

Univerzita Karlova

Filozofická fakulta

Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

# Swans and Contradictions in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats

Labutě a rozpory v poezii W. B. Yeatse

(Bakalářská práce)

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Studijní obor (Subject):

Anglistika-amerikanistika  
(English and American Studies)

Praha 2017

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v Praze dne 19. května 2017

Prague, 19 May 2017

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Lukáš Červený

I would like to thank a lot to Daniela Theinová for her always friendly but never unprofessional supervision.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## Abstrakt

Sbírka Williama Butlera Yeatse *The Wild Swans at Coole* z roku 1919 znamenala pro jeho poezii přerod: z raných písní ukotvených v romantismu básník přešel ke stylu ovlivněnému modernismem. A ačkoliv je dobré podívat se na Yeatsovo dílo právě prostřednictvím postoje k těmto dvěma literárním směrům, je třeba mít na paměti, že tyto postoje zůstaly problematické. Stylistická mnohoznačnost je patrná v titulní básni sbírky. Jejím ústředním paradoxem je básníkovy zpodobnění labutí: obsahuje jak prvky romantismu, tak prvky modernismu, a uniká proto jasnému zařazení. Labutě zde navíc nevystupují jen jako básnické symboly a složitější emblémy, ale též jako hmotné bytosti. Podobně protichůdný je i Yeatsův přístup v pozdější básni “Leda and the Swan” ze sbírky *The Tower* (1918). V básni o řecké báji je zvíře předmětem symbolického i tělesného popisu. Labuť se stává nádherným, ale strašlivým násilníkem, což nás mimo jiné přivádí ke vztahu Yeatse k ženám. Tento vztah je naplno rozehrán v poslední básni, kterou se detailně zabývám, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”. Zde Yeats tematizuje nejen svůj život, ale zároveň své dílo a vztah k labutím coby zrcadlu neodvratitelného zcizení.

První a druhá kapitola mapují vlivy obou literárních směrů na Yeatsovo dílo. Jeho vlastní názory na romantismus a modernismus pomáhají odkrýt, jak moc se jimi inspiroval a zároveň se od nich odklonil. Třetí kapitola pak tezi posouvá zase jiným směrem, k Yeatsově sebereflexi a způsobu, jakým zhodnocuje vlastní uměleckou metodu založenou na protikladech. Tuto metodu se snažím dokázat nejen na příkladech třech zmíněných básní, ale i poukazem k dalšímu Yeatsovu básnickému i prozaickému dílu. Cílem práce není snaha o zařazení často protichůdně se vyjadřujícího básníka do jedné úhledné kategorie, ale naopak pokusit se pochopit kreativní využití různých rozporů, napětí a protikladů, které prochází napříč jeho dílem.

## Abstract

William Butler Yeats's 1919 collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* marked a transition in his poetry: from early songs rooted in Romanticism, the poet moves towards a style influenced by Modernism. Even though it is beneficial to examine Yeats's work in relation to the two major literary movements, it is necessary to bear in mind that his stance towards both remained problematic. This stylistic ambiguity is apparent in the collection's title poem and its central paradox: the poet's depiction of swans contains aspects of Romanticism and Modernism alike, yet it resists clear classification. Furthermore, swans feature here not only as poetic symbols, but also as physical bodies. Similar contradictory tendencies appear in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan". In this later poem from *The Tower* (1918), the poet emphasizes the symbolic value as well as the physical features of the animal. The swan as a beautiful rapist in "Leda and the Swan" also prompts a feminist reading, bringing us to the dichotomy between the poet and woman as object. This dichotomy is put on display in the last poem I discuss in detail, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931". In it, Yeats thematizes not only his life, but also his work and his relationship with the swans as mirrors of inevitable alienation.

Chapters one and two trace the influence of the two literary movements on Yeats. His own ideas on the movements reveal how much he was inspired by them while rejecting them at the same time. Chapter three then pushes the argument in a different direction, towards Yeats's self-reflection and his evaluation of the creative principle based on contradictions. I try to prove this principle as elementary not only throughout his poetry but also considering his prose. The aim of this thesis is not to place Yeats in any clear-cut category, but to try and understand the creative usage of various contradictions, tensions and oppositions that run across his entire oeuvre.

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## Introduction

In the context of Irish poetry, W. B. Yeats is considered an inimitable luminary. Yet perhaps no other twentieth-century poet, in Ireland or elsewhere, took so much care to assert oneself as an individual figure. His opposition to most fashionable poetic trends and styles, his ongoing interest in the occult, his controversial political views: all of these traits established Yeats's individualism. Accordingly, many critics have described his poetry as a field of contradictions, showing how those inconsistencies were a result of both natural disposition and a willed design. For example, in his introduction to *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Cedric Watts states that "W. B. Yeats's output of poetry is rich, diverse, variable and paradoxical [...] He can contradict in one poem what he apparently affirms in another".<sup>1</sup> From the opening pages of *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, edited by Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John Kelly, we learn that "[h]is thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he also embraced a counter-truth: a proposition that contradicted the first truth, was equally true, and did not negate it".<sup>2</sup> Presenting Yeats's poems as paradoxical and inconsistent yet not quite antithetical, such commentaries can be as baffling as they are revelatory.

It would seem that one is bound to fail when proposing to search for continuity and coherence in an oeuvre full of swerves and paradoxes. But what if this very variability can be considered a mark of cohesion? After all, such a view seems to be embraced by Yeats throughout his work, even though not without reservation. As Graham Martin points out when comparing Yeats and Walt Whitman, "for Yeats, contradiction seems to have been suffered rather than welcomed, and against the more select range of contradictions he experienced, he waged a lifelong struggle".<sup>3</sup> Thus even contradiction itself appears to be informed by opposition in Yeats's case.

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1 Cedric Watts, "Introduction", William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008) x.

2 *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 1.

3 Graham Martin, "Self-Quarrelling Yeats", *Critical Survey* 11.3 (1999): 59.

Such propositions and comments as well as my own reading of his poetry led me to perceive oppositions as a creative principle of Yeats's work. When I first encountered his poems, I became aware of the fact that he is always trying to be several things, ideas and persons at once. In poems like "A Woman Young and Old" and its male counterpart, it seemed as if Yeats wanted to encompass everything so that his poet could be a mystic and a doubter at one time, or a greatly privileged person and then a man struck down by his failures at another. Still, his persona remains essentially autobiographical, and thus one that is not easy to come to terms with. The contradictory nature of it, however, has some advantages for the reader too: while Yeats is indisputably one of "the greats" and his often mentoring tone can be irritating, the occasional flaws and weaknesses put on display in his poems make him accessible at the same time.

Thematic approach seemed to be most suitable in proving that oppositions are a creative principle for Yeats. My argument is that in the three poems by Yeats where swans feature prominently – "The Wild Swans at Coole", "Leda and the Swan" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" – various contradictions embodied in the swan image serve to foreground tensions which are the driving force behind Yeats's entire oeuvre. I propose that in these swan narratives, Yeats's poetics, variable as it was during his life, is constituted by contradictions, or multiple inner quarrels. Furthermore, the paradoxes and inconsistencies traceable in these three lyrics from Yeats's mature and early late period can be viewed as marking both change and continuum and are convenient case studies of the poet's stance to various aspects of creativity. In this way, they can be argued to be characteristic of Yeats's poetic development and the inter-poem and inter-image relationships in his poetry.

Heavily influenced by William Blake's notion that contradictions complement each other,<sup>4</sup> Yeats's idea of a "quarrel within oneself" can be found in his essay "Anima Hominis". Written in 1917

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4 See the third plate of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." William Blake, *The Complete Illuminated Books* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013) 109.



and included in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, the essay is a prose account of the occult aesthetic and ontology. It further expands the concept of the anti-self that was becoming increasingly important for Yeats's poetry, as evident in "Ego Dominus Tuus", the dialectical poem that precedes "Anima Hominis". In the fifth section of the essay Yeats writes:

We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty: and, smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude, our rhythm shudders.<sup>5</sup>

This quote, however, can be as misleading as any "explanatory" note offered by Yeats: if his poetry has been described as paradoxical, the same applies to his critical writings.<sup>6</sup> The image of poets overwhelmed with self-doubt further calls to question any grand, codifying framework imposed on Yeats who, after all, is here the first to admit he may be fallible. So if I propose to examine Yeats's poetic development through the prism of his ongoing "quarrel" with himself and the world, this development necessarily becomes an incessantly shifting trajectory, full of dead ends that make it impossible to adopt one single, universal point of view.

This kind of approach, of course, has its precedents in former critical accounts of Yeats's work. Since 1917, when *The Wild Swans at Coole* collection was published, comparison and contrast have played an important role in defining various general trends in Yeats's work, such as literary alignments, stylistic development or choice of themes. Paul de Man's approach, for example, is based on tracing the dual influence of Romanticism and Modernism in Yeats's works. Indeed, at least from *The Wild Swans at Coole* onwards, Yeats combined elements attributable to the two movements. To impose either of the two, in themselves ambivalent and not necessarily opposed<sup>7</sup> categories on his work

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5 W. B. Yeats, "Anima Hominis", *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Anthology*, ed. William H. Pritchard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 76.

