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Yeats, Bloom, and the Dialectics of Theory, Criticism, and Poetry

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my epipsyche and muse, Hala Darwish, whose inspirational presence in my heart was, it may be said, the magic within these evasions, these wanderings.

> . . . Until one day I met a star that burned
> Bright in the heart of my heavenly breast,
> And then I knew why I was who I was,
> And why my soul would be forever lost
> In the folds of her voice raging in my veins . . .

SJS, August 1992

ABSTRACT

This thesis begins by showing how a strong and subtle challenge to poetry and theories of poetry has been recently argued by writers like Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller--critics whose ironic linguistic "disfigurations" of lyrical voice have thrown poem and poet into an anti-mimetic free fall, an abyss of bewilderment or undecidability. To its credit, de Manian deconstruction strongly misreads various mimetic approaches to William Butler Yeats, as its corrosive irony empties out theories of imitation. Chapter two explains how New Criticism, biographical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical criticism, all treat Yeats's poetry as a reflection or imitation of some prior being, text, or doctrine; and chapter three how, most recently and energetically, various new historicisms treat his poems as ideological artifacts determined by the world or history, but as artifacts that must seek to change the world in order to have value.

Harold Bloom's theory meets such challenges. It enacts deconstruction's misreading of poem and poet without reducing them to a linguistic abyss; and it re-envisions mimetic approaches by reading poems in terms of genealogical influence, without moralizing. Chapter four investigates Bloom's vision of strong poetry as a "supermimesis" or in terms of gnostic figures of "negative transcendence." Bloom's work, however, also needs Yeatsian creative correction. As the fifth and sixth chapters show, it needs, like Yeats's poetry, to hold itself more open to the chaos of history. Invoking instruction from the very poetry that has so influenced Bloom's theory of influence, yet from which Bloom has turned away, this thesis re-interprets Yeats's poems and Yeats criticism generally. Using Yeats's openness to history to revise Bloom and his pragmatic theory of misreading to re-interpret Yeats, the thesis attempts to advance dialectically both Yeats criticism and Bloomian theory.

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My father's spirit! In arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!
Hamlet

Sing out the song; sing to the end, and sing
The strange reward of all that discipline.
Yeats, "The Phases of the Moon"

O what am I that I should not seem
For the song's sake a fool?
Yeats, "A Prayer for Old age"

Introduction

There is a crisis in literary studies affecting the criticism of poetry. The classical certainties of the age of New Criticism have been under increasing pressure for decades now. From one side, the edifice of "disinterested" literary activity, autonomous literary work, and authorial integrity--derived originally from Kant and Coleridge through Matthew Arnold to "Modernist" critics like T. S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, and M. H. Abrams--has been declared an illusion, an effect of language, of the figures of speech that constitute the play of signs within the prison-house of language which is our mental abode. From another side, the edifice has been declared not an illusion but an ivory tower, an ethos that must be destroyed in the name of social progress. So powerful is the pressure nowadays either to empty poetry and criticism of subjectivity through textual irony, or to assault them on "political" grounds,

that to seek another vision which will revise and transfigure the classical certainties while also resisting the pressure to conform to the current trends may be a lonely, impossible quest. Yet it is the burden of this thesis--with specific reference to the poetry of William Butler Yeats and its criticism--to articulate and practice a theory and a criticism which may envision a new and antithetical dialectic among theory, poems, and criticism.

Among contemporary critics and theorists there are few allies to be discovered in such a contest, but most crucially I ally myself--given specific reservations which I argue in chapter five--with Harold Bloom, whose work on imaginative writing from Genesis to Kafka, Beckett and Wallace Stevens dares to transform the critical-theoretical ethos of our age. Since his first book on Shelley in 1959, and especially after his book on Yeats in 1970, Bloom has sought with increasing energy to perform a critical theory that engages with poetry in its deepest ambivalence. While this much may be admitted even by Bloom's enemies, who are many, my own insight is that Yeats is the crucial precursor of Bloom's own theory and practice, for it is Yeats who instructs Bloom most profoundly in the revisionary Bloomian principle that later poets malform or distort their own poetic fathers.

This thesis, therefore, is a story of fathers and sons. As such it takes and rejects, or absorbs and resists, much of the work of Bloom's critical-theoretical forerunners, contemporaries and adversaries. Bloom competes with writers like Frye and Abrams, for example, by turning their classical sureties into

Romantic volatilities. Though their careers are based on their writings about Blake and other Romantic poets, they project an air of objectivity and balanced impersonal judgment that would be anathema to the Romantics and that Bloom undermines vigorously. He takes Frye's formalistic "anatomy of criticism" and Abrams' insights on the temporal structure of "the greater Romantic lyric," and he turns them anew.[1] The result is that Frye's anatomy and Abrams' lyric become a visionary, highly subjective theory of poetry, less objective about poetry than dialectically engaged with poetry. From the perspective of traditional objectivists, Bloom's theory and practice appear to be self-inflated bombast.

But no more enamored of Bloom are many of those who would read poetry as the ironic disfiguration of lyrical voice. As my first chapter shows in detail, deconstructive readings of poetry achieve their insights at a fatal cost, the dissolution of lyrical voice in favor of absolute linguistic difference or undecidability. Bloom nevertheless shares with Paul de Man, for example, the sense that poetry is an error and a misreading, but the lie that is poetry is not epistemological or cognitive (as it is for de Man), though it may certainly be gnostic; and its misreading of its precursors is not merely linguistic. Rather it is the expression of a "poetic will," a pneumatic drive for the illusion of immortality. Bloom thus restores lyrical voice not as a presence, but as a lie that is necessary to his under-

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[1] I refer to Abrams' essay, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," which shows that poems like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" have a structural rhythm that moves outside-inside-outside.

standing of poetry, just as poetry itself is a "lie-against-time."

Latest arrivals at the scene of literary dialectics are the "new historicists," cultural determinists who have swerved or deviated from the earlier deconstructors by turning the lessons of linguistic difference into demands for political difference. In this context poems become either mere symptoms of the prevailing social ideology or symbols of resistance to it. With the fervor of the fundamentalist, historicizers seek to re-make the world, marshalling poetry and criticism as their weapons. Bloom shares with these agonists their sense of poetry and criticism as a form of struggle, just as he shares their devotion to history. But for Bloom, struggle and history have less to do with external, worldly affairs than with the internalized dynamics of creativity and the endless breaking and re-making of poetic history. Borrowing one of Bloom's tropes then, we might say that his work "transumes" the work of traditionalists, deconstructors, and historicizers alike. Bloom breathes, as the J writer said of Yahweh and the red clay that became Adam, the breath of life into literary tradition and into history by turning "voice" into the deep lie that poets speak each time they rediscover their origins, that is to say, each time they write a poem.[2]

Yeats is the greatest "Modern" poet to explore the profound ambivalence of poetic creativity. So energetic and so sustained was his exploration that his career can be read as one dis-

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[2] "Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of this earth, blew into its nostrils the wind of life. Now look: man becomes a creature of flesh." Bloom, The Book of J, p. 55.

continuous poem on the theme of his own creativity. Yet this giant imagination has not been matched by his interpreters. A bevy of traditionalists has depicted his verse as "a verbal icon" (Wimsatt) or as a "well wrought urn" (Brooks). They have mined his poetry for its apparent formalism, its structural and semantic ambiguities, its paradoxes and tensions. They have exhibited its "objective" content and tamed its elusive nature. Allied traditionalists have turned the poems into allegories of the life of the poet and his times. Others have read them as symptoms of his psychological make-up, or of one or another philosophical doctrine, Platonic, Kantian, occult, and so on.

