pollexfens of Sligo were “business people, property developers, and town councillors—ornaments of that forgotten class, the Irish Victorian bourgeoisie”

(Foster, "Background and Youth"). Yeats, however, had no problem placing himself within the Irish mythological heritage by identifying with great icons of Irish lore—Oisín, Cúchulainn, Aengus—within his personal and poetic phantasmagoria. "All the well-known families had their grotesque or tragic or romantic legends," he writes, "and I often said to myself how terrible it would be to go away and die where nobody would know my story" ("Reveries" 49). Yeats's fixation on death would soon develop into a belief in the regenerative power of resurrection via sacrifice, a belief that would be a thematic underpinning for much of his early work.

Just as Yeats was dissatisfied with what sort of legacy his birthright would afford him, he was equally apt to construct his own theory of spiritualism, a theory that would provide him with more possibilities for power through rebirth than traditional religion and even esoteric occult connections offered. Indeed from an early age he had "felt the need of a faith to replace orthodox Christianity [and therefore] made up his own" (Brown 114). However, he did not fully abandon his Christian beliefs, and he continued to incorporate them into his spiritualistic and theosophical practices, the central notion of resurrection notwithstanding. Yeats's use of Christian imagery and symbolism in his work is important enough to note. As Zwerdling claims, he "often opposes [the] two transcendental worlds . . . of Christianity and Irish myth. . . . Nevertheless, in many significant works [he] treats Christian belief and story with respect" (148). This inconsistency can be partly explained by the fact that he "objected to the Church, not to the religion" itself: "[t]he institutional aspects of Christianity, the 'rules' and the clergy, were for him the unacceptable aspects of a powerful spiritual doctrine" (148). Similarly,

he was “concerned only with the mystical experience itself and ignored the more formal and less private aspects of religion, such as dogma, creeds, liturgy, and worship” (149). This led him to explore the mystical possibilities of Christianity. But he found the mystical approach to be too comfortable (150). For “the mystic is too willing to accept supernatural phenomena on faith alone, while [Yeats's] age demand[ed] a kind of scientific certainty because of the nagging scepticism which affect[ed] even the most willing believers” (150). He had similar complaints about Buddhism and Hinduism, for they offered liberation from the material world and Yeats “is as much interested in the movement which leads downward into life as upward away from it” (150-51). The shortcomings he found in all of these doctrines led him to explore the world of the occult, and he would continue to explore the limits of what power this world could offer him throughout his life. But after his failed experiments with the Theosophical Society in the mid- and late 1880s, this idiosyncratic faith left him “trapped by the inadequacies of his own nature,” “in despair before the powers of the universe,” and disillusioned with what power the occult could afford him (Brown 111-12). As a result, he struggled with the “paradox that he could gain occult power as a man and poet only through the ultimate sacrifice of himself” (112). He expresses these shortcomings in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, for the battle in the “mysterious valley” in “The Valley of the Black Pig,” “the turmoil of the heavens [,] is the poet's projected on a cosmic scale” (Harwood 80). We likewise see him express his “doom-laden yearnings” over the following years in “the chiliastic note” of the other works eventually collected in the volume—especially “The

Song of Wandering Aengus”—wherein Yeats longs to perish so that he might be resurrected with new power (Brown 112).

Yeats’s Occult Interests

Yeats's unusual fascination with the death and the afterlife led him to explore esoteric means of communion with the spiritual world. Reluctant to accept traditional models of religion and spirituality, the maturing Yeats looked to eastern teachings and the occult for religious systems that better meshed with his idiosyncratic world views. In the years leading into young adulthood, he “took the revival of eastern wisdom very seriously and dabbled in a wide range of esoteric 'sciences' including cheirosophy (palmistry), celestial dynamics (astrology), chromopathy (healing by colors), and polygraphics (a form of automatic writing)” (Washington 91). He found a synthesis of these ideas early on in the Theosophical teachings of Madame Blavastky. It was from books written by Blavatsky's acolyte Alfred Sinnet, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) and *The Occult World* (1881), that he began learning about this new, theosophical way to approach religion, as well as about India—which became “a version of the Sligo of his dreams” in his poetry (“An Indian Song”)—and the Mahatmas, whose unwritten tradition harkened back to the memory of his mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen (1841-1900), and her “innocence of literature in her direct contact with the 'folk'” and their oral tradition of storytelling (Brown 33). In the mid-1880s he became a member of a section of the Theosophical Society in London. But he had an ulterior motive for joining the Society, one that went beyond a “desire for religious truth” (35). One reason for his obsession with the occult was that it presented him with the possibility that “ultimate spiritual truth [could] be

communicated directly to the living . . . and that certain facts of the world beyond the grave [could] thus [be] revealed” to those still on the earth (Zwerdling 152-53). He found this attractive as someone “who was interested not merely in the existence of a world of spirit but in the ways by which human beings could establish some sort of contact with it” (153). Another reason was his “dominant interest . . . in ancient rituals, especially those of initiation” (Vickery 186). He was intrigued by the thought of communication with the dead, but by this time even the iconoclastic Madame Blavatsky had given up on the practice and discouraged it. But he wouldn't listen. In 1888 Blavatsky allowed him to form an offshoot of the London section of the Society so he could pursue what was called “practical magic” (Brown 37). The subsequent experiments with this magic led to some difficult times for Yeats, and eventually to his expulsion from the Theosophical Society in 1890 (Brown 37-38).