6 As Paul De Man notes, having just admitted Yeats's prose has "considerable exegetic value" for our reading of his poems, "[t]he fundamental intent can only be derived from the poems themselves, considered in their entirety". Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 222.

7 The idea that "'Modern' poetry is, essentially, an extension of romanticism" was suggested by Randall Jarrell. See Randall Jarrell, "A Note on Poetry", *No Other Book: Selected Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) 84-85.

would thus be highly reductive, if not entirely impossible.

In chapter one, my reading of “The Wild Swans at Coole” traces the duality through Yeats’s affiliation with and departure from Romanticism. First, I further trace how the Romantic influence is rejected in “The Wild Swans at Coole” through critical references to Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s ideas of imagination and their handling of natural landscape. While the lyric, especially in its depiction of the natural setting, seems to show characteristics attributable to Romanticism, my reading of the poem focuses on the swans and their portrayal as an early example of Yeats’s late poetics in which images are emblems of discord rather than reconciliation.

Chapter two goes deeper into the nature of Yeats’s swan images and their development. Discerning Modernist aspects in “Leda and the Swan”, I explore the dualities in the poet’s treatment of the swan image. Looking closely at Yeats’s own ideas on Modernist poets and Eliot’s influence on modern poetry, the chapter takes up the argument from the previous one of the Irish poet’s ambiguous literary alignment. The conclusion is that the two movements were always both embraced and refuted in Yeats’s body of work, making him the “big fish” that cannot be caught in “categorical nets”,<sup>8</sup> as Edna Longley comments. In this regard, chapter two uses a similar approach to chapter one.

Chapter three then takes a different course. It focuses on the incongruity between the constructed poet-persona and Yeats’s life experience. The objects (swans, nature and women) from the two previous poems are compared with those in “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”. In this poem, Yeats straightforwardly addresses events that informed its writing as well as the creative process and its fallibility. In a close reading of the third poem, I further explore how Yeats used contradictions and various “anti-selves” in connection with the swan symbol to sustain his creativity. This process of creation, bared in the third poem, brings me back to the two preceding poems and the reasons behind the poet’s alienation from the swans in them.

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8 Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 70.

## 1. “The Wild Swans at Coole”

Whether Yeats was more of a Romantic or a Modernist remains debated. As already mentioned, the poet’s own remarks on the matter are of little help. On the one hand, in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* from 1936, Yeats wrote (albeit with a hint of irony) that he “too [has] tried to be modern”.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, his poem “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”, discussed in detail in chapter three, contains the famous lines “We were the last romantics – chose for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness”. This ambivalent stance towards Romanticism is thematized in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, chronologically the first of the three poems that focus on swans. In the poem, the way Yeats depicts landscape and handles the swan images marks a transition between Yeats the Romantic and Yeats the post-Romantic.

“Leda and the Swan” from *The Tower* (1928) and “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) belong to Yeats’s late period. They could thus be perceived as informed by the anti-Romantic aspects of Modernism, such as the emphasis on objectivity and the depersonalization of the poet’s speaking voice. As I will show, however, all three poems contain Romantic as well as Modernist elements that are placed in a creative dialectic. So, instead of proving that Yeats fits the characteristics of one movement rather than the other, this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, shows how the underlying conflict of two seemingly opposed influences is central to Yeats’s poetry. But first, before we look into this conflict-ridden synthesis which is the basis of Yeats’s poetic method and style, it is necessary to determine what Yeats understood by Romanticism as such.

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<sup>9</sup> William Butler Yeats, “Introduction”, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1953* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960) xxxvi.

## 1.1 Yeats and Romanticism

Although Yeats's views on Romanticism were quite idiosyncratic, the major figures that influenced his poetry are easily traced among the Romantics. As George Bornstein writes:

On the one hand, Yeats tended to think of literary Romanticism in terms of 'the Big Six' figures we identify today – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats [...] On the other hand, he saw Romanticism as spiraling out from there to include a poetic tradition from Dante and Spenser through Milton and the Big Six and on up to the present. In that sense Romanticism denoted not a specific historical epoch but rather a set of qualities that began much earlier, reached one peak of development in the Romantic period proper, and remained available to later artists like himself.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from discerning that Yeats could think of Romanticism conventionally as well, Bornstein draws attention to Yeats's another, distinctive and widened understanding of Romanticism as a set of characteristics.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Yeats's early poetry, these would include drawing themes out of Irish folklore and mythology as well as the romanticizing of the Irish peasant. An example of the former can be found in "The Withering of the Boughs" from *In the Seven Woods* (1904). There, the poet claims: "I know of the sleepy country, where swans fly round / Coupled with golden chains, and sing as they fly." (63)<sup>12</sup> As in the later "The Wild Swans at Coole", the pairing of the swans is used to evoke a happy marriage. However, this usage is still rooted in the Cuchulain myth and is has no autobiographical

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10 George Bornstein, "Yeats and Romanticism", *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 20.

11 Interestingly, in the next chapter of *The Cambridge Companion*, George Watson observes the same paradigm in case of Yeats's relationship with Victorianism: "He is no respecter of conventional literary periodization: as with his Romanticism, [Yeats's] Victorianism denotes not a specific historical epoch but rather a set of qualities that began much earlier, and reached a peak of development in the Victorian period proper." Watson also comments that "[o]ne would not [...] find too many critics ready to characterize Yeats as a Victorian – indeed, that Yeats was irredeemably hostile to everything Victorian has been an article of critical faith". His chapter reveals this hostility was as paradoxical as Yeats's stance towards Modernism and Romanticism: "Yeats's relation to the literature and critical theories of the nineties is [...] shifting and variable, a mix of attraction to the call of 'high art' and rejection of its esoteric remoteness from life, delight in its elaborate artificiality and a yearning for something more like 'the book of the people.' Similarly, his relation to the earlier Victorian period is not as monolithically hostile as it has been painted. In short, Yeats cannot be understood without being placed firmly in the Victorian context." George Watson, "Yeats, Victorianism, and the 1890s", *Ibid* 36, 56. While I am aware of this, my thesis is more concerned with the two literary movements and immediate context of Yeats's life.

12 All poems by Yeats are cited with page numbers in brackets from William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008).

motivation in the earlier poem.<sup>13</sup>

Since at least the publication of *The Wild Swans at Coole* in 1917 then, Yeats started to break away from his early, romanticizing method. The transition – announced in the last poem of *Responsibilities* (1914) which I discuss below – took place through opposition: seeing Romanticism’s flaws accentuated in the works of his imitators, Yeats sought to shed the influence of “the Big Six” over himself. The change manifested itself from *The Wild Swans at Coole* collection onwards and details in the collection’s title poem provide an illustration of this (imperfect) rejection of Romanticism. When contrasted with the ideas of Romantic imagination developed in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s writings, for example, the landscape’s description in “The Wild Swans at Coole” is quite obviously influenced by the Romantics. Nevertheless, their ideas are ultimately discarded in the poem. It captures a Yeats torn between two literary movements, and as in so many other such situations, he uses the tension as fuel for his creative process. Let us now read poem that marks the change.

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13 Cuchulain (also Cú Chulainn or Cú Chulaind) is one of the heroes from Irish legends. In an episode concerning swans, he throws stones at them, knocking the birds unconscious. Then he binds them together as a live trophy. For his plays, Yeats drew upon Augusta Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. See Alexander Norman Jeffares and A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) 110-111.

## 1.2 The Reflecting Lake at Coole

As already mentioned, Yeats's departure from his early Romantic tendencies was foreshadowed in "A Coat", the closing poem in *Responsibilities*. Reading "A Coat", Edna Longley quotes Ezra Pound's review of the collection, "where Pound concedes that Yeats is incurably 'romanticist, symbolist, occultist' [and] goes on to call him 'the only one left who has sufficient intensity ... to turn these modes into art' – perhaps a hopeful epitaph for 'these modes'".<sup>14</sup> So is the poem such an epitaph? Does it offer a "cure" for Yeats's earlier modes? In it, the poet refuses a coat made of "old mythologies" and the language in which his imitators have been romanticizing the Irish rural West. They are welcome to keep these for themselves:

Song, let them take it,  
For there's more enterprise  
In walking naked. (104)

This proposed shedding of an outworn subject matter was not complete on Yeats's part: his work remained in many respects influenced by Romanticism. Mythopoeia and symbolism, for example, never ceased to be relevant approaches in his poetry. Still, the gesture with which he forsakes some of the formerly constitutive elements of his own writing has Yeats's characteristic theatrical intensity.<sup>15</sup> We can almost imagine the poet believing that from then on, his work would be wholly different.

In view of this intensity, it is peculiar that "A Coat" concludes the collection directly preceding *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917). Its title poem demonstrates anything but vigour and resolution. As John Middleton Murry wrote two years after the collection's publication in an essay titled "Mr. Yeats' Swan Song",

we can regard him [...] as a poet whose creative vigour has failed him when he had to make the highest demand upon it. His sojourn in the world of the imagination, far from enriching his vision, has made it infinitely tenuous. Of this impoverishment, as of all else that has overtaken him, he is agonisedly aware.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Longley 94.