More devastatingly subtle than all of these has been the response of deconstructors to the poems. De Man and J. Hillis Miller, for example, have read them as signs of an undecidable impasse--as the death of which Yeats writes so well and so often. On the other hand, Yeats's poems have inspired something like moral disgust in those who would turn poetry to the interests of some political agenda. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, when she comes to consider the visionary work of Yeats and Dante, sees only what she wants to see, a couple of dead white misogynists.[3]

It is the argument of this dissertation that the importance of Yeats's poems runs much deeper than biographical psychology, poetic ambiguity, philosophical doctrine, deconstructive death, or any cultural political agenda. For the critical theory of Harold Bloom has opened the possibility of reading Yeats's poems as acts of revision by an agonistic imagination moving towards

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[3] I refer to Spivak's essay, "Finding Feminist Readings: Dante--Yeats," published in her book, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1987).

gnosis or gnostic transcendence. It is an intriguing irony that this theory of poetic influence draws so much upon Bloom's deep reading of Yeats, yet after 1970 Yeats plays only a very minor role in Bloom's writing. It therefore falls to me, in this dissertation, to delve into the agonics of the relationship between Bloom and Yeats, which, in its fuller Romantic outlines includes Shelley and Blake and even the voice of Hamlet. Extravagance in such a quest is not only inevitable but necessary, as each station in that wandering will be seen to have its purpose in the goal.

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.
"Among School Children"[1]

Chapter One
Yeats, Deconstruction, Lyrical Voice

Since Plato's contest with Homer and with his other poetic precursors such as Pythagoras and Heraclitus, the rift dividing philosophy from poetry, with few notable exceptions, has seemed unbridgeable, much like the division between the spume and the ghostly paradigm suggested in Yeats's poem. The problem that this thesis aspires to solve is the proper bridging of that rift--"Load every rift with ore" was Keats's motto.[2]

But my Keatsian metaphor may seem inadequate, too weak in its dualism, for it implies that poetry is made of the same earth as philosophy (or literary criticism or critical theory), all being "language," the same cosmic clay, even if some upheaval, some catastrophe caused the rift. We would then want to speak not of the rift, but of the cosmic distances dividing earthly criticism from poetry which is more like a star. So much

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[1] All quotations of the poems, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from Yeats's Poems, edited by A. Norman Jeffares.

[2] His advice to Shelley, in a letter, August 1820.

criticism and theory seem so woefully inadequate to their poetic object, so weak, mundane, and merely rational, talking about and around (the) poetry. On the other hand, poetry seems vital, vigorous, pulsating, and self-begotten. "The metaphysica, the plastic parts of poems / Crash in the mind," as Wallace Stevens puts it.[3] The tradition of poetry that stretches from Homer and the Bible to Yeats and beyond is both a visible and a knowable continuum, even as it is always a self-breaking tradition; while criticism and theory dimly and ponderously look on, amazed at the sublime, oracular power they observe in poetry.

That I exaggerate for effect need not be stressed, for some criticism has seemed eminently suited to its object--even criticism not always done by poets themselves. Walter Pater, though not a "poet" as such, has produced, in The Renaissance (1871),[4] a kind of criticism that is stronger in its appreciation of metaphor than the criticism written by Matthew Arnold who mistrusted his own and others' poetic powers. Not only did Arnold repudiate his lyric drama, Empedocles Upon Etna, because he had come to deny "the notion that the proper goal of poetry is to project an allegory of the poet's mental state";[5] but he also was decidedly ambivalent about Shelley's extravagant indulgence in metaphor--"in poetry, no less than in life, he is

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[3] "The Glass of Water," The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, p. 197. All quotations of Stevens's poems, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this edition. All italics or emphases within quotations are those of the quoted author, unless otherwise indicated.

[4] The date in parentheses that follows the title of a work represents its first publication (in English). But in the case of poems by Yeats, and unless otherwise noted, it represents the date of composition in Richard Ellmann's The Identity of Yeats, pp. 287-294.

[5] J. Hillis Miller, The Linguistic Moment, p. 28.

'a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.'"[6] A criticism or theory of poetry faithful to (the) poetry would not need to be written by a poet at all, but it would need to love and struggle with metaphor, neither trying to purge itself of metaphor, nor subordinating metaphor to other ends, such as reason or ideology, politics or morals. Those are fine things, cultural artifacts, materials of life; but they are not the breath of poetry.

So what would a contemporary criticism or theory, fearless of its debt and link to poetry, look like? In the last twenty years or so, a generation of critics in America and Britain have written voluminously under the influence of a philosophical critical theory associated with the term deconstruction, and with such names as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller. The problem for poetry posed by the work of these critics and those under their influence is that while they appreciate the value and the purpose of metaphor in their own writing and in poetry, they also strenuously ironize and demystify the subjective categories traditionally used to understand poems and poets. If the subject, the individual, the author, poet, or reader are so severely disfigured and emptied that they appear to be merely effects of discourse and ideology, a nostalgic dream from an age not ours, then will lyric poetry be any less a fragmented and centerless series of traces than its poet or critic? Repeatedly staging the limits of intelligibility,

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[6] Taken from George Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley, p. 40. Bornstein quotes from Matthew Arnold's "Shelley" (originally published in 1888) which was a review of Edward Dowden's two volume biography of Shelley. The final clause is Arnold quoting Dowden.

deconstructive criticism enjoys its own textual play and irony. And such textual pleasure is surely a mark of the poetic. But at what cost? In this first chapter I want to appraise that cost. With specific reference, where possible, to the lyric poetry of William Butler Yeats, I will measure the strengths of deconstructive criticism.

1.1 Hillis Miller's "Yeats" as "Nothing"

> A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
> Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
> Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind.
> "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"

It is well-known that the kind of textual criticism that, with some irony now, we call "New Criticism" relies on relatively stable categories when it uses terms such as text or poem, and author or poet. Though I reserve for my second chapter a detailed discussion of New Critical formalism (among other kinds of criticism that I find wanting), suffice it here to say that deconstructive criticism, which in America and Britain has been staged as a criticism or a revision of New Criticism, does not take such categories as stable. On the contrary, they are assumed and shown to be volatile. Although the eminent Yeats critic, Richard Ellmann, has written <u>The Identity of Yeats</u> (1954), implying by his title that a unified sense of a certain man is derived from a proper reading of the whole of that man's poems which themselves form a unified whole, a deconstructive critic like Hillis Miller on the other hand practices a kind of Yeats criticism that in effect dismisses such fiction of unity and wholeness concerning poem(s) and poet. And to sharpen the blade of his cutter, in his chapter called "Yeats" in <u>The</u>

Linguistic Moment (1985), Miller even quotes Yeats to the purpose of demystifying poetic voice:

> "I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's 'Platonist,' that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality, and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing." [324; taken from "A General Introduction for my Work," Essays and Introductions 522]