In March of the same year, he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, “a magical fraternity based in Rosicrucianism,” with whom he would remain affiliated as late as 1922 (Washington 92). He “was particularly touched by [the Order's] central ritual myth . . . , the death and resurrection of the initiate, which seemed to him to embody a beautiful profundity of universal significance” (Vickery 186). This fact would make itself known in the chiliastic note of the poems comprising *The Wind Among the Reeds*. In *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats: A Study of The Wind Among the Reeds*, Allen Grossman claims that “the poems of *The Wind* represent in general a ceremony of initiation from which Yeats emerge[s] with increased power” (90). Grossman argues that Yeats “labors at his art . . . to bring about a new world which will supplant the old and

restore the son to that Eden from which he was expelled at the beginning of history and which is so jealously guarded by the ministers of God” (95). In Grossman’s conception, the poet’s violent yet creative actions destroy the world the poet presently inhabits in order to bring about a new one of the poet’s own design. But Grossman ignores the necessity of the death and resurrection of the poet himself within the volume. The volume does not chronicle Yeats’s first entrance into a new world created by the destructive creativity of the poet. It shows a world-weary poet, through an intimate re-purposing of the most ancient knowledge the world has to offer him, its religions, dominate and take control of the world. The central theme of *The Wind Among the Reeds* is one of creation through destruction. And once the poet reaches his cataclysmic end, the embodiment of death, he is resurrected with new power. In this we see Yeats rely heavily on an allusion to the resurrection of Christ, for Yeats does not hope to reenter Eden by creating a new garden to supplant the old, to return as the subordinate son of Eden; he longs to dominate and replace the Master therein, to be reborn with power and authority enough to shove open the gates.

The Wind Among the Reeds is the culmination of Yeats’s belief in the power of rebirth through sacrifice that he developed as a child in Sligo and as a young man in London. The world he constructs therein is made up of a combination of Irish myth paired with a personal and poetic phantasmagoria that he had been developing since early childhood, with the earliest salient compilation of these ideas coming in the mid-1880s in the form of early, unfinished drafts of what would become his poem turned play, *The Shadowy Waters*.

Yeats's Phantasmagoria

Yeats drew heavily from Irish myth throughout his poetic and dramatic career. In the lore of his native ancestry, he found channels by which he could reconcile the physical and spiritual worlds as he saw fit. There are, however, no rules, no set boundaries that he adheres to in his verse, for he was not wed to any one image or symbol, and the lore that he drew inspiration from became wholly his once he made claim to it. In other words, he uses myth merely as inspiration, as a means to generate new images—"Those images that yet / Fresh images beget," as he would later write in "Byzantium" (1929) (VP 498). Thus, as Sidnell, Mayhew, and Clark put it when writing about his early manuscripts of *The Shadowy Waters*,

his use of mythology is not Joycean, not a 'method,' and it would be fruitless to look for a detailed system

[He] took his mythological and occult sources seriously, of course, but he freely modified the personal symbolism he drew from them in response to poetic and dramatic criteria. For the cognoscenti there would be pleasures of recognition, for noninitiates reverberations from the anima mundi would give great richness to the work, but . . . the order imposed is a dramatic rather than systemic structure.

What emerges . . . is not a covert attempt at asserting dogma, ritual, or philosophical system but an attempt to bring the truths of vision, Irish myth [,] and occult lore into a relation with each other and so to unity. (34)

So while not imperative to the enjoyment of his work, the unique phantasmagoria Yeats constructs in his volumes serves to enrich our sense of his peculiar interpretation of mythic and occult motifs. These interpretations combined with his distinctive belief in the possibility of rebirth through death, creation through destruction, inextricably inform his

work in the years surrounding his early compositions of *The Shadowy Waters* and, soon after, *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries* and *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

A substantial amount of the images and themes realized in *The Wind Among the Reeds* are established in the unpublished drafts of *The Shadowy Waters*. Yeats began conceiving this perennial work as early as 1884, continually revising it well into the twentieth century (Clark 151). Harold Bloom writes that Yeats would go on to “reac[h] the full maturity of his earlier achievement” in the later versions of the poem/play (133). Yeats originally considered *The Shadowy Waters* a poem, but would go on to adapt it for the stage. A full text of the poem first appeared in *The North American Review* in May 1900, with a rewritten dramatic version appearing in 1906 in *Poems 1899-1905*. The “acting version,” which was first performed at The Abbey Theatre on December 8, 1906, was published in 1907 in *The Poetical Works of William Butler Yeats*. Both the 1906 and 1907 versions were reprinted several times over the following years.

Antedating all of the well-known versions of *The Shadowy Waters* is the unpublished version of 1894-95. David R. Clark edited and finally published a version of the 1894-95 manuscript in *The Massachusetts Review* in Autumn-Winter 1964-65 as “Half the Characters Had Eagles' Faces: W. B. Yeats' Unpublished *Shadowy Waters*.” Clark explains that

in the Autumn of 1957 Mrs. W. B. Yeats gave to the National Library of Ireland a large number of manuscripts of Yeats's plays. It was my fortune to spend much of that winter attempting to arrange these papers: identifying pages of successive versions of single plays and arranging these versions in what seemed their order

of composition. In this work I was helped by the fact that Mrs. Yeats had already begun the work of collating and had left notations on many of the manuscripts. (151)

Clark's privilege thus provides us with a previously unreleased, albeit incomplete, early version of the poem/play that is quite different from any Yeats's ever completed, a version that according to Bloom "is in some ways a more rewarding and powerful poem or scenario for a poem than any of the complete versions that Yeats published, remarkable as all of them are" (134). All of the versions are indeed remarkable, for they allow us to trace the poet's development across several years as he formulates what he understands as the promise of creation through destruction, rebirth through sacrifice, in his verse. Clark lauds *The Shadowy Waters* as "one of Yeats's most important dramatic poems from the point of view of one who would understand his early formative period. . . . It is one of the few of his plays which are not based on an old story but conceived entirely by the poet and expressive, without shield, of his personal motivations" (151). In this way this early draft is a touchstone within Yeats's oeuvre, for it is the expression of his lifelong obsession with the power of death, and it informs all of the work produced by him for many years to come.