15 As Longley notes, "Yeats's self-image as poet spans actor, character in a play (sometimes Shakespearean tragedy), theatre director, impresario". Longley 30.

16 John Middleton Murry, "Mr. Yeats' Swan Song", *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Anthology*, ed. William H. Pritchard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 78.

We would expect such criticism in the case of a poet who is about to retire. Yet, despite the notion of defeat, Yeats went on to write some of his most accomplished poetry. This further confirms that with *The Wild Swans at Coole*, contradiction became a creative principle for him.

Where exactly does the contradiction lie? The critic's point that Yeats "made the tragic mistake" of contemplating the loss of his imaginative faculties demonstrates how "The Wild Swans at Coole" is still a poem influenced by Romantic ideas of imagination. Encountered for the first time, the poem may even read, Bornstein suggests, as a typical Romantic lyric, "in which an individual speaker confronts the landscape, and the interplay between mind and setting constitutes the poem".<sup>17</sup> If we look closely, however, the description of the landscape in the first stanza does not merely set the scene:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans. (107)

Instead, what the lines seem to suggest is a discarding of the imaginative faculties. This discarding is twofold. First, the verb used to describe the lake's reflection of the sky imitating its stillness refers to mimesis. Second, we will have to dive under the water's surface and find its spring. But let us consider the reflection first.

As mimesis is most commonly associated with Aristotle's *Poetics* and its interpretations during classicism,<sup>18</sup> it could be perceived as standing in opposition to Romanticism.<sup>19</sup> However, some of the Romantics embraced and expanded on the concept as well. When speaking about the ideal poet

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17 Bornstein 29.

18 Drawing attention to the term's reduced neoclassical interpretation as "the imitation of nature", Stephen Halliwell remarks: "It was not Aristotle but parts of the ancient tradition of mimeticism as a whole, and subsequently its neoclassical inheritors, that conflated the larger formal-cum-teleological principle with the more specialized idea of a particular group of mimetic arts." Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 154.

19 According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, under the entry for classicism we learn that, "[a]fter the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 'classical' came to be contrasted with 'romantic' in an opposition of increasingly generalized terms embracing moods and attitudes as well as characteristics of actual works". Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 41.

in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth writes that such a poet “considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature”.<sup>20</sup> What Wordsworth implies here is an ideal mindset; one that does not merely reflect but interacts with the natural setting. But is such interaction to be found in Yeats’s lines? Paul de Man writes that in Yeats, “[t]he descriptive, mimetic use of landscape remains quite similar to Wordsworth’s first kind of vision, in which nature is seen as an exterior object”.<sup>21</sup> Considering this as given, we would read the first stanza of “The Wild Swans at Coole” as a narcissistic projection, defined by the poet’s subjectivity (autumn symbolizes the poet’s age, for example), and thus very much in line with Wordsworth’s verse.

If viewed as an emblem, however, the lake becomes not a product of creation, but a creator. Mirroring “a still sky”, it replaces the poet who yields his role to the reflecting surface. A desire for synthesis – the impulse “to get lost and dispersed in the landscape”<sup>22</sup>, which Zdeněk Hrbata and Martin Procházka identify in all the major Romantic poets – is replaced by detachment. Instead of his own reflection, Yeats’s poet finds the reflected image of the sky. The individual self is not a force that shapes or gets shaped by the natural scenery: it stands apart from the surroundings, very much unlike Wordsworth’s poet with his ideal mindset blending into them. As David Daiches wrote in 1965, “for Wordsworth the key word is *relationship*. But for Yeats, even in his early romantic phase, it was a conviction of the essential dichotomy between man and nature that most possessed him”.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from this dichotomy, “The Wild Swans at Coole” also display some of the differences between the late and early Yeats. When we read on, the Romantic influence that seemingly permeates the poem is further rejected. In the fifth line, “the brimming water” of the lake reminds us of

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20 William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads in Romantic Poetry and Prose*, eds. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 604.

21 De Man 143.

22 Zdeněk Hrbata and Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a romantismus: pojmy, proudy, kontexty* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005) 29. Translation mine.

23 David Daiches, “The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns”, *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats 1865-1939*, eds. A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1965) 49.



Wordsworth's famous dictum that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings".<sup>24</sup> The lake at Coole thus becomes a spring and a reflecting surface which both echo Romantic thought. As M. H. Abrams writes of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's ideas of imagination: "Varied as these are, they usually agree in picturing the mind in perception as active rather than inertly receptive, and as contributing to the world in the very process of perceiving the world."<sup>25</sup> In "The Wild Swans at Coole", this notion of an artist's "brimming" imagination and the idea of the reflecting mind are literally placed in the landscape, apart from the weary poet. Paul de Man also argues that in Yeats's early phase,

The structure of the image has become that of self-reflection. The poet is no longer contemplating a thing in nature, but the workings of his own mind; the outside world is used as a pretext and a mirror, and it loses all its substance. [...] [T]he dominant mood of Yeats's earliest poetry is one of narcissistic self-contemplation.<sup>26</sup>

In "The Wild Swans at Coole", this is no longer true. Even if we find narcissism to be the driving force behind the poet's recollections, as mentioned above, the mirror does not reflect him, but the sky. The landscape thus gains substance and stops revolving around the poet's "workings of mind". In an exaggeration: the lake is the Romantic poet in the poem.

Further into "The Wild Swans at Coole", hallowing of natural scenery or expression of pantheism (often found in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry, respectively) are replaced by envy. This feeling then marks Yeats's departure from the Romantic influence, alienating the poet not only from nature but from early Yeats as well. Ultimately, it is the swans "Upon the brimming water among the stones" that are the emblems of this removal from the Romantic landscape, for the lake belongs to them rather than the tired poet's imagination. And it is in their image that the tension of Romantic influence and post-Romantic tendencies is most heightened.

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24 Bloom and Trilling 596.

25 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958) 58.

26 De Man 154.

### 1.3 The Swan as an Image of Contrast

The emblematic swans floating on the lake are the poem's central subject from the last line of the first stanza onwards. But can they be considered a subject through which the poet would identify with the nature, and thus resolve the poem in a unity? Writing about another poem from *The Wild Swans at Coole*, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", Frank Kermode famously defines the purpose of the poem's centre as follows: "[Yeats] reconciles the opposites of action and contemplation; and this reconciliation of opposites, very properly in a Romantic poet, is the purpose of the Yeatsian symbol, which is the flowering of what I call the Romantic image."<sup>27</sup> If swans in "The Wild Swans at Coole" were to be considered such a "Yeatsian symbol", tensions would need to be reconciled in them. No such reconciliation takes place. Instead, as apparent in the following two stanzas, the poem depends for its effect on quarrels between oppositions such as movement and stasis, imagination and the reality, the poet and the swans, or past and present:

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trode with a lighter tread. (107)

At first, Wordsworthian subjectivity and emphasis on the relationship between the poet and nature pervade the quiet contemplation. A recollection of the poet's past, however, sets the swans literally in motion.<sup>28</sup> When he makes an attempt to count them, they escape his analysis: at that instant, they stand

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27 Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge, 2002) 52.

28 The recollection alone would be suggestive of Wordsworth's poetry for, as Harold Bloom writes: "The hiding places of every person's power, Wordsworth insisted, are in his own past, however painful that past might have been. To live life, and not death-in-life, Wordsworth gently but forcefully advises us to find the natural continuities between what we were and what we are." Bloom and Trilling 126.

for the elusiveness of memory as well as the inevitable cycle of seasons and the flow of time.

The purpose becomes clearer: rather than reconciling the poet with his past, himself or nature, the swans become the central image of contradiction. As “The Wild Swans at Coole” keeps all the opposites apart, the contrasts in the poem become the force holding it together. Or, as Hazard Adams phrases it, “Yeatsian conflict is not a disintegrative principle but paradoxically the Heraclitean form of order itself”.<sup>29</sup> So, when in the final two stanzas Yeats completes drawing the contrasting images of the swans’ flight and the stationary poet, it comes as no surprise that the birds’ supposed happy state and freedom is openly contrasted with the poet’s melancholy and suffering:

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake’s edge or pool  
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away? (107)

Motion and stillness, happiness and suffering, loneliness and the wish to belong: these are some of the most evident contraries. But not only binary tensions constitute the poem. In the threefold opposition between the poet, nature (represented by the swans) and the poet’s imaginative faculties (located in the lake), we can find an early example of what David Daiches describes as “three-term dialectic” in Yeats. This dialectic culminates in the last three lines with the open question. As Daiches writes:

[Yeats’s] early poems are full of simple contrasts between pairs, and such contrasts often provide the basic poetic structure: man versus nature, the domesticated versus the wild, the human versus the faery, the temporal versus the changeless, the modern versus the ancient, the familiar versus the remote, and so on. In his later poetry he resolves these “antinomies of day and night”, achieving a resolution of opposites either in a tertium quid or else in a sense of the interpenetration of opposites.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats’s Vision: Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 13.