With a deft brilliance that I greatly admire, Miller shows Yeats to be a deconstructive poet who "speaks as no one, from nowhere, at no time, to no identifiable listeners" [320]. The voice of the poem is not the poet's voice, but is "another voice, universal, anonymous, depersonalizing, a voice speaking through the poet" [324, my emphasis]. Poetic voice is demystified as an illusion, "the voice ultimately of 'nothing'" [324]. Although Miller is addressing himself specifically to one Yeats poem, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1919-1922), his claims extend much further--"one poem standing by synecdoche for them all" [320], and all lacking "organic unity" [320]. Instead of the usual New Critical organic form, the balance-in-tension of paradoxical and ironic structure, Miller argues that Yeats's poems mobilize images that are best seen as "heterogeneous materials yoked together by violence" [321]. Miller's strategy therefore empties this poem and all of the poems of any conceivable center. Poet, voice, and textual form are all dismissed, all substituted by the figure of "the labyrinth of the wind"--a center which of course is no center at all:

> . . . [T]here is no identifiable central, literal thing of which all else is figure. The poem, in short, is a "labyrinth of the wind." . . . The absence of an identifiable center disqualifies all the conceptual oppositions that the critic needs to interpret

> the poem but at the same time give the poem its enigmatic power. [320]

Miller's deconstructive reading of the Yeatsian poem and voice links his work to the work of de Man in literary critical theory, and to that of Derrida in philosophy. If we follow this trajectory, our concerns will become not only less strictly poetic but also less Anglo-American and more Continental. For de Man and Derrida have influenced theories of British and American poetry more by way of French and German criticism and philosophy (say Kant, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche) than by Shelley and Emerson for example. Not that Kant, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche are irrelevant to British and American poetry. On the contrary, great poets from Coleridge to Yeats have felt the dark gift of their influence, and have relied on that influence for a strong sense of the poetic imagination, even if, paradoxically, that strong imagination in its turn relies upon an ever more strenuously emptied or negated sense of the self, which, in Mallarmé for instance, threatens to become a blank poem made up of wayward traces.

1.2 Derrida's Fictive Philosophy

> He'd crack his wits
> Day after day, yet never find the meaning.
> "The Phases of the Moon"

The de Manian and Derridean interventions in critical theory and philosophy intensify this trajectory of the self-emptying self, but the act of self-emptying is also severely ironized so that it is made to appear as an inevitable consequence of the catastrophic condition of language, not as the result of an acting subject. De Man's "aporia," his radical "de-facement" of

autobiography, his deconstruction of the epistemology of metaphor, and Derrida's "différance," his reading of metaphor as an infinite biodegradable series of heliotropic traces, his argument that "the center is not the center,"[7] all plunge the self into the textual abyss, a labyrinth of the wind, a tropological space where all language is potentially figure and figure of figure, an immanence without origin or end where "mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show," in Yeats's ruthless trope ["The Statues" 461]. But it may be that a free fall into the abyss of language, the epistemology of metaphor, is not adequate to poetry. As Wallace Stevens reminds us,

> . . . there is still
> The impossible possible philosophers' man,
> The man who has had the time to think enough,
> The central man, the human globe, responsive
> As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
> Who in a million diamonds sums us up.
> ["Asides on the Oboe" 250]

Regarding différance, or mirrors without voices, it may be superfluous to trace the twists and turns of this sign "which is neither a word nor a concept," as Derrida puts it.[8] Suffice it to say that differance allows Derrida strategically to dismantle all closure from inside and from outside, as brilliantly performed in his recent "Biodegradables" (1989) and elsewhere.

In his essay "The Epistemology of Metaphor" (1978) de Man concludes that the literary and the philosophical are mutually permeable and contaminate each other. As a result they can never be distinctly known: "All philosophy is condemned, to the extent

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[7] "Structure, Sign, and Play," Writing and Difference, p. 279.

[8] "Différance," Margins of Philosophy, p. 7. The term has largely been taken directly into English critical theory at least since Frank Lentricchia's historical reconsideration, After the New Criticism (1980). I therefore follow that practice.

that it is dependent upon figuration, to be literary and, as the depository of this very problem, all literature is to some extent philosophical" [28]. In "White Mythology" (1974), by showing that the trope of "the sun" is the central metaphor of philosophy, a metaphor intrinsically divided from itself, Derrida has demonstrated with his own solar energy that the philosophical text, though it seeks to dominate metaphor, to alienate metaphor from itself, is suffused with metaphor: "Classical rhetoric, then, cannot dominate, being enmeshed within it, the mass out of which the philosophical text takes shape. Metaphor is less in the philosophical text . . . than the philosophical text is within metaphor" [Margins of Philosophy 258]. Both writers put forward what must be regarded as a strongly poetic sense of metaphor as the impulse of all language, in accord with Shelley's famous declaration that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Yet though de Man, Hillis Miller, and other deconstructors have done much to revive the critical fortunes of Romantics such as Shelley and Wordsworth (after the severe demotion of Romanticism by critics under T.S. Eliot's influence), and though their work shows important affinities to Romantic criticism due to their appreciation of metaphor, the rift between them and their Romantic precursors still remains unbridged.

When interviewed Derrida once said, "I've always been interested in literature--my deepest desire being to write literature, to write fictions--I've the feeling that philosophy has been a detour for me to come back to literature."[9] But

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[9] Salusinszky, Criticism in Society, p. 22.

given Derrida's grammatological theory of differance, he could never have been on such a detour--his philosophical writing always having been a form of literary fiction--and he will forever remain on that detour, since all writing inevitably stages the failure of its desire to enact an essence, a genre, an appropriation of identity or origin. As Derrida says in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" (1972):

> [T]here is no life present at first which would then come to protect, postpone, or reserve itself in différance. The latter constitutes the essence of life. Or rather, as différance is not an essence, as it is not anything, it is not life, if Being is determined as ousia, presence, existence/essence, substance or subject. Life must be thought of as a trace before Being can be determined as presence. . . . To say that différance is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin. Which is why "originary" must be understood as having been crossed out, without which différance would be derived from an originary plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary.
> [Writing and Difference 203]

In such a context metaphor becomes crucial, but not metaphor in any nostalgic sense such as fusion or identity or unity, but metaphor as transfer, translation, doubling, repetition within difference, the play of absence and presence, metaphor decentered and in love with death. Commenting on a poem by Edmond Jabès in "Ellipsis" (1978), Derrida writes:

> The strange serenity of such a return. Rendered hopeless by repetition, and yet joyous for having affirmed the abyss, for having inhabited the labyrinth as a poet, for having written the hole, "the chance for a book" into which one can only plunge, and that one must maintain while destroying it. The dwelling is inhospitable because it seduces us, as does the book, into a labyrinth. The labyrinth, here it is an abyss; we plunge into the horizontality of a pure surface, which itself represents itself from detour to detour. [Writing and Difference 298]

1.3 Paul de Man's Ironic Abyss

> The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished;
> I have nothing but the embittered sun.
> "Lines Written in Dejection"

Ever open to the value of gnostic metaphors, Salman Rushdie has said that he writes fiction to try to fill a god-shaped hole inside of him.[10] A key question in my research has been to comprehend "the abyss" that so clearly fascinates Derrida in "Ellipsis." Paul de Man has dwelt in a similarly inhospitable trope which he calls "aporia" or the undecidable. In a trope, a turn, or detour which famously overturned the orthodox received wisdom of Yeats criticism, in "Semiology and Rhetoric" (1973) de Man interpreted the question mark at the end of Yeats's "Among School Children" (1926) in a way in which no one before had ever read that punctuation mark.[11]

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance? [325]

With drastic simplicity he suggested that the question mark not be dissolved away. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" was not simply a statement implying the transcendence of identity, but also a plea for knowledge. De Man does not deny the validity of the orthodox figurative reading; rather he simply insists that the literal reading of the question mark be allowed

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[10] Rushdie has used this trope at least twice, in vigorous defense of his Satanic Verses (1988): in "The Book Burning" (1989) and more recently in his Herbert Read Memorial Lecture, "Is Nothing Sacred?" (1990).