Bloom writes that "the first *Shadowy Waters* is a barbaric work, bordering at times on the splendidly repulsive" (134). The most obvious difference between the 1894 version and the subsequent versions of *The Shadowy Waters* is the presence of a beastly race called the Fomorah, "grey robed, eagle-headed 'Seabar,' [who] spea[k] in half-screams," originally major players in the story (Clark 155). Yeats provides insight into

the origins of this mythological race: Fomoroh means from under the sea, and is the name of the gods of night and death and cold. They were the ancestors of the evil faeries and . . . of all misshapen persons” (Var. Poems 795). In this version of his search for power through resurrection, he takes on the role of Forgael, an Irishman who wanders the seas in search of an immortal lover. The Fomorah, in this inchoate stage of his phantasmagoria, serve as placeholders for the “unknown perishing armies” and their god, here known as Tethra, the “Master of the still stars, and of the flaming door,” that he will later face, and defeat—hence their absence in the subsequent published versions of the poem/play—in the great battle of “The Valley of the Black Pig” (109). The Fomorah are said to have “shrieked at the drowned image of the moon” for their “hunger of twenty days shall be appeased / Though not with ample sacrifice” (Clark 159). Yeats cites the inadequacy of the symbols of worldly wisdom to grant appeasement, while toying with the idea of sacrificial offerings. He lauds the power of the “flames” in this scene:

The children of Dana, have an island, hid
Among the sighing foam and roses hang
Above the foam, like little dropping flames,
And he who gathers them about his heart
Endures the wisdom, day dragged after day,
Until the sun and moon and stars are dead,
And heaped up: in a winking of an eye
It covers him like little dropping flames. (159)

More powerful than the great symbols of wisdom—the sun, moon, and stars—is the flame, an iteration of the power that Yeats will continue to write about for many years—the “fire [that] was in [his] head” in “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” for instance (*VP*

149). For earthly “wisdom has made [Forgael] weak / And he shall be the sacrificial flesh” for the Fomorah (Clark 160). *The Shadowy Waters* and *The Wind Among the Reeds* each tell a version of a story of a wanderer, or of many wanderers, in search of otherworldly knowledge that would grant them ultimate power via sacrifice. In this version, Forgael is the bearer of the “all the wisdom that was carved / In ancient days on boards of hazel and oak” (161). In Irish lore, the hazel tree parallels the Christian tree of Life or Knowledge introduced in Genesis 2:9: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Finneran 481). Hazel reappears in “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” wherein Aengus wanders in search of the elusive girl that bears such knowledge in the poem. In *The Shadowy Waters*, the Fomorah see Forgael as their key to such knowledge, the final sacrifice that will finally appease Tethra. But Forgael rebukes this belief, proclaiming that there is but one sufficient outcome, the death of all things. He says,

I that am mightier than the moon and sun,
.....
And have beheld all things in a wink of the eye,
Cry there is no good hour but that great hour
That shall puff out demons and gods and men. (Clark 162)

Forgael assures the Fomorah that sacrificing him will not provide them with the knowledge they seek: “Your proud, insatiate hearts are not appeased,” he says (163). The eventual rebirth that takes place for Yeats in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, although much of the images and motifs are established here, does not take place in this manuscript for

one crucial reason. At this point in his phantasmagoria, he is still invested in what power extant earthly entities can grant him, be it the Fomorah's god, Tethra, or Forgael's possibly immortal lover, Dectira. No real transformation can take place until he attempts to dethrone such entities via subversive sacrifice in the later works.

The Fomorah flee before killing Forgael in the poem because they hear the sound of an ancient, magical harp coming from another ship in the distance, which Forgael orders his men to capture. While they are away, Forgael is left to appeal to Tethra for a sign, for his “heart is tired of many things,” dejected and frustrated with his world (164). Just then, the men bring back two lovers, Aleel, a poet, and Dectira, a princess. Forgael sees them in the distance, and he takes it as a divine sign:

The shadows of an unappeasable desire,
A boy that follows upon flying feet
A girl that has an apple in her hand;
And [he] is blinded by the foam of dreams. (164)

Aleel had won Dectira's heart when he played on his magical harp, “apple-blossoms [falling] about his hair” (164). Apple-blossoms are another image that Yeats establishes here and will use again in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” as a symbol of knowledge. The story of Dectira's and Aleel's love is too a version of a tale of a wanderer seeking knowledge. In this version, Dectira steals away from her father's kingdom to be with Aleel, the apparent bearer of the knowledge of the apple-blossom. Though we do not get much of their tale here, we see how Dectira's search ends. Forgael slays her lover, picks up his harp, and uses its magical song to wipe out her memory of Aleel and make her

love him instead. What we are left with is a series of failed acquisitions of supreme knowledge due to misguided and insufficient sacrifices, botched rituals. Neither the Fomorah, in their attempt to sacrifice Forgael, Dectira, in her selfless devotion to her lover Aleel, or Forgael, in his appeal to Tethra and subsequent sacrifice of Aleel and later himself, gain the knowledge and power that they seek.