30 Daiches 50.

In poems like “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, where Kermode reads the central image as a means of harmony, the opposites do get resolved. But in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, the contraries are visibly left apart, struggling against each other, the result being a set of tensions between antinomies rather than a resolution. Permeating the poem, these oppositions are emblemized by the swans. In their image, the poet’s past and present meet, their “Passion or conquest” helps to set out the poet’s fatigue, and so on. Rather than a central image of unity, the swans thus represent an image of discord.

## 1.4 Conclusion

The tension between the discordant swan image and the lingering influence of Romanticism is what shapes the “The Wild Swans at Coole”. After all, dramatic contrasts in the poem do not entail any sense of dread. What is foregrounded is the sense of mystery and perception verging on transcendental experience, such as when the sound of the wings resembles a “bell-beat”, so that an image of a man-made church and a movement of live bodies overlap. In their unifying quality, these images could be easily related to Coleridge’s idea of pantheism and the difference he made between fancy and imagination.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the movement of the swans stirs memory in the poet also questions the extent of his alienation. Such Romantic tendencies and elements are kept visible in the poem’s narrative.

But as shown in the above discussion of the swan image or the treatment of the Romantic ideas of imagination in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, the poem contains elements verging on the anti-Romantic as well. An example of a deliberately and wholly counter-Romantic concept would be the references to exact numbers. “The nineteenth autumn” and “nine-and-fifty swans” seem to undermine the initial sense of a subjective, sentimental narrative and can be seen as cases of exact analysis, i.e. something which Wordsworth considered as unproductive. After all, in “Tables Turned” he warns that “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: / – We murder to dissect”.<sup>32</sup> Thus the swans at Coole are both countable and uncountable, even transcendental, in their flight.

In view of these details, it is impossible to say that Yeats has moved away from the Romantic ideas of imagination and nature. It would be equally naïve to assume that the digressions from

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31 Writing about Coleridge’s passage on fancy in *Biographia Literaria*, M. H. Abrams notes: “Coleridge introduced into English criticism an important concept [fancy], and one which has reappeared to play a leading role in the critical writings of our own generation. This is the appeal to inclusiveness as the criterion of poetic excellence – to the co-existence in a poem of ‘opposite or discordant qualities,’ provided that these have been blended or ‘reconciled’ into unity by the synthetic power which Coleridge attributes to the imagination. The concept, it is important to notice, is not adventitious in Coleridge’s criticism, nor even specifically aesthetic in its origins. It is merely the application in the province of aesthetics of the generative principle which underlies Coleridge’s metaphysical system in its totality.” Abrams 118.

32 William Wordsworth, “Tables Turned”, Bloom and Trilling 130.

Romanticism on the poet's part would help us see some clear-cut difference between Yeats "the last Romantic" and Yeats the post-Romantic (or Modernist). Rather, the numerous inconsistencies can help us understand the creative process of the poet, especially in his later writings, where he uses this wavering between the two styles to his own advantage. Inspired by Romanticism, he openly subverts some of its ideas while retaining some other of its methods and qualities. For sure, Yeats also struggled "against 'exteriority' – against the compromises that Victorian poetry has made with the age by 'admitting so much psychology, science, moral fervour'",<sup>33</sup> as Longley has it. But this time, the contradiction becomes internalized, or, as Marjorie Perloff writes: "The protagonist of 'The Wild Swans' is no longer quarreling with others; his meditative speech is directed only at himself."<sup>34</sup> As I will show in the next chapter, "Leda and the Swan" with its simultaneous use of objective and subjective expression presents another example of such double-edged ambivalence, accentuated again in the treatment of the swan image. The difference is that in "Leda and the Swan", the prevalent – and again rejected – influence would be that of Modernism.

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33 Longley 74.

34 Marjorie Perloff, "'The Tradition of Myself': The Autobiographical Mode of Yeats", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 4.3 (1975): 531.

## 2. “Leda and the Swan”

Regarding Modernism, Yeats’s ideas were similarly complex and ambiguous as those about Romanticism. Writing about the contemporary poets chosen for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, he made it clear in the editorial introduction that he considered “modernity” as “novelty” rather than an aesthetic movement:

Edith Sitwell with her Russian Ballet, Turner with his *Mare Tranquillum*, Dorothy Wellesley with her ancient names – ‘Heraclitus added fire’ – her moths, horses and serpents, Pound with his descent into Hades, his Chinese classics, are too romantic to seem modern. Browning, that he might seem modern, created an ejaculating man-of-the-world good humour; but Day Lewis, Madge, MacNeice, are modern through the character of their intellectual passion.<sup>35</sup>

A historical understanding of Modernism blends here with Yeats’s opinion about certain recent poets. Like in the case of Romanticism, it is hard to discern which of the two viewpoints applies each time Yeats writes about someone or something “modern”. But, as this thesis has argued, such duality goes hand in hand with the contradictory nature of his poetry.

For example, the “intellectual *passion*” that Yeats praises in Lewis, Madge and MacNeice, is in itself opposed to T. S. Eliot’s ideas in his influential “Tradition and Individual Talent” essay. There Eliot points out that “[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”,<sup>36</sup> and although Eliot’s argument is not wholly against emotion,<sup>37</sup> it is against subjectivity. The subjective and the objective have thus been associated with Romanticism and Modernism, respectively. The idea of an impersonal poem is to be found in the above quoted passage from Eliot’s essay, whereas the notion of subjectivity would be most commonly associated with Wordsworth’s verse. As Bloom notes, “[b]efore Wordsworth, poetry had a

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35 Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1953* xxxvi.

36 T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and Individual Talent”, *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: Bedford Books, 1989) 470.

37 Further on he writes that “very few know when there is an expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done”. Eliot 471.

subject. After Wordsworth, its prevalent subject was the poet's own subjectivity".<sup>38</sup> My reading of "Leda and the Swan" rests on the tension between this subjectivity and Modernist objectivity. It also brings us to Eliot's influence on Yeats, who was all too eager to dismiss it.

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38 Bloom and Trilling 125.



## 2.1 Yeats and Eliot

After its first publication in *The Dial* magazine in 1924, “Leda and the Swan” was included as an epigraph to the “Dove or Swan” chapter in *A Vision* (1925). Writing of time in the chapter, Yeats imagines history as having “phases” that revolve in great “wheels” and “gyres”.<sup>39</sup> The text further associates swan with the “antithetical” phase in this cyclical history of art rather than the “primary” one preceding it. There is not enough space here to go in detail into the book’s intricate and in many ways paradoxical theories of art, history and time.<sup>40</sup> It is useful, however, to explore how this passage can help us understand the nature of the swan image.

First and foremost, the placing of the swan in the antithetical phase stresses again the importance of contradictions in Yeats’s late work. As Hazard Adams writes: “The rape of Leda by Zeus, in the form of a swan, stands for the beginning of the Pagan Era and produces symbolically in two eggs the opposites necessary to antitheticality: Love in the person of Helen and Strife in the persons of Castor and Pollux.”<sup>41</sup> Such an understanding of the Greek myth points to Yeats’s personal viewpoint rather than a historically accurate account. But this asserted viewpoint of “antitheticality” can prove useful when we read the poem, as contradictions are likely to occur within the swan image.

Second, the understanding of art history in *A Vision* sheds light on Yeats’s problematic literary alignment. Seeing everything in oppositions, he places the two literary movements – that are not necessarily opposed, as mentioned above – against each other. So much so that in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats’s summary of Modernism serves mainly to present his opinion on the development of poetic styles. When he foregrounds Eliot’s “novelty” further on in the introduction, Yeats is stressing the historical sense of “modernity” again. The following description of Eliot’s influence upon other poets serves not only as a representation of Yeats’s individualism: it brings

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39 See William Butler Yeats, *A Critical Edition of Yeats’s A Vision* (1925), ed. George M. Harper and Walter K. Hood (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978) 180-181.

40 De Man goes as far as to say that “pseudo-exploration and pseudo-ordering [takes] place in *A Vision*”. De Man 222.

41 Adams 139.

to the fore what influence Eliot may have had on the Irish poet.

Eliot has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry. He is an Alexander Pope, working without apparent imagination, producing his effects by a rejection of all rhythms and metaphors used by the more popular romantics rather than by the discovery of his own, this rejection giving his work an unexaggerated plainness that has the effect of novelty.<sup>42</sup>

Is not Yeats's own verse characterized by rejections and wanderings off the beaten track? As I have shown, his "A Coat" is a vocal rejection and reconstruction of the self through opposition. Moreover, the impersonality that Yeats detects in Eliot's works is present in Yeats's work from at least *The Wild Swans at Coole* onwards.

This tension that Yeats artificially creates between himself and Eliot can help us understand the tension between his own "modernity" – expressed in the apologetic phrase that he too has tried to be modern – and the theatricalized "poet-persona as a revenant from a bygone age" that Laura O'Connor identifies as the "antitype" image desired by Yeats.<sup>43</sup> It is the same tension, which could be simplified as that between a highly subjective and objective, impersonal mode, that fuels the creative energy behind "Leda and the Swan", "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", and to some degree also "The Wild Swans at Coole".