[11] In fact de Man first broached a similar reading of the Yeats poem in his 1960 PhD dissertation on Mallarmé and Yeats. But the relevant section of the thesis was only published after de Man's December 1983 death in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (1984) as "Image and Emblem in Yeats," which I will discuss in the second chapter.

into the interpretation of the poem, allowing for "greater complication of theme and statement":

> . . . since the dancer and the dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary--for the question can be given a ring of urgency, "Please tell me, how can I know the dancer from the dance"--to tell them apart. ["Semiology," Allegories 11-12]

I reserve for the next chapter a discussion of "Among School Children" and its place as a canonical poem in the Yeats critical institution. For the moment I want to emphasize how the poem's final line serves de Man with a surpassingly brilliant example of his abyssal sense of aporia. For he situates himself and his reader between two interpretations which are both necessary yet contradictory and impossible. Undecidability or aporia is the scene of reading for de Man. It is the black hole at the center of a poem, the labyrinth of the wind said Hillis Miller quoting Yeats. The structure of metaphor is divided against itself, inside/outside, literal/figural, and a reader can never be sure, and yet must choose, which face to read. Like "the fiery blossom and the earthly leaf [which] are held together, as well as apart, by the crucified and castrated God Attis" [12] in Yeats's poem "Vacillation," the de Manian reader of metaphor vacillates between mutually necessary yet incompatible choices.

To this point we have seen how Hillis Miller enacts the deconstruction of Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and how Derrida and de Man deconstruct metaphor--Derrida philosophy's metaphor and de Man criticism's and lyric poetry's metaphor. But it is important now to see exactly how Hillis Miller and de Man deal specifically with the traditional notion of lyrical voice.

1.4 De Man and the Negation of Voice

> There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,
> A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.
> "Paudeen"

The long and short of it is that voice too is taken to be a metaphor, with its own aporia. Miller hinted as much in his discussion of Yeats. He sees the poem's center as no center at all, as a labyrinth of the wind, but with urgency asks himself "What is that wind?" [328] His answer is compelling for the way in which it plunges into the abyss only to re-invoke, through negation, the very binary oppositions he wishes to deconstruct. "Black hole" [329, 332], "dark sun," "endless tunnel" [337], "labyrinth" and so on become metaphors for the "unnamable center" [336], the "it" of the poem:

> This <u>it</u> is at a center that is no center but is missing there, and at the horizon but missing there, too. It is dispersed everywhere, not just outside, beyond the last wall, nor inside, at some inner core. . . . Nor is this <u>it</u> in a transcendent realm. . . . <u>It</u> is neither word, nor force, nor thing, nor subjective energy, nor spiritual entity, but all those "things" at once in a confusion that confounds the clear distinctions and binary oppositions between subject and object, between word and thing, between literal and figurative language, between this world and the supernal one, which are necessary to clear thought, whether in poetry, in philosophy, or in literary criticism. [338]

The Yeats poem dissolves in a stream that is not "any sort of transcendentalism, Platonic or otherwise," nor an "immanence of Being." All tradition having been negated, something yet remains, the poem as an encounter, an experience, an event, a voice yet remains:

> If the <u>it</u> is neither thought, nor thing, nor spirit, nor word, it is not nothing either. In the encounter with this <u>it</u>, the validity of the notion of the linguistic moment reaches its limit and dissolves before something that is not language. [338]

Thus, a powerful series of negations leads Miller to the conclusion that there is something that is not language. This crucial insight, this briefly flickering spark, is the one moment in Miller's Yeats essay that is not relentlessly deconstructive, the breath of a suggestion that all is not necessarily aporia, differance, the tracing of a trace. At the linguistic moment Miller seems to allow that there is an outside to language, something outside the text, even though it "can only be approached through that language" [339].[12]

Paul de Man, on the other hand, is relentless, never letting down his guard, and producing a thoroughly rigorous critical theory that to my mind epitomizes "the irony of irony."[13] While Derrida's differance opens out, unfolding, as trace leads to trace without origin or end, de Man's aporia opens in, imploding or "infolding," as ironic distances are ironized, inwardly widening and deepening the chasm of metaphor like a bottomless well. For example, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969) (reportedly dubbed the most photocopied critical essay in American postgraduate study),[14] de Man meditates on the nature of irony, a trope whose structure originates the structure of literary consciousness itself, doubled, inauthentic, and approaching the abyss of madness, as seen in this cento:

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[12] That there is nothing outside the text (or there is no outside {to} text ["Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"] is an oft-cited trope taken from Derrida's Of Grammatology, p. 158, and discussed with reference to "differance" in Lentricchia's After the New Criticism, p. 170.

[13] Harold Bloom uses this phrase in The Breaking of the Vessels (1982), p. 17.

[14] Wlad Godzich quoting Jonathan Culler in "Caution! Reader at Work!" Godzich's introduction to the revised edition of Blindness and Insight, p. xvi.

> In speaking of irony we are dealing not with the history of an error but with a problem that exists within the self . . . , self-duplication or self-multiplication. . . . The dédoublement thus designates the activity of a consciousness by which a man differentiates himself from the non-human world, . . . by means of language as a privileged category. . . . Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition. . . . The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity, and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity, . . . [yet] to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic. . . . Irony is unrelieved vertige, dizziness to the point of madness . . . [and] absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. [211-216, Blindness and Insight]

Irony thus appears to de Man as a master trope that structures the self into an inevitable inward doubling, but ironically it cannot be an origin because irony itself is the effect of differance which, as we have seen above, leads back only to traces without origin.

Similarly, when applied to a discussion of lyric poetry, de Man's severely ironic stance opens up a bottomless aporia within voice itself, denying lyric a founding inaugural moment. In his essay "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory" (1985) de Man wishes to dismantle the nostalgic essentializing notion that voice begets poem, even though he puts at risk any understanding of the poem:

> The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice. Our claim to understand a lyric text coincides with the actualization of a speaking voice, be it (monologically) that of the poet or (dialogically) that of the exchange that takes place between author and reader in the process of comprehension. [55]

There may well be a third choice, not entertained by de Man, a way that is neither the voice of a poet's monologue nor the voice constructed from a dialogue between poet and critic; for the time being, however, I must delay developing this third choice. But as de Man describes it here, nostalgia for the speaking voice--a nostalgia which is mystifying and duplicitous because not ironic, as argued in "The Rhetoric of Temporality"--desires that "the status of the voice not be reduced to being a mere figure of speech or play of the letter, for this would deprive it of the attribute of aesthetic presence that determines the hermeneutics of the lyric" [55, my emphasis]. De Man himself sees voice precisely as a figure of speech which attempts to capture and "phenomenalize" the inherently nomadic quality of poetry, to localize and literalize it within the name and metaphor of voice. He takes it as his job, therefore, not only to show how certain critics nostalgically essentialize the figure of lyrical voice, but also how Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and especially Shelley already anticipated this critical error by writing poems that de-faced or disfigured the poetic voice that their poems are presumed to speak with. Like Hamlet, de Man would remind us that "A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm," meaning only to show us "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar."[15]

In his essay "Autobiography As De-Facement" (1979) de Man pursues with intense irony another version of his central theme that the self-presence of voice is a metaphor imploded by aporia.