The manuscript of this early version of *The Shadow Waters* ends, both in terms of language and motif, in such a way that foreshadows the continuation of Yeats's search of power through rebirth in *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries* and *The Wind Among the Reeds*. At the end, a single Fomorah looks on Forgael, who has now fully supplanted Aleel as Dectira's lover, and marvels at his new power.

He is more mighty than the sun and moon
For I have seen crowned dreams gather their robes
About them and be gone: All that has been
Since Aleel stood under an apple tree
And played upon the silver harp is gone. (169)

Alas, Forgael's new power is not sufficient, for in the end, he discovers that Dectira is indeed mortal, a fact proven by her fear to engage in a ritual "where she must eat magical fruits that whisper of human passions" (172-73). Thus Tethra remains the Master of Forgael's world. The Fomorah return to prey on Dectira, she being no longer protected by Forgael's love, but, although he has discovered her mortality, he is "moved by her beauty to pity, [and he] completes the sacrifice in her stead by stabbing himself" (Clark 173). Clark reads Forgael's sacrifice here as a success: "In death, in complete self-sacrifice, he gains . . . immortal life" (179). Clark's reading, however, does not account

for the equally important stage missing from Yeats's ritual that should follow his death: resurrection. This stage of the ritual will not take place until years later in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. In the end, what we see in this early manuscript is the origin of the images, themes, and even the language of Yeats's continuing search for power that extends throughout his work for many, many years.

The Peasant Visionary

Yeats's letters to Olivia Shakespear and Florence Farr about a decade later in 1895 provide further insight into the state of his spiritual life as he continues his quest for power via his poetry and occult experiments in the years between the writing of early drafts of *The Shadowy Waters* and the publication of *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries*. In a letter to Shakespear dated April 12, Yeats urges her to refrain from pursuing a vision that she has requested he interpret. He persuades her that her visions are beginning to breach “dangerous ground.” He admits to her that “[e]very . . . influence has a shadow . . . an unballanced . . . duplicate of itself. There are means of driving away an influence the moment one finds it to be unballanced, or unpleasant in any way but I cannot give you these means” (*Collected Letters* 463). It is clear that he believes in the influence of opposing spiritual forces, but he is powerless to control them, even as the visions of those in his circle begin to strengthen. Yeats writes to Farr the following December, almost giddy at the thought of a looming apocalypse: “Has the magical armageddon begun at last? . . . [*The Freeman's Journal* . . . has an article . . . announcing inevitable war . . . [that] would fulfil . . . a prophetic vision I had long ago . . . , but what a dusk of the nations it would be! . . . Could you come and see me on Monday and have

tea and perhaps divine for armageddon?" (477). He is delighted by the prospect of this "magical armageddon," for if it were to come about it would authenticate his abilities as a prophet. Not only this, but his subsequent annihilation—the sacrifice of the initiate—would afford him increased occult power. But, "[a]lthough greatly excited by the prospect of war, [*The Freeman's Journal*] nowhere announced it as 'inevitable'" (Kelly et al. 477). Nevertheless, the fact that he interprets this article this way emphasizes the poet's tendency to read armageddon into the world around him. But his desire for tea and armageddon would not be fulfilled in 1895, and his frustration and disillusionment would subsequently ring out in his poetry.

Yeats's disenchantment extended beyond the world of the prophetic into the world of the poetic. The authority that he exercised over the world of myth was often misread as a mere retelling of old tales. Two reviews of Yeats's *Poems*, both published in January of 1896, serve as a cross section of the critical reception of the poet and his previously published work outside of his inner circle. *The Spectator* paints him as a sentimental Irishman who founds his verse "chiefly on old . . . legendary myths and folklore, strange and weird stories, with that dash of sadness in them which seems inherent in the Irish nature." Although the reviewer admits that Yeats is capable of "real imagination and poetical power," he is ultimately said to compose "pretty little songs and . . . ballads simply and poetically told . . . with a touch of genuine pathos" ("Mr. Yeats's *Poems*" 136-37). This is condescending praise for a poet who would later be read to "demand of symbolism its ultimate revelatory powers" (Brown 110). The reviewer allows Yeats more agency in *The Bookman* review, yet the disenchanting death-wish to be

released just three months later is not fully anticipated: “The consciousness of two worlds is ever present in his dreams, not . . . of a dim future, but one co-existing with and invading the other, each disputing the other's claims The human nature . . . that interests him most lives near the soil and roots of things But the bliss of dreaming . . . and its ruin, too . . . are as yet more native themes” (“Mr. Yeats's *Poems*” 423-24). However, this assessment would prove too optimistic. For Yeats would indeed come to envision a dim future; indeed ruin would invade the bliss of the poet's dreaming, and he would long to surrender to the soil with “dream-awakened eyes” (“Valley” 109).

The 1896 publication of *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries* opens with the original version of “A Cradle Song,” a revised version of which ultimately appeared in 1899's *The Wind Among the Reeds*. The revision Yeats makes in the interim is significant, for it helps us trace his further descent into insecurity and frustration. Both versions of the poem are exemplary of Yeats's use of images and symbols from the ancient world of Tir-na-n-Og from Irish mythology, plainly set out in the early draft of *The Shadowy Waters*. The original 1896 poem begins by nearly lulling the reader into the world of dreams: “The faery children laugh / in their cradles wrought with gold, / And clap their hands together, and half close their eyes” (“Cradle Song” 109). But the speaker is aware that the bliss of dreams will not come. A crucial difference between the two versions of the poem appears in the next line: the 1896 version reads: “For winds will bear them gently when the eagle flies” (109). In the 1899 revision, Yeats changes the simple “eagle” to the “ger-eagle,” “a bird described in the Bible as unclean; probably the Egyptian vulture” (Finneran 480). Here again we see Yeats's use of “supernatural birds”