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42 Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1953* xxi.

43 Laura O'Connor, "W. B. Yeats and Modernist Poetry", *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 80.

## 2.2 The Subjective and the Objective

As shown above, Yeats's stance to Eliot as an exponent of Modernism is complicated. Moreover, the question of the Irish poet's relationship with Modernism in general remains as ambiguous as any attempt at periodization of modern poetry. For example, in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, Joe Cleary delineates "abrasively anti-modern rhetorics"<sup>44</sup> in Yeats's late work and yet, less than forty pages later, Laura O'Connor argues that "Yeats's relish for adversarial stances is a rare unequivocal modernist trait" and labels him "[a] contrarian in both the colloquial and Blakean senses of the word".<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in his monograph from 1970, Harold Bloom took Yeats's position among "major modernists" such as "Joyce, Pound, and Wallace Stevens"<sup>46</sup> for granted. According to Bloom, post-Romantic poetry, "despite its frequently overt anti-Romanticism, as in Pound, Eliot, and their school",<sup>47</sup> is to be perceived as a continuation of Romanticism. This further supports my reading of "The Wild Swans at Coole" as showing the characteristics of both Romanticism and post-Romantic tendencies. It is as if because of its contrariety, Yeats's poetry could fit almost any periodization. Reading "Leda and the Swan" or "The Wild Swans at Coole" as solely Modernist poems would then be as limiting and problematic as any exclusively "Romantic" reading.

To complicate its alignment even further, in view of its subject matter – the rape of Leda by Zeus – "Leda and the Swan" could again be described as a Romantic lyric upon first reading. After all, discussing the importance of symbolism, myth and folklore in Shelley, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, M. H. Abrams points out that "[s]ymbolism, animism, and mythopoeia, in richly diverse forms, explicit or submerged, were so pervasive in this age as to constitute the most pertinent single attribute for defining 'romantic' poetry".<sup>48</sup> And reading the thematically related, mythopoetic "Ode to a

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44 Joe Cleary, "European, American, and Imperial Conjunctures", *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. Joe Cleary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 44.

45 O'Connor 80.

46 Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 33.

47 Ibid.

48 Abrams 296.

Nightingale” by Keats or Shelley’s “To a Skylark” alongside “Leda and the Swan” would certainly reveal some of their author’s influence on Yeats. Once more, it is the tension between an influence and its rejection that is one of the drives behind the poem.

The influence of Romanticism lies in the subjective, personal manner of description; that of Modernism in the overarching objectivity which the poem strives to achieve. As the swan and Leda are described by the poet in an impersonal yet emotional manner, the two perspectives create one contradictory viewpoint. A similar choice of words suggesting subtler duality of tone is to be encountered in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. As mentioned above, the act of assessment by way of counting both triggers and disrupts the poetic persona’s reminiscing in the earlier poem, while the “mysterious” and “beautiful” swans are, as Longley suggests, “Symbolism and Aestheticism embodied”.<sup>49</sup>

A major difference between the two poems lies in the seemingly absent speaker in “Leda and the Swan”. Interestingly, commenting upon his understanding of bird imagery prior to writing *A Vision*, Yeats wrote in his note to the play *Calvary*:

Certain birds [...] such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river, while the beasts that run upon the ground, especially those that run in packs, are the natural symbols of objective man.<sup>50</sup>

Such pairing of swans with subjectivity and beasts (or man) with objectivity suggests that the poet – as well as Leda – would fall into the second category. However, the objective alongside the subjective is found in the poet’s description of both the bird and the human, so that the two approaches struggle against each other rather than merge from the first stanza onwards:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push

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49 Longley 91.

50 William Butler Yeats, *The Plays*, eds. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2001) 696.

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (182)

Again – like in the case of “The Wild Swans at Coole” – dichotomous imagery serves to define the poem’s outer imaginary limits and thus to hold it together: the strong swan and Leda’s trembling body, “her nape” held by the bird’s bill. And even though in the last lines in both stanzas the two bodies are shown as connected – breast to breast and heart to heart – in the end questions are raised in place of a resolution. Again, the swan is an image of discord.

The poet then acts as an observer and commentator. Yet his descriptions are full of unnecessary, highly subjective details, like when he describes Leda’s fingers as “vague” or tries to interpret her feelings. Yeats’s wish is to express “an eternal competition between objective (factual, ugly) and subjective (symbolic, beautiful)”,<sup>51</sup> as Daniel Albright points out. The ancient myth is retold from a subjective perspective and the swan itself is becoming “symbolic” and “factual” at the same time.<sup>52</sup> So is its victim in the final two stanzas:

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.  
                                  Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (182)

This further develops the duality of the swan image, established in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. There, the poet was musing about another person’s eyes catching a subjective sight of the swans:

Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake’s edge or pool  
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away? (107)

In “Leda and the Swan”, the final question left hanging in the air is similarly overarching and helps to

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51 Daniel Albright, “Yeats and Modernism”, *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 66.

52 In Yeats’s earlier poem, “Demon and Beast”, we find a similar contrast between esoteric and almost graphic description: first, the bird there is “gyring down and perning there” (158), then the poet claims that “Being no more demoniac / A stupid happy creature / Could rouse my whole nature” (158).

further discern the poet's treatment of the swan image. Which leads us to the discrepancy between swan as the natural image and swan as an emblem that is the subject of my subsequent reading.

### 2.3 Swan as Both Natural Image and Emblem

Considering the violence described in the poem, the poet's subjective question in the last four lines seems odd in its genuine curiosity and obvious lack of empathy. Yeats does not employ any distancing irony and he does not contrast mythical, elevated subject matter with everyday imagery, as Eliot does in his poetry.<sup>53</sup> Still, the subjective aspect in the poem fails to connote any therapeutic quality – be it for the poet or the reader. That is why the tension between the objective and subjective is the strongest in the final question: Yeats's swan is shown as terrifying and very much alive, while it also stands an emblem of history's cold brutality and impersonal exchanges of power.

This was Yeats's original intention. Lady Gregory noted in her journal that at the time of his visit in Coole, during which he conceived the poem's earliest version, Yeats "talked of his long belief that the reign of democracy is over for the present, and in reaction there will be violent government from above".<sup>54</sup> The result of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty – the border between the North and the rest of Ireland – was one of the events connected with "Leda and the Swan". But as Roy Foster notes, at the time of its publication, local papers linked the poem with what seems almost as an anecdote. In 1924, Yeats attended a ceremonial occasion on which his colleague senator and poet Oliver St. John Gogarty presented "gift of a pair of swans to the River Liffey, as a thanksgiving for his rescue" from his anti-Treaty kidnapers during the Civil War.<sup>55</sup> These two swans waddling into the Dublin's river ironically stand in contrast to Yeats's grand intention of a political parable, as the mundane event hardly fits the system of "gyres" or "phases" that Yeats believed to be the basis of any historical narrative.

Another biographical fact that becomes relevant when we discuss the swan image is the third possible source of inspiration. This inspiration would not come from an actual episode or the political

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53 See, for example, the opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table"; or Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales", written around the same time as "The Wild Swans at Coole" and structured, tongue-in-cheek, around the Philomela myth. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 9, 22-23.

54 Daniel J. Murphy, ed. *Lady Gregory's Journals. Volume 1* (Gerrards Cross, 1978) 477. Qtd. in R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, Volume II: The Arch-Poet, 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 243.

55 Foster 270.

situation in Ireland but from the sphere of art. “Leda and the Swan” is said to have been inspired by at least three visual sources, out of which a bas-relief exhibited in the Etruscan Room of the British Museum seems to be the most influential.<sup>56</sup> So, if we consider the poem as an ekphrasis as well, what does it mean for the swan image? Writing about Yeats’s late poetry in his seminal work *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Paul de Man remarks:

Yeats’s entire effect is calculated to seduce the reader by the apparent realism of his narration. But since it is much easier to construct a seemingly real setting around a system of emblems than to discover a coherent set of emblems in a real situation, one may well conjecture that the reality here is artifice, while the emblematic network is the real starting-point. A definite stylistic pattern thus begins to appear; the poem uses natural imagery and gains its immediate appeal and effectiveness from this imagery; the true meaning, however, is only revealed if the images are read as emblems, and one is led to believe that it consists of emblems masquerading as images rather than the opposite.

The dual role of the emblem does not appear in the form of a discontinuity in texture; the two versions dovetail perfectly with each other and with the larger context of the poem. They fit neatly within the picture of the concrete scene, as well as in the network of emblems.<sup>57</sup>

The image of the swan then is an exponent of such a duality, be it in “Leda and the Swan” or in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. In the latter, the swans are emblems of a happy, “married” life<sup>58</sup> as well as images of heavy, circling bodies and their “clamorous wings”. Their description thus relies on these very physical bodies as well as the poet’s associations and projections stemming from those bodies. Or, as Paul de Man specifies the two roles, the swans are both a natural image and an emblem.