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[15] IV, iii, 26-30; p. 158. All quotations from Hamlet are cited act, scene, line, and page from Spencer's 1980 Penguin edition.

Here his discussion of Wordsworth's Essays on Epitaphs dwells on the figure of prosopopeia which, like irony in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," empties out the figure of voice. Prosopopeia is seen by de Man as "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" [Rhetoric of Romanticism 75-76]. But as de Man's argument develops, its insistently compelling quality is not his observation that Wordsworth's prosopopeia makes the dumb speak, epitaph giving voice to a senseless stone [77]. Again focusing on the structure of metaphor, de Man argues that the giving of voice to stone "acquires a sinister connotation" [78], an antithetical symmetry whereby voice is silenced in the living: by making "death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death" [78]. Prosopopeia, the figure of "the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave" [77], has a "chiasmic" structure. That which gives voice to the dead must cross over and give up its own voice. Here de Man's aporia becomes the point of crossing where the dead stone gains a voice and where the giver of voice becomes mute, voiceless, a figure of death.

But more than all this, the chasm of aporia begins to open up and swallow poet, writing, and critic when we read de Man arguing that Wordsworth is prosecuting a polemic against the very figure that he invokes to give voice to his writing. On the level of content and style Wordsworth is said to "speak out forcefully against [Alexander Pope's] language of satire and

invective and plead eloquently for a lucid language of repose, tranquillity, and serenity" [78-79]. This puts Wordsworth as much in the camp that he is attacking as on the side of poetic "repose." On the level of figurative structure, "The language so violently denounced [by Wordsworth] is in fact the language of metaphor, of prosopopeia and of tropes" [80], that is to say, his own language. Wordsworth is rightly taken by de Man as a great poet of autobiography, and autobiography for de Man is "the prosopopeia of the voice and the name" [81]. De Man concludes his essay with the sentence, "Autobiography veils a de-facement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" [81], succinctly and intensely summarizing the deconstructive abyss that he finds essential and inevitable for dealing with the voice of great Romantic poets like Wordsworth.

In an early essay, "Symbolic Landscape in Wordsworth and Yeats" (1962) de Man distinguishes Yeats from Wordsworth, arguing that

> whereas Wordsworth's imagination [in his sonnet "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake"] remains patterned throughout on the physical process of sight, Yeats's frame of reference [in "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931"], by the very nature of his statement, originates from experiences without earthly equivalent. [Rhetoric of Romanticism 143]

Despite this distinction, it would be possible to apply to Yeats, who also wrote an autobiography and gave the gift of life and voice to several stones in his poems, the same chiasmic moment of aporia that de Man, in "Autobiography As De-Facement," reads into Wordsworth. Examples are legion, notably Yeats's epitaph carved in a stone at his grave in Drumcliff, Ireland, and his poem carved in a stone at his home, Thoor Ballylee. In fact,

carved stone is a Yeatsian obsession. Also several elegies and many other Yeats poems too numerous to mention call the dead to life. But this is to belabor what should be obvious, tradition being, for a poet at least, inescapable, and tradition being nothing if not the voice of the dead living amongst us. De Man is hyper-aware of this, thus his emphasis on disfiguration, discontinuity, death as the center of metaphor. In fact, even in de Man's previously unpublished 1960 PhD dissertation, "Mallarmé, Yeats, and the Post-Romantic Predicament," from which "Image and Emblem in Yeats" (1984) was excerpted for The Rhetoric of Romanticism, early traces of what will later become the aporia of metaphor are clearly evident in his argument:

> [T]he logical discontinuity that disrupts the natural image . . . [is] often concealed within the image itself [and] becomes explicit on the thematic level. . . . The treatment of nature remains contradictory, . . . it is indispensable, but as the entity which, by its mere presence, voids the poet's hope to find permanence in words, it is his worst enemy. It throws him back upon himself, in sterile self-contemplation, "Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea."
> [158-160; "The Indian to His Love" 49]

Yeats's imagery is thus internally divided, and a chasm or a void begins to open up between meaning and intent, between word and world.

Nevertheless, the de Manian essay most appropriate for Yeats criticism would in my view be his essay on Shelley who is arguably the most crucial figure among Yeats's precursors. In "Shelley Disfigured" (1979) de Man gives his reading of Shelley's poem "The Triumph of Life," a difficult poem written in Dante's terza rima and left incomplete at the time of Shelley's death by drowning. True to the temporal and internally distanced form of his thought as the irony of irony, de Man takes Shelley's poem

to be a figure of its own disfiguration. "The repetitive erasures by which language performs the erasure of its own positions can be called disfiguration" [Rhetoric of Romanticism 119], and the poem of course displays and performs these erasures of its own figurality. As de Man reads it, the poem is a free fall, a contraction or limitation of the self. The poet, who to himself is but a figure of himself, gives us the figure of a speaker who in turn has a vision of a disfigured "Rousseau" who also in his turn relates his vision,

> . . . a vision of continued delusion that includes him. He undergoes a metamorphosis in which his brain, the center of his consciousness, is transformed. The transformation is also said to be the erasure of an imprinted track, a passive, mechanical operation. . . . The erasure or effacement is indeed the loss of a face, in French figure. Rousseau . . . is disfigured, défiguré, de-faced. . . . The trajectory from erased self-knowledge to disfiguration is the trajectory of The Triumph of Life. [99-100]

It is also the trajectory of de Man's criticism, a free fall of self-contraction, the irony of irony. The poem is and puts forward figures but it does not mean its figures, for being and meaning in a poem cannot coincide:

> . . . language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood. Nor does the knowledge of this impossibility make it less impossible. This impossible position is precisely the figure, the trope, the metaphor as a violent--and not as a dark--light, a deadly Apollo. [117-118]

This may look like "the impossible possible philosophers' man" of Wallace Stevens that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, but I don't believe it is. As I intend to show later, the Yeatsian and Stevensian man, "the central, the human globe" is certainly a figure, like a mirror, but more Shakespearean, "a

mirror with a voice," On the other hand, the de Manian impossible man, although he too is but a figure, a trope, merely reiterates or reflects, and confirms his falsehood again and again. In this self-disfiguring abyss, Shelley's poem displays "the madness of words" [122]:

> The Triumph of Life warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. [122]

Taking the measure of de Man against Shakespeare's Hamlet would be a useful critical exercise, bearing in mind Horatio's desparate warning to the tragic hero concerning his father's figure-from-beyond-the-grave:

> What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
> Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
> That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
> And there assume some other, horrible form,
> Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
> And draw you into madness?
> [I, iv, 68-74; p. 88]

I am not aware of a more strenuous, self-emptying, deconstruction of lyrical voice than de Man's essay on Shelley. Hillis Miller too has an essay on "The Triumph of Life."[16] His deconstruction of Shelley's poem, like his deconstruction of Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," is persuasive and eloquent in its transfer to the poem of Derridean "non-concepts" like differance, as he reads the poem as an allegory of his poetics. Yet because Miller's style of thought is energetically "direct" whereas de Man's is pitilessly ironic, I feel that de Man's work is even more tightly contracted or "infolded" than Miller's. To redeem

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[16] His chapter called "Shelley" (1985) in The Linguistic Moment.

de Manian critical theory from the paralysis of aporia, to save it for a criticism intimate with the impulses of poetry, would require a transformation of de Man that he has vigorously hedged his work against. Wallace Martin has noted de Man's long opposition to any form of "'redemptive poetics.'"[17] Such a redemption or transformation would amount to what de Man castigates as "a monumentalization of sorts" [123].