which are present throughout his poems and plays (Clark 153). Daniel Albright cites a connection between the ger-eagle and the Fomorah from the early drafts of *The Shadowy Waters* “who want to tear [Forgael] with their claws; they are often called unappeasbale” (457). Although Yeats cites traditional Irish lore as the source of the symbol of the wind—“a symbol of vague desires and hopes”—I argue that this change serves as an example of not only his characteristic repurposing of myth but also of his growing disillusionment and impatience (Finneran 480). For in the interim between the first publishing of this poem and its revision, he found it necessary to emphasize the fact that the symbolic wind found here and eventually in the 1899 volume is itself stirred up by the beating of the “heavy whitening wings” of an “unclean” bird that feeds on death, with “a heart fallen cold” (“Cradle Song” 109). Indeed the wind that originates here is a desolate one, for all of Yeats's vague desires and hopes for power have likewise gained in intensity enough to lay waste to the world of dreams.

The speaker of the poem continues, “I kiss my wailing child and press it to my breast, / And hear the narrow graves calling my child and me” (109). “The children of the [poem],” according to Grossman, “possess that autonomy of self-delighting energy which is only the possession of those who need no longer desire; hence their hearts have fallen cold” (133). Yeats's heart, too, is cold, as he is left wanting nothing that the material world or the occult can offer him in his present condition. Thus, the grave calls for a sacrifice from the speaker. The wind “cries,” “hover[s],” and “beats,” the “wandering sea,” the “flaming West,” “the doors of Heaven,” and the “doors of Hell”; the speaker is hopeless to escape, the refuge of the dream world violated (“Cradle Song” 109). Finally,

the wind blows the powerless speaker toward the world of ghosts, and “the unappeasable host” waiting therein beckons for an offering: “O heart the winds have shaken; the unappeasable host / Is comelier than candles before Maurya's feet” (109). Grossman reads these lines to mean that “the presence of the host makes impossible the desired relation to the symbol of both comfort and of order which is embodied in Maurya, Gaelic for Mary” (134). These lines show Yeats's impatience and disillusionment with the orthodox religions of the world and the comfort and order that they promise. Grossman, echoing Yeats, says that “the effect of poetry is to induce the trance that loosens the bonds of reality. . . . The reader,” says Grossman, “overhears [“A Cradle Song”] as he would something occult and forbidden, something which does not belong to the order of God's world” (133). Indeed, as the ger-eagle's wings beat, Yeats, our host, invites us to witness as he plots to overtake death and defy the order of God's world.

The Great Battle

The eight lines of “The Valley of the Black Pig” are “charged with biographical implication” (Brown 113). This poem best illustrates Yeats's desire for death in battle. We can consult Yeats himself in order to clarify some of this underrated work, for he includes nearly seven pages of explanatory notes in *The Wind Among the Reeds*—significantly more than he includes for most of the other poems found in the volume. Yeats uses these pages to elaborate on the symbol of the black pig and the anecdote about the “great battle” that he includes in *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries*. “The pig,” he says, “[was] originally a [good omen], [but], . . . because the too great power of their divinity makes divine things dangerous to mortals, . . . abhorrence took the place of

reverence, pigs and boars grew into types of evil, and [they] were described as the enemies of the very gods they once typified” (VP 809). Yeats sympathizes with this pariah, stripped of its godlike status, for his stagnating occult powers have left him unable to contend with the strengthening visions and looming spiritual forces beckoning those within his circle. He goes on to say, “The Pig would, therefore, become the Black Pig, a type of cold and of winter . . . and of the darkness that will at last destroy the gods and the world” (VP 809). As the ger-eagle with its heart fallen cold, this once triumphant creature succumbs to the cold of winter. But it is clear that Yeats sees a potential for power in this transformation: “there is no shape for a spirit to take so dangerous as the shape of a pig” (98). However, he at once seeks to embody and to do battle with this symbol of death; for, he says, “the battle of the Black Pig is the battle between the manifest world and the ancestral darkness at the end of all things; . . . the battle of all things with shadowy decay” (810). He ultimately seeks to renounce shadowy decay, thus he must embody death in order to conquer it. Yeats, via his speakers, takes on the various forms of death—the ger-eagle, the Black Pig—in order to engage in ritual sacrifice of himself in his poems.

“The Valley of the Black Pig” has received some critical attention, but it has been largely overshadowed by the more popular works from *The Wind*, such as “The Rose” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus.” This oversight is understandable, for the importance of the poem is bound up in a personal struggle which Yeats only makes known sporadically in his work leading up to 1899. Certainly the unpublished drafts of *The Shadowy Waters* received little attention until Clark’s article in 1964-65, long after

the publication of the volume, and “A Cradle Song” is likewise overshadowed by the more popular works. But what we see in “The Valley” is the expression of the frustration that had been building up within Yeats for many years at the moment that he finally decided to take action. And as the ger-eagle circles over the battlefield, Yeats wages war within the lines of the poem:

The dew drops slowly; the dreams gather: unknown spears
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes;
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.
We, who are labouring by the cromlech on the shore,
The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew,
Being weary of the world's empires, bow down to you,
Master of the still stars, and of the flaming door. (“Valley” 109)