Similarly, the shapeshifted Zeus in “Leda and the Swan” stands for the aforementioned political or personal concepts of power (observed in detail in the next chapter) but his image still retains its physicality. An example of such duality is the sense of violence which pervades the poem: “the great wings beating still”, “the white rush” and “the brute blood of the air” accentuate the conflict behind the two roles of the image, as well as the conflict of the whole poem. As de Man writes,

After having been treated as an ambiguous poetic device, destined to give texture and appeal to emblems and themes not really strong enough to dispense with its assistance, nature returns in the later poetry in a very different form. No longer does it function as the self-reflecting,

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56 See Foster 710-711.

57 De Man 194.

58 In *Ornithology*, Frank B. Gill writes: “Monogamous pair bonds may last for a breeding season or for life. Most pairs of parrots, eagles and pigeons sustain lifelong associations. Long-lived birds – including swans and geese, albatrosses, and some shorebirds – also rarely divorce.” Frank B. Gill, *Ornithology* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 2007) 360.



narcissistic mirror of the early poetry, but it acts as the brutal strength of matter, a bestial violence which can only find expression in images of blood and torment.<sup>59</sup>

This move of Yeats further away from a Romantic understanding of nature and his embrace of an idiosyncratic Modernist technique does not mean Yeats becomes a straightforward Modernist. Quite the contrary: the quarrel between the two movements' influences and an inner quarrel of the late Yeats with his early self escalates with time. It results in a set of creative tensions, such as that of the dual swan image and the contradiction of subjective and objective description in "Leda and the Swan". And as the swan there is both an emblem and a natural image, so is Yeats at the same time a Romantic and a Modernist poet. Regarding the latter, Anne Fogarty remarks, Yeats becomes paradoxically "both a proleptic modernist and a late arrival in a movement that he helped to shape but never fully embraced".<sup>60</sup> Elements of Modernism in the poem attest to his fluctuating alignment, as Yeats used some ideas of Modernism in his poetry but never forgot to properly differentiate himself from the movement.

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59 De Man 229.

60 Anne Fogarty, "Yeats, Ireland and modernism", *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, eds. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 126.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In order to argue for a continuity or difference between “The Wild Swans at Coole” and “Leda and the Swan”, it is useful to try to determine again what Yeats could have meant using the term “modern”.

Denis Donoghue distinguishes two possible concepts:

It seems clear [...] that Yeats saw two kinds of modern poetry: the poetry of sincerity and the poetry of the dramatic monologue. Mostly, he committed himself to the dramatic monologue, but he often felt misgiving – as in saying “I too have tried to be modern” – and turned to the poetry of sincerity.<sup>61</sup>

With this in mind, we could perceive “Leda and the Swan” as leaning towards a sincere piece of myth-handling and “The Wild Swans at Coole” as more of a dramatic monologue. The third swan poem by Yeats makes use of the duality of description as well. The crucial difference between “The Wild Swans at Coole”, “Leda and the Swan” and “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” lies in the latter’s use of explicit meta-poetic commentary. It is this commentary that brings us to the relationship between Yeats’s poetry and his life, as well as the alienation that informs his late creative process.

So far, chapter one explored the origin and function of the image of contrast and chapter two referred to the duality of its treatment. This contrast between two different approaches to description apparent in “Leda and the Swan” also connects the raping swan with the harmonious flock of birds observed in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. In both poems, the swan image is treated objectively and subjectively and as a result, its nature is twofold. If the counted swans at Coole Lake emanated mystery, they were still described as robust, heavily soaring bodies by the poet. Similarly, the bird in “Leda and the Swan” is emblematic but at the same time physical. What remains to be addressed in the last chapter are the facts of Yeats’s life.

As I have suggested, these have informed the poems heavily. The political background in the case of “Leda and the Swan” and the ageing poet in “The Wild Swans at Coole” all play an important role. I have not delved too deep into these autobiographical aspects yet. Because of them, it would be

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61 Denis Donoghue, “Yeats, Trying to Be Modern”, *New England Review* 31.4 (2010): 142.

easy to argue against any continuity between the two poems, especially regarding the differences between their poetic personas or absence of any kind of overt violence in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) seems to offer an intersection of these disparities, a coming together of all the contradictions outlined in the two previous poems, with an emphasis placed on the contrast between the poet and the world. Precisely this contrast is the subject of the next chapter.

### 3. “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”

Written in 1932, “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” was later identified by Yeats as an ode on Lady Gregory, composed on the occasion of her death. As Roy Foster notes, “[t]he title also connects his house and hers, by the metaphor of the underground river that ran between them [which] surfaces in the lake at Coole”.<sup>62</sup> The mirroring lake from “The Wild Swans at Coole” and its surrounding nature once again serve to reflect the poet’s mood: only this time, Yeats makes the connection explicit.

Upon the border of that lake’s a wood  
Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,  
And in a copse of beeches there I stood,  
For Nature’s pulled her tragic buskin on  
And all the rant’s a mirror of my mood:  
At sudden thunder of the mounting swan  
I turned about and looked where branches break  
The glittering reaches of the flooded lake. (206-207)

The “wintry sun”, dried branches and the “flooded lake” all suggest late winter, and it was in February that Yeats visited Augusta Gregory for the last time. The season becomes an emblem, reflecting Lady Gregory’s demise and the poet’s mood, as he is doubtful about the coming of spring. Yeats once again combines the descriptive mode with a personal narrative as in “The Wild Swans at Coole” and “Leda and the Swan”.

In “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”, however, the narcissistic projection of the self and Augusta Gregory’s soul into the landscape is overtly revealed in the fifth line. The poet exclaims: “And all the rant’s a mirror of my mood”, making it clear that the Romantic idea of mimesis prevails in the poem and he will not try to discard it this time. After introducing the landscape, the poem’s narrative turns to an interpretation of a swan’s flight in the third stanza and the first line of stanza four:

Another emblem there! That stormy white  
But seems a concentration of the sky;  
And, like the soul, it sails into the sight  
And in the morning’s gone, no man knows why;

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62 Foster 439.

And is so lovely that it sets to right  
What knowledge or its lack had set awry,  
So arrogantly pure, a child might think

It can be murdered with a spot of ink. (207)

The simile in the third line, when the swan “like the soul [...] sails into the sight / And in the morning’s gone”, openly suggests that the swan is a symbol of Lady Gregory’s departed soul. But as these two images of a bird and spirit are likened to one another, the poet disrupts his meditation by saying that the bird is “So arrogantly pure, a child might think / It can be murdered with a spot of ink”. This remark referencing the matter of the poem and the fact that it consists of “mere” written words undermines the importance of the emblem, as Yeats names the swan here explicitly for the first time. The comment also brings us to the poet who stepped back when the natural image took the stage. As Nicholas Greene writes in reference to the last, crucial line:

The perceived world prompts symbolic interpretation, and one of the most persistent urges of Yeats’s poetic imagination is towards a coherent symbology that will tell the truths of universal correspondences. Its countermovement is a sceptical self-awareness underlining the constructedness of all such imagination.<sup>63</sup>

“The Wild Swans at Coole” with its discordant swan image and “Leda and the Swan” with its blending of an emblem and a natural image could be seen as prime examples of such system of symbology. With “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, Yeats begins to openly doubt the plausibility of this set of symbols, founding his poem not on the tension between the poet and his object, but between the object and William Butler Yeats’s life.

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63 Nicholas Greene, *Yeats’s Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 129.

### 3.1 Swans as “Anti-selves”

Reading two different poems from *The Tower*, Helen Vendler observes that “[b]oth ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ and ‘Among School Children’ scrutinize and debate Yeats’s life-choices; but the first is conceived mythically, the second autobiographically”.<sup>64</sup> In the first poem, myth conveys Yeats’s figurative withdrawal whereas in the second, a group of children perceive the poet as “A sixty-year-old smiling public man” (183) who reconsiders his past beliefs. These two modes that Vendler terms the mythical and the autobiographical apply to “Leda and the Swan” and “The Wild Swans at Coole”, respectively, too. In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, they complement each other. This is most apparent in the last stanza of the poem where the myth-maker – Homer – standing for the deceased, real person – Lady Gregory – is connected with the swan:

We were the last romantics – chose for theme  
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
Whatever’s written in what poets name  
The book of the people; whatever most can bless  
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;  
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood. (207)

But the contrastive image of the swan once again sets the association apart. Importantly, it also sets the swan, Lady Gregory and Homer apart from the poetic persona and, finally, Yeats himself.

Distance and subsequent alienation is established in all the three poems: what varies is the method. In “The Wild Swans at Coole” it is achieved by means of numbers, as I argue in chapter one. The two numerals can be taken as part of an enigma to decipher, as means of a transition from Romanticism or as simple markers of loneliness.<sup>65</sup> In “Leda and the Swan”, “controlled violence of the late work”<sup>66</sup> plays a similar role, ultimately alienating the natural and emblematic swan as well as Leda.

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64 Helen Vendler, “The later poetry”, *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 82.

65 As Linda L. Fox points out: “A popular interpretation views the uneven number of birds (twenty-nine pairs plus an odd swan) as a symbol for loneliness.” Linda L. Fox, “Nine-and-Fifty as Symbol in Yeats’s ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’”, *English Language Notes*, 26.1 (1988): 54.