1.5a The Revenge of Historicism: Edward Said

> What if the Church and the State
> Are the mob that howls at the door!
> "Church and State"

Reacting against what they see as the impoverishments of de Man and of Hillis Miller, some critics and theorists have attempted to restitute lyric poetry by the re-insertion of history, politics, and social morality into post-deconstructive critical and literary theory. Herbert Tucker, for example, has decried the "abysmal disfigurements" of the deconstructive approach to lyric poetry, and has called for a dialectical approach that sees poetry as "a ratio of history and desire."[18] With writers such as Edward Said and Frank Lentricchia, and more recently Jonathan Arac and his associates, in the forefront, critical theorists have labored to get beyond the labyrinth of differance that apparently tropes and traps all criticism into what Said and Lentricchia have called "wall-to-wall discourse" [<u>After the New Criticism</u> 313, 317] and others have called the

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[17] "Introduction," <u>The Yale Critics</u>, p. xxvii.

[18] "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in <u>Lyric Poetry</u>, pp. 243 and 231.

prison-house of language. With these writers develops a considered and forthright critique of deconstructive critical theory, but at the cost of widening the rift between poetry and criticism. And interestingly enough, Lentricchia and Said have each taken a distinctive tack in sailing through "the labyrinth of the [deconstructive] wind." For while Said has largely ignored de Man while focusing his fire on Derrida, Lentricchia has in fact tried to trope Derrida to appear as an ally in Lentricchia's battle with de Man. But what links the two, along with other historicizing critical sailors, is their common mooring in a Foucauldian harbor.

Throughout Said's book The World, the Text, and the Critic (1983) and especially in the chapter "Criticism Between Culture and System," the author carefully follows the arguments that Derrida raises in his all-pervasive critique of Western logocentrism as the fallacy of the metaphysics of presence. When Said looks at Derrida he likes important aspects of what he sees. But the things that he likes he also sees in Foucault who, to Said's mind, has other distinct advantages over Derrida. In both of them Said praises what he reads as essentially a democratizing or even revolutionary impulse that "challenges the culture and its apparently sovereign powers of intellectual activity" [184-185] (but what I would simply read as a poetic aspect of their writing):

> For both writers, their work is meant to replace the tyranny and the fiction of direct reference--to what Derrida calls presence, or the transcendental signified--with the rigor and practice of textuality mastered on its own highly eccentric ground and, in Foucault's case, in its highly protracted persistence. [185]

But the tag that Said throws onto his description of Foucault's sense of textuality shows that he considers Foucault to be somehow more "worldly" (Said's term), more rooted in and focused on history, whereas Derrida is seen, despite his revolutionary textuality, as ultimately a new breed and breeder of textual formalism or idealism. Said believes Derrida to be producing just another dualism of world and text, and he wants to overcome that dualism, grounding textuality in worldliness. He sees Derrida's "ambition" [212] as

> . . . to reveal one or another undecidable elements in a text in lieu of some simple reductive message the text is supposed to contain . . . , to reveal the entame--tear, incision [de Man's aporia]-- . . . an entame already inscribed in written language itself by its persistent desire to point outside itself, to declare itself incomplete and unfit without presence and voice. [212, 207]

Although differance initially presents itself to Said as a liberating impulse, it ends up being a new limitation, contracted to the form of mere textual repetition of the trace.

Of course Derrideans would protest that it is Said's reading of Derrida which produces this contracted "Derrida," since there is nothing beyond the text or alternatively there is only the beyond-text, both equally Derridean positions that are one position, and since Derrida's writings are not at all limited to the notion of textuality that Said ascribes to him. It is certainly true that a series of texts by Derrida published since the early 1980s have engaged, not merely with "textual" matters such as readings of Hegel or of Plato, but with more "worldly" matters. I have in mind five essays by Derrida, one on Apartheid, "Racism's Last Word," a second in response to a critique of it, a third essay on nuclear disarmament, "No

Apocalypse, Not Now," and his two vigorous essays concerning accusations of Nazism against Paul de Man, "Paul de Man's War" and the previously mentioned "Biodegradables."[19] Even so, it is Foucault not Derrida who is seen by Said as the champion of a more worldly textuality where the trope of "actuality" wins a new priority:

> For if the text is important to Derrida because its real situation is literally a textual element with no ground in actuality, . . . then for Foucault the text is important because it inhabits an element of power with a decisive claim on actuality, even though that power is invisible or implied. Derrida's criticism moves us <u>into</u> the text, Foucault's <u>in</u> and <u>out</u>. [183]

Said finds decidedly uncomfortable "the <u>écriture en abîme</u>" [183] and "the <u>mise en abîme</u>" [204], metaphors of the abyss that deconstructors use virtually as textual strategies. He protests that these metaphorical strategies "reduce everything that we think of as having some extratextual leverage in the text to a textual function" [204]. But Said's attack on Derrida begins to look more and more like a latter day Arnoldian anxiety over metaphor, its freedom and its power. He quite rightly says that "Dissemination does not <u>mean</u>. . . . Dissemination <u>maintains</u> the perpetual disruption of writing, maintains the fundamental undecidability of texts" [204], but he feels that this is a sorry state for critical theory for "it entails a certain figurative

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[19] So far as I know, Said has not pronounced himself on the furor surrounding Paul de Man's articles published in 1941 and 1942 for a newspaper under Nazi control in occupied-Belgium, although I personally wrote to Said in 1988 asking that he either contribute to the debate or share his ideas with me privately. He did not respond to my letter, nor am I aware that he has published on this issue. (Several months after writing this chapter, I was able to obtain Said's new book, <u>Musical Elaborations</u> (1991). He spends five pages (36-41) generalizing on the subtle moral dilemmas of the de Man issue, yet he takes no personal position except rightly to emphasize what all other commentators to my knowledge have ignored--the most infamous anti-Semitic article by de Man has a sentence that implicitly endorses a strategic alliance between Nazis and Zionists to move Jews out of Europe to Palestine.

castration." Deconstructive play with the undecidable power of metaphor--which I read as the most severe ironization of poetry and theory in English since the "impersonality" poetics of T. S. Eliot (another Arnold, fearful of his own poetic powers)--is read by Said as figurative castration. Presumably, therefore, Foucault returns the phallus to the writer, erecting a new tower, materialist, historical, social, political:

> Foucault's interest in textuality is to present the text stripped of its esoteric and hermetic elements [Said's tropes for deconstructive play, but also aspects of Yeatsian poetics], and to do this by making the text assume its affiliations with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, guilds, ideologically defined parties and professionals. [212]

But what appears to Said as Foucault's redemption of deconstruction for social work, appears to me as further retreat. "The most heroic effort to escape from the prisonhouse of language only builds the walls higher."[20] The subordination of metaphor to politics is surely a trope intensely hostile to poetry. Strip the text of esoterica and coerce it into offices and parties, this is Said's clarion call.