These lines reveal a speaker suddenly awakened from the world of dreams. The slowly-dropping dew, the speaker's spiritual stasis as his dreams gather and he begins to realize the real cost of occult power; his slumber invaded by unknown spears before his wide-open eyes. Then, the speaker's peace is broken by the clash and cries of unknown perishing armies, harkening back to the violent Fomorah from *The Shadowy Waters*. Yeats's speaker witnesses the fate of the ignorant worshipers of Tethra, fearful of the notes of the ancient harp imbued with power, and understands that he is no better. With the memory of Forgael's failed sacrifice in the speaker's mind, the need for a proper sacrifice becomes clear for he who wanders between the ancient tomb on the shore and the grey cairn on the hill. And as the dew-drowned day sinks into night—as the speaker longs to surrender and be inundated—he grows weary of the world's empires, ready to

sacrifice himself to the Master: the Master of the peaceful stars but also of the flaming door that bars the speaker from the knowledge that he seeks. Despite the fervor it affords him, Yeats's need to create his own religion has left him, and his speaker, lordless. But even in this desperate, apocalyptic moment he presents a beginning, creating a tense dialectic. The speaker wants to enter the flaming door, as if to reenter the garden in Genesis 3:24: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." By taking on the shape of the Black Pig and sacrificing himself, the speaker embodies a darkness powerful enough to destroy the gods of the world. He uses the power to cast down the gods of the world and approach the Master.

In the chapter, "William Butler Yeats: The Tragic Hero as Dying God" in *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough*, John Vickery says, "[i]t is [Yeats's] use of myth to transcend personal dilemmas that in large measure is responsible for the tone of calm acceptance that pervades "The Valley of the Black Pig," a poem that illustrates the difference between moving toward the myth and already being deep within it" (189). Indeed Yeats is deeply bound to the myth of the Black Pig, and the tone of calm acceptance in the poem is a result of Yeats's quiet subversion, for his long-gestating plot to defy the order of God's world continues as the speaker approaches the Master. Vickery goes on to say, "the theme [of the poem] is . . . man's religious acceptance of material and spiritual necessities" (189). Although Yeats indeed defies all things material and spiritual as he attempts to disrupt the order of the world of the Master, he accepts the necessity of his self-sacrifice in order to attain power through eventual rebirth. Vickery argues that

the black pig, who has been transformed into the master of the flaming door, stands revealed as a demonic entity who controls that form of death which is a ritual of nature as well as a transition to something beyond nature achieved through the purging of those aspects of existence subject to 'shadowy decay.' To bow down to him is to acknowledge an inevitable segment of the life cycle of man and god, history and myth secure in the knowledge that it will inaugurate a revival of the man-god into a world of supranatural immutability. (190)

Therefore by bowing down, sacrificing himself, and leaving only the Master, Yeats, the embodiment of the Black Pig, is himself transformed into the Master—effectively becoming he who controls that form of death which is a ritual of nature as well as a transition beyond nature. Yeats's subversive sacrifice results in a mastery of both natural and supernatural death. Thus, writes Vickery, “[t]he destruction of the world in the battle of the black pig is the prelude to regeneration rather than the world-weary anarchism of fin-de-siecle disillusionment” (190). Unlike Forgaels' final melodramatic act of self-sacrifice, Yeats's sacrifice here carries the promise of rebirth. However, Yeats still labors, wandering from cairn to cromlech, from hill to shore. And although he has witnessed the possibilities offered to his speakers in death, he has yet to be reborn with new power.

The Song of Wandering Aengus

“The Song of Wandering Aengus,” first published in *The Sketch* in August 1897, a little over a year after the first publication of *Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries*, then entitled “A Mad Song,” best illustrates Yeats's desire for rebirth through sacrifice.⁸ After his embodiment and sacrifice of the Black Pig and transformation into the Master, Yeats takes on the role of another master—Aengus, “[t]he god of youth,

⁸ I use the *Variorum* version here.

beauty, and poetry,” a figure reminiscent of the musician/poet, Aleel, from *The Shadowy Waters* (Finneran 480). This role is yet another act of subversive for the poet, for he can still only mimic the gods—he has yet to be resurrected. At the start of the poem, Aengus goes “out to the hazel wood / Because a fire was in [his] head.” Yeats's thoughts remain on the flaming door, as he continues to pursue rebirth. He thus ventures into the otherworldly hazel wood to seek the knowledge he urgently needs. As we saw in *The Shadowy Waters*, the hazel tree parallels the Christian tree of Life or Knowledge introduced in Genesis. Here Yeats seeks to control that form of death which is a ritual of nature as well as a transition beyond nature by attempting to divine wisdom from the hazel tree. So Aengus “cut and peeled a hazel wand, / And hooked a berry to a thread” (VP 149). The fruit hanging from the tree of knowledge mirrors the forbidden fruit of Genesis 2:17: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, though shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” Aengus then “dropped the berry in a stream / and caught a little silver trout” (VP 149). “[T]he tribes of the Goddess Danu,” says Yeats, “can take all shapes, and those that are in the water take often the shape of fish (480). Here again we see Yeats attempting to dethrone a divine creature. This time embodying the alluring Aengus, he also mimics the serpent in Genesis 3, coaxing the silver trout to eat of the fruit. The trout complies; however, instead of perishing, having eaten the fruit from the tree of Knowledge, the fish is transformed into a “glimmering girl.” The death of the naïve creature is the catalyst for rebirth into a new form. This is everything Yeats hopes to accomplish, yet the girl flees, “fad[ing] through the brightening air,” taking with her the knowledge—the spiritual authority—Aengus so

desperately desires (150). The glimmering girl entices the speaker to follow her, and, of course, he cannot resist. Aengus now hopes to mimic the role of Adam in Genesis 3:6. But unlike Adam, Aengus does not eat of the fruit, but how he longs for the knowledge possessed by the glimmering girl. Aengus wants to “pluck” the fruit of the tree of Knowledge, to know how to be reborn into new life by sacrificing the old—but, alas, he still labors:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun. (150)

Yeats’s quest for power does not end here. By taking on the role of the persuasive Aengus, Yeats comes closer to coaxing out the power he so desperately seeks. But although he does witness the otherworldly power afforded the glimmering girl via resurrection, he must continue his pursuit. It is only through the eyes of the most stable character in his phantasmagoria—Mongan—that Yeats will finally realize the cost of rebirth.