66 De Man 188.

“Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, however, questions such usage of images altogether, as the deprivation hinted at with the rejection of imaginative faculties in “The Wild Swans at Coole” matures into the gloomy vision of a riderless horse of verse. The swan, “drifting upon a darkening flood”, seems to become an emblem not only of the soul of the poet’s friend or his own imagined demise, but of a drama outside the narrative, related to the creation of poetry: as a witness to a doubtful, esoteric system of symbols, the swan “can be murdered with a spot of ink”.

In this regard, the swan could be read as the opposite side in Yeats’s creative self-quarrel. Similar thought was articulated in “Ego Dominus Tuus” (1915), a poem entitled after Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and included both in Yeats’s *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (where it directly precedes the “Anima Hominis” essay quoted earlier) and *The Wild Swans at Coole*. The poem is structured as a dialogue. At one point, Yeats has one of the two speakers, Ille, say:

By the help of an image  
I call to my own opposite, summon all  
That I have handled least, least looked upon. (134)

To which his partner’s Hic’s immediate response is: “And I would find myself and not an image.” Putting aside speculations as to which one of the two speaks for Yeats himself, what does this exchange mean for the subsequent swan narratives? Should they all be read as the “callings of opposites”, invoking “of all imaginable things / The most unlike, being my anti-self” (136) that Ille specifies in the last stanza of the poem? And what could stand for this “anti-self”?

The choice of title offers a clue: the Italian poet’s line “Ego dominus tuus”, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s footnote translated as “I am thy master”,<sup>67</sup> is spoken by a figure that appears in Dante’s dream after he had seen Beatrice for the second time. The full account in his *La Vita Nuova* comes close to Yeats’s calling for an opposite:

[T]here appeared to be in my room a mist of the colour of fire, within the which I discerned the figure of a lord of terrible aspect to such as should gaze upon him, but who seemed therewithal to rejoice inwardly that it was a marvel to see. Speaking he said many things, among the which I

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67 Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova* from *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo d’Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)*, trans. and ed. by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Smith, Elder, 1861) 226.

could understand but few; and of these, this: Ego dominus tuus.’<sup>68</sup>

Although the swans in the three poems by Yeats do not speak (nor sing) or emerge in a dream or a vision, they are always antithetical to the poet. In “The Wild Swans at Coole”, they paddle along in pairs, making us aware of the poet’s loneliness. In “Leda and the Swan”, the poet emerges from the concluding question hinting at the swan’s (and history’s) brutality. And finally, in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” the poet discloses the image of the swan is his product, a word written on a page. The exclamation in Dante’s dream (“I am thy master”) does not make the anti-self a tyrant in relation to Yeats. Rather, we should take it as a paraphrase of the “intellectual passion” he observed in the modern poets. Here, Yeats identifies it as the driving principle behind Dante’s poetry. In “Ego Dominus Tuus”, this principle is laid bare as a summoning of images. The catch is that it comes from Dante’s platonic love of Beatrice.

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68 Dante 226.



### 3.2 Terrible Beauty

Similarly to Dante, Yeats hints at autobiographical facts related to women throughout the three poems featuring swans. In “The Wild Swans at Coole”, the absent but implicitly referenced woman would be the actress, nationalist and suffragette Maud Gonne who was for many years the object of Yeats’s obsession and the source of his frustration. The authorial persona’s weariness in the poem can be fully apprehended only if the reader is familiar with Yeats’s personal history: otherwise, the assertion that “All’s changed” in the third stanza cannot be distinguished from the refrain in “Easter, 1916”: “All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born” (152). But whereas the latter reveals Yeats’s shock at the bloody outcome of the Easter Rising,<sup>69</sup> in “The Wild Swans at Coole” the objection concerns Yeats and his love life. His persona – with a heart “grown old” and “sore” – is defined mainly through the opposition to the swans, as shown in chapter one, but also through the opposition to the facts outside the text: Yeats’s final rejection by Maud Gonne, after which he unsuccessfully proposed to her daughter Iseult.

The alienation that takes place in “The Wild Swans at Coole” removes women from the poet’s sight and the poem, making it a covert instance of courtly love. Especially reading it alongside “Easter, 1916”, still unpublished at the time “The Wild Swans at Coole” was reviewed,<sup>70</sup> exposes the treatment of woman as an alienated object. Psychoanalytical theory characterizes courtly love as an instance of creation wherein the created thing is the image of the damsel as something ideal, even antithetical to the poet: an ambiguous representation of “the Other”. As Jacques Lacan writes, referencing conditions similar to the situation of Ireland after the Easter Rising:

The poetry of courtly love, in effect, tends to locate in the place of the Thing certain discontents of the culture. And it does so at a time when the historical circumstances bear witness to a disparity between the especially harsh conditions of reality and certain fundamental demands. By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner.<sup>71</sup>

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69 Although Roy Foster suggests that even “Easter, 1916” can be read as “a last, elegiac love-lyric to Gonne”. Foster 59.

70 See Foster 82.

Yeats's vision of "A terrible beauty" thus becomes an acute reading of both a present historical event and personal history.

And this oxymoronic image of "terrible beauty" matches the poet's idea of the swans as "those brilliant creatures" in "The Wild Swans at Coole", as well as the contradictory terror and beauty that Zeus stands for in "Leda and the Swan". It even accounts for the lack of empathy with the idealized Leda in the latter poem.<sup>72</sup> In conclusion to her close reading of the lyric, Elizabeth B. Cullingford notes how Yeats's political and artistic intentions defy labels proposed by literary critics, making it difficult to separate one particular point of view:

"Leda and the Swan" demonstrates what happens when a writer cares more about using explicitly sexual situations as a strategy for challenging censorship than with the implications of that strategy for women, who are both the subjects of and subject to the power of his imagination. Yet it also exposes the brutality of the male or divine exercise of force. We cannot make a tidy separation between a positive liberal-historicist hermeneutic and a negative feminist one.<sup>73</sup>

Again, the political circumstances of the separated Ireland come to the fore. Maud Gonne's agitation for the Home Rule could lead us to think that the figure of Leda is to be read as an image of Ireland's futile revolutionary tendencies (with Maud Gonne as Leda or Helen in the forefront) being brutally repressed by the English forces. However, Yeats's remark that "Leda and the Swan" became as distant from politics as possible when published in *A Vision*,<sup>74</sup> as well as his numerous revisions to the poem complicate any such narrow reading of the swan image. Though the opposition of the two powers is clear, it can, in Foster's interpretation, result in a sort of balance,<sup>75</sup> not unlike the tensions and "quarrels" observed above. And if we would consider these two competing images as alienated from the seemingly absent poet, lost in the objective description, it is equally possible to perceive the image

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71 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (Hove: Routledge, 2010) 212.

72 As Slavoj Žižek points out expanding on Lacan's theory, "the Lady is the Other which is not our 'fellow-creature'; that is to say, she is someone with whom no relationship of empathy is possible". Slavoj Žižek, "Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing", *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994) 90.

73 Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 164.

74 See Foster 243.

75 Foster remarks that "[t]he drafts show how the focus persistently shifts from the god to Leda, a balance which [Yeats] was not satisfied with until the poem's third printing, in *A Vision*". Foster 244.

of the swan as the object of courtly love, presenting an idealized, horrifying “Other”.

Even the mystery surrounding the flock in “The Wild Swans at Coole” could be seen as erotic in a sense. The argument falls short, however, in the case of the last poem discussed: the only woman referred to in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” is, as mentioned, the poet’s lifelong literary friend Lady Gregory, who’s soul can be identified as one of the many emblematic meanings of the swan image there. Still, Yeats’s poet remarks the swan is not just pure, but “arrogantly pure”. It is this arrogance following from the bird’s chromatic and moral properties in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, the swan’s “strange heart beating” in “Leda and the Swan” and the provokingly enigmatic “The Wild Swans at Coole” that finally lead us to realize what Yeats has already articulated: as a result of all the contradictions, the poet becomes alienated from his object.

### 3.3 The Autobiographical Animal

The alienation from the swans in the discussed poems is not only a result of Yeats's creative principle, this "summoning of anti-selves" or "quarrel with oneself" (as described in "Anima Hominis"). It is also connected with his autobiographical method. In his lecture from 1997, titled "The Animal That Therefore I Am", Jacques Derrida described himself as an "autobiographical animal". He went on to define autobiography as follows:

Autobiography, the writing of the self as living, the trace of the living for itself, being for itself, the auto-affection or auto-infection as memory or archive of the living, would be an immunizing movement (a movement of safety, of salvage and salvation of the safe, the holy, the immune, the indemnified, of virginal and intact nudity), but an immunizing movement that is always threatened with becoming auto-immunizing, like every *autos*, every ipseity, every automatic, automobile, autonomous, auto-referential movement. Nothing risks becoming more poisonous than an autobiography, poisonous for oneself in the first place, auto-infectious for the presumed signatory who is so auto-affected.<sup>76</sup>

Yeats's poet could be seen as such an autobiographical animal,<sup>77</sup> precisely for the *pharmakon* effect his poetry produces.<sup>78</sup> It is in that single line of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931", where the poet admits the swan emblem could be "murdered with a spot of ink" that Yeats comes to a realization. His very autobiography is no longer held together by a set of symbols, as prior to "The Wild Swans at Coole", or veiled by a myth as in "Leda and the Swan": Yeats the poet is becoming Yeats the animal, breathing and living.