1.5b The Revenge of Historicism: Frank Lentricchia

> Even the wisest man grows tense
> With some sort of violence . . .
> "Under Ben Bulben"

An error very similar to Said's appears to me to be made by Frank Lentricchia. Said paid no attention to Miller and very little to de Man. A few pages in <u>The World, the Text, and the Critic</u> suffice Said to deal with the "extraordinary talents" of

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[20] Miller, "The Critic as Host," p. 230.

de Man and his critical doctrine which, in Said's view, is that literature is the "endless naming and renaming of the void . . .: when critics or poets believe themselves to be stating something, they are really revealing--critics unwittingly, poets wittingly--the impossible premises of saying anything at all" [162, 163]. On the other hand, Lentricchia (more in After the New Criticism [1980], less in Criticism and Social Change [1983]) attempts to dissociate de Man from Derrida and thereby to save Derrida from the paralysis that he feels pervades de Man's discourse of the aporia. In the earlier of the two books, Lentricchia gives a much more sympathetic reading of Derrida's general critique of logocentrism than we saw Said give. He finds Derrida "utterly persuasive" [176], his argument "irresistible" [174], though it is clear that he longs to extend Derrida's position beyond ontological decentering to more specifically "historical labors":

> Put as baldly as possible, Derrida's point is that once we have turned away from various ontological centerings of writing, we do not turn to free-play in the blue, as the Yale formalists [i.e., de Man and Hillis Miller] have done. Rather, it would appear that our historical labors have just begun. [175]

Lentricchia argues that both Said and Yale critics have misread Derrida's differance, taking it as an ontological rather than as a textual strategy. He chides Said for seeing grammatology as "disguised ontological work," as a "linguistically crafty existentialism which poises writing, in Said's phrase, 'just a hair beyond utter blankness.' Derrida is no ontologist of le néant, because he is no ontologist" [171]. But Said is not Lentricchia's true target. He's a Foucauldian ally. Lentricchia

is more interested in exposing the misreading of Derrida done by his popularizers at Yale:

> Oddly, however, though Derrida warned that differance, as the subversion of all ontological realms, could authoritatively command nothing, the Yale critics have taken differance as a radically subversive authority which autocratically commands, as abyme, the whole field of writing, and while doing so establishes writing as a monolith itself that forever escapes determination. [173]

In a word, de Man and Miller have idealized Derrida, in this argument, and have made obstacles for a more historically sensitive reading and use of Derrida's philosophy.

Lentricchia divides Derrida from "the American Derrideans" [184], and even goes so far as to read Miller as counter-deconstructive:

> To use the aporia, particularly in the anti-Derridean way that Miller does, in order to privilege literary discourse for its supposedly self-deconstructive power [but de Man also uses this approach], is to reinstate the speaking subject as a free and unblinded authority. [184]

Lentricchia here turns Miller (and de Man) against themselves, making these "boa-deconstructors," as Hartman has called them, appear as anti-deconstructors. "What do you read, my lord?" asks Polonius. "Words, words, words," Hamlet replies in the Fishmonger Scene.[21] Lentricchia's goal is to save Derrida's textual practices for social and historical critique, a path that has been taken by others as well, such as Michael Ryan who is the most radical of the socializers or politicizers of "Derrida." Ryan's book, Marxism and Deconstruction (1982), turns differance

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[21] My use of names such as the Fishmonger Scene or the Council Scene is borrowed from Harry Levin's book, The Question of Hamlet (1959).

into a political strategy of absolute, levelling "democracy."[22] But Lentricchia clearly feels much more comfortable, in both books, when lambasting Paul de Man, not from a Derridean but from a Foucauldian stance.

In his chapter on de Man in After the New Criticism, Lentricchia, like Said, emphasizes the mimetic trope of "the actual," as he cites with approval "Foucault's positive genealogical view of discourse [which] encourages us to focus on actual historical formations," whereas de Man's writings are said to "reveal a critical intention to place literary discourse in a realm where it can have no responsibility to historical life":

> The issue here, as Foucault has argued, is not one of allowing history, as something "outside" discourse, "inside." The issue is one of allowing the myriad discourses that are history to have some power. The difficulty is that de Man . . . unnecessarily grant[s] power only to the self-deconstructing move of the literary, a move which succeeds in emptying literary discourse of everything but the aporia, the undecidable. This is the error . . . of isolationism, which has repeatedly emasculated formalist thought. [310-311]

Emasculation again, another figurative castration (Said). But in Criticism and Social Change Lentricchia's denunciation of de Man, reinforced by a series of accusatory pathological metaphors, is even more nakedly stated. De Man is said to write "easily within the claustrophobic space of the literary man" [49] (psycho-pathology). His critical practice "falls prey to [an] illness of the spirit" (moral pathology) that is equivalent to "paralysis of action" [43] (physical pathology). And his politics are "that passive kind of conservatism called quietism" [50]

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[22] Ryan writes, "I would argue that deconstruction is a philosophical pretext for a socialism that would be radically democratic and egalitarian in nature" [41-42].

(religious pathology). These accusations look amazingly like an unconscious allusion to Hamlet's self-diagnosis:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment,
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action. [III, i, 83-88; p. 125]

But are they not voiced against de Man (Hamlet) from the point of view of an impetuous Laertes who, in order to revenge the murder of his father, Polonius-as-history, and the madness of his sister, Ophelia-as-aporia, would "cut his throat i'th'church"? [IV, vii, 126; p. 176]:

> There is nothing outside the text, said Derrida; de Man revises to say there is nothing outside the literary text. . . . Deconstruction is conservatism by default--in Paul de Man it teaches the many ways to say that there is nothing to be done. [50, 51]

1.6 Miller's Ethics of Linguistic Negation

> The struggle of the fly in marmalade . . .
> "Ego Dominus Tuus"

Voiced in the supposed interests of social critique, an assault such as Lentricchia's only more urgently begs the question of the relevance of social critique to poetry. Is the poetry of Yeats or Wordsworth or Shakespeare really to be understood best by stripping it of esoterica, and making it assume links with classes and corporations? Enter Hillis Miller's essay on de Man in <u>The Ethics of Reading</u> (1987). Stung by hard-hitting, even moralizing attacks against deconstruction (the ferocity of which would only increase within a year with the publication of de Man's collaborationist wartime journalism), Miller has tried to answer that de Man does insist on an ethics:

> The category of ethicity is one version of [de Man's] insistence on a necessary referential, pragmatic function of language which distinguishes de Man's work from certain forms of structuralism or semiotics. It gives the lie to those who claim "deconstruction" asserts the "free play" of language in the void, abstracted from all practical, social, or political effect. [44]

But despite this caveat to his anti-mimeticism, Miller is not finally a historicist, and although it allows for the obvious--the "situatedness" of deconstruction in the world and history--his essay on de Man attempts to (but does not) advance what I take to be the central question that dogs mimetic and historicist theories of poetry: whether, and if so, how do history (Lentricchia's trope of "the actual" which is somehow beyond "text") and/or historicity (Said's tropes of "actuality," "worldliness," classes, institutions, discourses, etc.) have any bearing at all on a poet in the act of self-transformation that we call writing a poem?

Despite Miller's attempt to save "ethicity" for deconstructive poetics, it remains true that he and de Man empty lyric poetry of voice, while Said and Lentricchia restitute that emptiness by loading it with "history." I would argue that both approaches remain beyond poetry, are inadequate to poetry. The social approach loads the rift alright, but loads it not with the golden ore of poetic voice but with the untransformed detritus of history. Though more responsive to the power of metaphor, the first approach either falls into a severely ironic asceticism (de Man), or divides itself between either indulging in an admirably joyful free play that substitutes itself for the poem (Miller), or repeating a series of deconstructive slogans that are simply imposed on the poem, as we shall see. While the third chapter

will go into detail concerning my critique of the Foulcauldian distortion of poetics, the rest of this chapter will explore my sense of the rift between deconstruction and poetry.