Mongan Emerges

The effects of what transpires in “The Valley of the Black Pig” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus” are made clear in one of what Albright calls, along with “Mongan Thinks of His Past Greatness,” two of Yeats’s “unusually important poems” (474).

“Mongan Laments the Change That Has Come Upon Him and His Beloved and Longs for the End of the World” was first published in *The Dome* in June 1897. Grossman writes, “[u]nlike the other surrogates which we have [seen in *The Wind*], Mongan retains in Yeats'[s] writing his historical identity in the old Celtic Poetry as 'a famous wizard and king who remembers his past lives'” (135). By taking on the role of Mongan—a bastion of stability within his phantasmagoria—Yeats can reflect on what has occurred within the other poems, as well as objectively analyze the repercussions of his previous embodiments. In “Mongan Laments” we witness a dialogue between Mongan and the glimmering girl. Yeats traces his journey from cairn to cromlech, out to the hazel wood, and to the continuing pursuit of her: “I have been in The Path of Stones and the Wood of / Thorns, / And I have hatred and hope and desire and fear / Under my feet thus they follow you night and day.” The girl likewise recounts her experience: “A man with a wand of hazel came without sound; He changed me suddenly; I was looking another way; . . . And Time and Birth and Change are hurrying by” (VP 153). Yeats, without giving too much away, confirms this connection by saying, “[t]he man in my poem who has a hazel wand may have been Aengus, Master of Love” (807). But the glimmering girl appears to have faded into limbo, Time and Birth and Change hurrying by her. This implies that Yeats has corrupted the regeneration ritual, and that even if he were to eat of the fruit, he would not be reborn with new power. The girl goes on: “I would that the Boar without Bristles had come from / the west / And rooted the stars and sun and moon from the sky / And lay, grunting in the dark, and turning to his rest” (153). The girl indeed laments the change that has come upon her and her new state of uncertainty; she wishes that the Boar

would have come from the west, “a place of symbolic darkness and death,” and merely devoured the silver apples of the moon and the golden apples of the sun instead of implicating her in this botched ritual (807). Here we are reminded of *The Shadowy Waters*, wherein Dectira, the girl Forgael thought immortal, is proven mortal by her fear to engage in a similar ritual “where she must eat magical fruits that whisper of human passions” (Clark 172-73). Thus Yeats's finally awakens from the world of dreams, for now even the glimmering girl, the one thought to possess the knowledge required for his speaker to achieve spiritual authority, is shown to fall short of the power Yeats believed she possessed.

Mongan returns in the penultimate poem of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, “Mongan Thinks of His Past Greatness,” first published in *The Dome* in October 1898, later called “He thinks of his Past Greatness when a Part of the Constellations of Heaven.”⁹ This poem is evocative of all of the poems discussed above, as well as Yeats's “Fergus and the Druid” from 1893's *The Rose*.

I have drunk ale from the Country of the Young
 And weep because I know all things now:
 I have been a hazel-tree,

.....
 I became a man, a hater of the wind,
 Knowing one, out of all things, alone, that his head
 May not lie on the breast or his lips on the hair
 Of the woman that he loves, until he dies.
 O beast of the wilderness, bird of the air,
 Must I endure your amorous cries? (VP 177)

⁹ I use the *Variorum* version of “He thinks” here.

Mongan admits returning to the form of a man here, as well as coming to hate the cold wind stirred up by the ger-eagle. He likewise accepts the fact that he will not be with the glimmering girl until his natural death takes him to the country of the Young, “a name in the Celtic poetry for the country of the gods and of the happy dead” (*VP* 177).

Grossman says that Mongan's drinking the ale allows him to “com[e] upon his identity”; for “[t]he symbol of absolute personal identity, the identity of the poet, is the knowledge of the past transformations of the self. . . . The history of the past of the self recapitulates the progressive degradation of man in time, and Mongan becomes successively the tree of life itself . . . and finally the reed, man, whose oppression is the wind” (135). In this way, Yeats achieves power in the form of reassurance in this absolute personal identity as a man, poet. However, for Yeats, the only absolute realm is itself in constant motion. In “Yeats's Abnormal Restlessness” from *The Passions of Modernism*, Anthony Cuda writes that in “He Thinks of His Past Greatness” Yeats “collapses the shape-changing druid and the poet's metamorphic imagination into a single entity; that is, he finally allows us to see that Fergus and the druid are both elements of a single mind. . . . He is both seeker and the sought after” (105). The same is true for the Black Pig and the Master, Aengus and the glimmering girl. These are all forms that Yeats takes in order to use myth to transcend personal dilemmas. “And,” says Cuda, “as Fergus does, he exclaims, 'I weep because I know all things now.' Like Fergus's despair, the speaker's weeping registers the emotional implications of what Yeats calls elsewhere 'the dissolution of the fixed personality’” (105). Just as Yeats compiles an idiosyncratic belief system from various aspects of differing faiths, he finds stability of identity through the embodiment of diverse personae.