To come full circle, this realization can be seen as achieved by mimesis. As Derrida suggests: "Wherever some autobiographical play is being enacted there has to be a *psyché*, a mirror that reflects me naked from head to toe."<sup>79</sup> In the first part of his lecture, Derrida speaks about his cat meeting him

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76 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 47.

77 After all, in "Sailing to Byzantium", he pleads: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is" (163).

78 The term "pharmakon" was first used by Plato and has several meanings. Two of them are used in the *Phaedrus* dialogue to refer to writing as both a remedy and as poisonous to human memory. Commenting on the ambiguous connotations of the term in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy", Derrida concludes: "It is not enough to say that writing is conceived out of this or that series of oppositions. Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such." Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 104.

79 Derrida 50.

in the bedroom. He also notes that “the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, *a little cat*. It isn’t the *figure* of a cat. It doesn’t silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions, literature and fables”.<sup>80</sup> Arguably, the swan Yeats sees mounting from Coole Lake in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” is also a real bird. What supports such claim is a letter he wrote to his daughter. As Anne Saddlemyer notes:

Spurred by George’s tale of the animals and perhaps remembering that his daughter had become a member of the SPCA ‘Band of Mercy’, Willy wrote to Anne: “I hear you are almost well again. I have no news except that the head forester here a little while ago counted sixty two wild swans on the lake, that is seven or eight more than I ever saw. A little before that he saw a flight of twenty five herons rising from the bank & I never saw more than two or three. He says that wild swans & herons are increasing all through the west of Ireland & explains it by the greater gentleness towards beasts & birds of the people especially the children. I have been writing a poem which contains a description of a wild swan suddenly flying up from the side of the lake. Your affectionate father.” But then he overlooked Anne’s birthday.<sup>81</sup>

The details surrounding this letter help us to see how alienating – or, in Derrida’s words, poisonous – Yeats’s method became. His daughter’s membership in the “Band of Mercy”, an organization instructing children how to be kind to other animals, led Yeats to include a number of details about birds. What he concludes with, however, is himself: particularly, his creative effort. The head forester’s narrative – including the act of counting which is remindful of “The Wild Swans at Coole” – is just a cover-up for autobiography happening.

But even though we may be mad with Yeats for his self-centeredness, as his wife George rightly was, the ignorance on his part is only human. It serves as a footnote to his paradoxical poetry, where we can read the poet as brutally honest in his swerves and embraced contradictions. And the mirror – or mirrors – Derrida speaks about, making Yeats “naked from head to toe”, are the swans.<sup>82</sup> For if in “A Coat” the poet ironically announced that “there’s more enterprise / In walking naked”, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” finds him truly undisguised, in a situation which Derrida describes as being

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80 Derrida 6.

81 Anne Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 448-449.

82 As Stanislav Komárek asks: “What are animals to us? Essentially a mirror in which we always find what we, for one reason or another, look for and what we can, in accord with our internal mood, interpret in favour of a concept that we have chosen to believe in.” Stanislav Komárek, *Ochlupení bližní: zvířata v kulturních kontextech* (Praha: Academia, 2011) 255. Translation mine.

“naked under the gaze of a cat”.<sup>83</sup> “I am seen and seen naked, before even seeing myself or knowing myself seen naked,” continues Derrida in the lecture: “I am presented to it before even introducing myself. Nudity is nothing other than that passivity, the involuntary exhibition of the self.”<sup>84</sup> Although there is no such gaze described in the poems featuring swans, in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” the poem’s conception is bared. This sense of nudity would explain why the poet sees the swan as “arrogantly pure” and not just “pure” or “white”: it stirs his emotions, as did the birds in “The Wild Swans at Coole” and “Leda and the Swan”.

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83 Derrida 11.

84 Ibid.

## Conclusion

The autobiographical method that leads to alienation of the poet from the outside world is rooted in contradictions. As I have shown, various oppositions not only appear as obvious dichotomies in the three poems featuring swans: they play a vital role in them, form them and constitute the structure of the poems' central swan image. Be it its quality of a discordant image or the dual treatment of the image, swans are central to the poems' effect and embody the many contradictions in each of them. This embodiment that the poet stages takes its toll in the feelings that the poems convey. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", the poet is weary and lonely, doubting his life-choices and love, all the more so because of his projection of the birds' happiness.<sup>85</sup> In "Leda and the Swan" the covert poet's voice suggests doubt of historical progress, whereas in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" the process of poetry writing itself is doubted. The mirrors that the swans hold up to the speaker offer unpleasant reflections. The exploration of the swan image in the three poems that stand at the head of the thesis chapters has enabled me to reveal some continuity, albeit in a limited number of poems. As obvious from the overall discussion and from references to other poems throughout the thesis, these thematics and approaches are traceable elsewhere. By way of a coda I will now look at three other poems from Yeats's late period, all of which illustrate how continuity and coherence are established by keeping tensions alive.

In the third part of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" from *The Tower*, the poet claims that if "Some moralist or mythological poet / Compares the solitary soul to a swan; / I am satisfied with that" (177), thus aligning himself with such artists. The Romantic influence is embraced. But the swan with its "wings half spread for flight, / The breast thrust out in pride / Whether to play, or to ride" (177) is an image of discord. Yeats again uses the motif of influence and twists it, like in "The Wild Swans at Coole", so that in the end,

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<sup>85</sup> Note how swans in pairs, such as in "The Withering of the Boughs", stand for contradictions while they are portrayed as faithful lovers.

That image can bring wildness, bring a rage  
To end all things, to end  
What my laborious life imagined, even  
The half-imagined, the half-written page. (177)

His meditation on life and death turns into a debunking of the creative process, as it did in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”. The “troubled mirror” that the swan embodies in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” reflects nothing but the old, raging poet.

A different image of Yeats as poet and poetic persona is offered in “Among School Children” from the same collection. The eyes of the children change the speaker’s “fit of grief or rage” (184) into a comforting act of remembering. If we saw him projecting his political vision and personal frustration into Leda and Zeus, here he reads both into a half tender, half mocking image of Maud Gonne: “For even daughters of the swan can share / Something of every paddler’s heritage” (184). The children – as Gonne’s metaphorical “daughters” – make the poet see her as a child again. This memory is replaced by her present image, but as this image angers the poet ludicrously, his personal myth of a rejected, embittered man is mocked too. The poet concludes: “And I though never of Ledaean kind / Had pretty plumage once – enough of that” (184). Identifying with youth’s prettiness, he becomes self-aware and chooses to present himself as a “comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (184) to the children. The end of the poem with its empathy then stands in opposition to the expectable image of Yeats as a venerable, old and pompous artist. The metaphor of “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird” refers not only to the poet but to the codes behind his works as well, and I read “Among School Children” as one of the few successful attempts at overcoming his alienation.

“The Circus Animals’ Desertion” from *Last Poems* (1936-1939) finds the poet searching for the source and origins of his poetry as he admits that “Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of” (296). The poem has Yeats reconsidering all the imagery that verged on the transcendental, as in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, and admitting that his poetry has grown out of “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”, an image sharing the naturalism of the heavy



swans that circled around the Coole Lake. The contradiction between a work of art and its model is complete, as Yeats's poet openly admits and decides to embrace his failures.

The three poems featuring swans which I read in detail in the above chapters can also be seen as embracing various kinds of failures. In the introduction I mentioned that I was first struck by Yeats as someone who displays his greatness while always reminding us of his flaws. This, I suggest, proves particularly true in the case of the three poems discussed. "The Wild Swans at Coole", "Leda and the Swan" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" can all be read as accounts of inner battles, be it against old age, loneliness, political repression or the fear of death. But the contradictions that inform these poems fulfill their particular functions: as a result, the conflict is a creative, rather than a destructive force within the writing process. However, Yeats becomes both master and slave of his "anti-selves", as he lets them drag him in opposing directions. Accordingly, if scholars want to align him with just one literary movement, for example, they inevitably face difficulties.

The poet's own comments regarding his life and work lead us to think outside the box. This way of thinking, however, does not mean that my approach would be negative. After all, the contradictions traceable in Yeats's work are what sustained his creativity. Well illustrated in the images of the swans, the varying oppositions and arguments with oneself are to be found not only in other poems but in various other Yeats's writings as well. The continuous presence of contrasts and paradoxes confirms that contradictions were at the basis of the poet's writing and thinking from the start and I show how this tendency to conflict and ambivalence increases rather than slackens in his late poetry. What also supports my argument is the change in Yeats's persona: the esoteric, prophetic figure from the earlier work is later on replaced with someone who will portray himself in any light, be it positive or negative. This willingness to bring opposites closer together and thus stay true to oneself and the vagaries of mind and life is precisely what for me makes Yeats fascinating.

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