He grows in power from these journeys, transformations, and sacrifices; yet, knowing all, he calls out, mourning his faery children and his glimmering girl, with a fire in his head; as he must still endure the beckoning, amorous cries of the Black Pig and ger-eagle. His journey that began in *The Shadowy Waters* finally provides him with the power of authority via experience, but this authority comes with a heavy price, as the kingdom he now reigns over is one of cairns and cromlechs.

A Vision of the Otherworld

About the time that *The Wind Among the Reeds* was published, Yeats acquiesced to the limits of his humanity in the essay, “The Autumn of the Body.”¹⁰ He concedes that “thoughts and emotions” are “often but spray flung up from hidden tides that follow a moon no eye can see” (139). Although he dismissively reflects on his past convictions, he does not denounce the power of the arts. He cites an artistic sea change, concerned with “more than amusement” (139). This change, mirrored by a shift in popular opinion on the occult, allows Yeats to see hope in a once bleak future. He now believes that he is living in “the moment when [people are] beginning to be interested in many things which positive science . . . has always denied . . . the moment when man is about to ascend” (141). He writes of finding peace with his laboring and wandering in Dante who “added to poetry a dialectic which . . . was the invention of minds trained by the labour of life, by a traffic among many things” (141). Finally, although his “arduous search for . . . disembodied ecstasy” will continue, he has achieved rebirth and power in the form of “a

¹⁰ 1899 in *Literary Ideals in Ireland*; as “The Autumn of the Flesh,” *The Dublin Daily Express*, December 1898.

poetry of essences,” his “new belief [that] makes the world plastic under [his] hands”

(142). Zwerdling writes that his

sources of spiritual authority were not . . . limited to the philosophical, the religious[,] and the scientific. There was also an important literary tradition involved, and Yeats . . . speculated on the possibility of treating poetry as a kind of substitute spiritual voice. . . . [S]uch a position . . . seem[s] almost inevitable, for the poet is free to make use of his private insight without moralizing or submitting the products of his imagination to orthodox censorship. . . . The poet [is] the visionary, scribe, and priest of his private religion. (155-56)

In this way, Yeats does achieve spiritual authority and power through the creation of his own religion of poetry, and one of the many holy texts of such a religion is *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Furthermore the poet finds his way back to Eden, for, according to Grossman, “[t]he answer that [*The Wind* gives] is unequivocal. Eden is in the self; the only proper metaphor of that self is the timeless and absolute Ideal; the only moral act equivalent to the greatness of the self so conceived is death” (100). Thus in a characteristic contradiction, Yeats creates Eden, the place of beginning, from death. And his exploration of the functions and limits of his dominance over death is what we see in *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

Yeats's infatuation with the occult would not end in the late 1890s, and the loyal acolyte would continue to explore the limits of possibility well into the next century. But his newly acquired power and purpose for his poetry would at least distract him from his more self-destructive tendencies. This fact, along with his continued ascension through the ranks of the Order of the Golden Dawn, afforded him the “authority he always sought” (Foster, “Literary Politics”). Unlike the Theosophical Society, the “order was

devoted to magical researches rather than the achievement of mystical transcendence” (Foster, “Literary Politics”). His devotion to the order allowed him to pursue his unique understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds, as well as “helped [him] create the hieratic and lofty persona which would come to characterize him in the outside world” (Foster, “Literary Politics”). His search for power culminates in 1925's *A Vision*, his deeply personal philosophical treatise based on regenerative cycles, or gyres. Here again Mongan emerges, as Albright writes,

[w]hen Yeats codified his esoteric beliefs in *A Vision*, he spoke of the ultimate component of human identity as the daimon, that part of a man that survives from one reincarnative state to the next; and the Mongan poems constitute Yeats's first attempt to define the tragedy of the daimon as it passes, unappeasable, through all its thousands of inflections of being. In *A Vision*, Yeats describes how a painfully knotted love relation could persist for centuries. (474)

Yeats composed *A Vision* largely through sessions of automatic writing with his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees (1892-1968). Indeed, Yeats's singular search for authority concludes in a partnership between himself and his lover, and one cannot help but to recall Forgael and Dectira. As Helen Vendler writes about the 1900 version of *The Shadowy Waters*, the ending of the early manuscripts of the poem/play having since been revised to show the two lovers sailing off together toward the “Otherworld,” a “blending of passion, destiny, poetry, immortality, and dream”: “[t]hat one can make immortality out of mortality . . . is the assertion of *The Shadowy Waters*, but it is not a faith in which Yeats can rest, and the undercurrent of death, murder, and deception in the play shows the final fated drifting to the Otherworld bought at a serious price” (310). By 1911, the play had been revised into

an “acting version.” Gone are the beastly Fomorah, save a brief mention of reminiscent “grey” specters, “turned to the shape of . . . man-headed bird[s]” in a dream-vision of one of the sailors on Forgael's ship (“*Shadowy Waters*” 258). Here Forgael possesses Aleel's magical harp from the outset, a fact which causes this version to read more like a continuation than a revision. Forgael, although with some struggle, is finally able to tap into the power of the flame here, as he says, “sometimes there's a torch inside my head / That makes all clear”; “when the torch is lit / All that is impossible is certain, / I plunge in the abyss” (261). As this version ends, and Forgael and Dect[i]ra again sail off toward the Otherworld, Forgael—Aengus, Mongan, Yeats—after yet again casting his spell, his “Druid craft of wicked music” (265), over his lover, finally becomes the one sought after, himself now in possession of the knowledge of the flame, of the wind, and of the glimmering girl, as Dect[i]ra vows to him,

O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,
O silver fish that my two hands have taken
Out of the running stream, O morning star,
.....
Upon the misty border of the wood,
Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,
For we will gaze upon this world no longer. (273)

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