1.7 The Blissful Abyss

> . . . turn away
> And like a laughing string
> Whereon mad fingers play
> Amid a place of stone,
> Be secret and exult . . . .
> "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing"

There can be no doubt that Derrida and de Man have inspired some dazzling readings or interpretations of lyric poetry. In this context, I have already discussed Miller's reading of Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," but an essay by Richard Rand must not go unmentioned. Member of a highly select group of individuals by virtue of being one of Derrida's translators,[23] his "Ozone: An Essay on Keats" (1987) epitomizes a critical style provocatively given over to metaphor, light, free play. The essay does not so much argue a point as perform it. Keats's poetry is not so much interpreted to us as its genius is enacted. Rand's essay can hardly be called an analysis, rather it reads Keats by becoming itself an allegory for what it takes to be the spirit of the letter and word in Keats--erotic and infinite substitution, transfer, metaphor:

> . . . [During] a stage which I am tempted to call the "ozone" of his career . . . Keats invested a truly remarkable degree of energy in "o" as a grapheme, in "o" as a phoneme, and in the virtual zone between and around the two terms. "O," in an infinity of manifestations, became the chief focus of his concern. I submit this point in the full knowledge that Keats himself would have questioned it; in the matter of

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[23] Rand's translation of <u>Signéponge/Signsponge</u> was published in 1984.

vowels he claimed to play the field. . . . Endymion, we recall, falls in love, and does so in a dream; the object of his passion is an "o," sporting the alias of an "Oe" diphthong in the name of "Phoebe" . . . :

> "And lo! from opening clouds, I saw emerge
> The loveliest moon, that ever silver'd o'er
> A shell for Neptune's goblet: she did soar
> So passionately bright, my dazzled soul
> Commingling with her argent spheres did roll
> Through clear and cloudy.
> . . . . . .
> To commune with those orbs, once more I rais'd
> My sight.
> . . . . . .
> O ye deities!
> Who from Olympus watch our destinies!
> Whence that completed form of all completeness?
> Whence came that high perfection of all sweetness?"

It is a moon, then, a full moon that dazzles Endymion's soul, causing it to commingle with its "argent spheres"--eyes, to be sure, but also spheres: for there is more than one sphere in the word "moon," more than one "o," more than one "orb" in the orb known as the "moon." [297-298, my ellipses]

From start to finish, Rand rolls on, playfully and lovingly yet also "critically" performing a text of his own that is also a parallel anachronism of Keats. When Paul de Man meditates on a metaphor, he finds that it opens up like a chasm beneath his feet, throwing him into an anti-mimetic void wherein he must oscillate between the dancer and the dance in an undecidable vacillation. But Richard Rand's meditation loads the aporia with ore stolen from the Keatsian ozone. And in so doing he creates "his own" poem, creates a rival poem. It is in this tropological space or linguistic moment--the topos of Rand finding his own voice within the voice of Keats by disfiguring Keats--that deconstructive interpretations of poetry are at their strongest and most useful as critical acts.

The Wordsworthian critic, Geoffrey Hartman, has also been associated with what Lentricchia dismissed as "free-play in the blue" deconstructive criticism. Differance energizes Hartman

whose profound knowledge and love of Western European literatures is carried through a style that is playful, elliptical, quick and light, seemingly bred on a fusion of Wordsworthian imagination and Derridean differance. As a lover of poetry however, Hartman has chosen to evade the implications of a purely linguistic theory of poetry, to step back from the linguistic abyss at the vital moment. In his essay on Wordsworth in Deconstruction and Criticism (1979), Hartman entertains the thought that "[p]erhaps the term 'lyrical ballad' indicates [an] excess of voice-feeling over the articulate word, . . . [a] severe music of the signifier or of an inward echoing that is both intensely human and ghostly" [190]. And in Saving the Text (1981) Hartman argues for "a counterstatement to Derrida [that] is not a refutation but rather a different turn in how to state the matter" [121]. Using an approach that one critic a little derisively has called "aesthetic criticism"[24] (though I would consider Walter Pater's legacy to have a fine literary pedigree), Hartman says he is concerned "in literature, [with] the reality of words that conduct voice-feeling" [121]. For Hartman, poetry fulfills because it is endlessly figurative and heard in some inner ear [157].

1.8 Thanatos, or the Cost of Being in Love with Death

> I wander by the edge
> Of this desolate lake
> Where wind cries in the sedge . . .
> "He hears the Cry of the Sedge"

The pity however is that most deconstructions of lyric poetry fail to tempt the abyss with the courage of Rand or

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[24] This phrase is the title of Michael Sprinker's essay on Hartman in The Yale Critics.

Miller, Hartman or de Man. Mechanical rather than vital, they fail to perform an action, because to propagate slogans, to imitate jargon, is not to act. As Miller himself warns us, "the interpretation of tropes can freeze into a quasi-scientific discipline promising exhaustive rational certainty in the identification of meaning in a text and in . . . the way that meaning is produced."[25] Mary Jacobus displays this tendency. Her essay on Wordsworthian prosopopeia, "Apostrophe and Lyric Voice in The Prelude" (1985), appeals repetitiously to the de Manian figure of the hollowing-out of poetic voice: "Instead of the voice of the poet, we have the voice of poetry--that is, Nature. In order to achieve this status for his poetry, Wordsworth has to eschew the very fiction of the individual voice which is central to Romantic conceptions of the poet" [176]. Similarly, Tilottama Rajan's essay on Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, "Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness" (1985), appeals repetitiously to the Derridean figure of "revealing the traces of another voice within the seemingly autonomous lyric voice" [195]. On the same round, Joel Fineman's essay, "Shakespeare's Sonnets' Perjured Eye" (1985), seemingly with his own eye more on deconstructive critical theory than on Shakespeare's poems, argues about the "double doubling" and the "difference sounded in sameness" of the sonnets:

> It is language, therefore, the "languageness" of language, now conceived and conceited as something linguistic, as both like and unlike the vision to which it is opposed and on which it is superimposed, that in the dark lady sonnets entails as well as

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[25] "The Critic as Host," Deconstruction and Criticism, p. 249.

> describes the redoubling of unity that leads to division, the mimic likeness of a likeness that leads to difference, the representation of presentation that spells the end of presence. [128]

The trend prevalent among critics influenced by deconstruction is the tendency to get bogged down under the burden of the critical theory that they feel compelled to read onto their poets. De Man and Hillis Miller have injected a new strength into poetics with their intensification of irony as the decentered propagation of metaphor and voice, and as Daniel O'Hara in "Yeats in Theory" (1987) has argued, this new strength is largely the result of Yeats's influence on contemporary theory:

> For, in attempting to comprehend and use Yeats, his American theoretical heirs conceive designs which paralyze their imaginative developments, even as they disseminate and so perpetuate the error of proposing such undertakings as exemplary. Rather than authoring "Yeats," then, their chosen poet has authored and--paradoxically if not perversely--authorized them. [349-350]

But in the followers of de Man and Miller a sterility has set *in*. The lesson of de Man and Miller, Hartman and Rand must surely be similar to that of the poets they write about (Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Yeats), that poems are the breaking and making of metaphors. But how Jacobus or Rajan or Fineman, or the many others like them, can be seen to be saying anything inventive, original, and crucial in and about lyric poetry must be seriously in doubt.[26]

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[26] Cynthia Chase's essay on Keats's "Nightingale" cannot break out of its dependence on de Man's vision of prosopopeia; while T. S. Eliot possibly gets the dionysiac dismemberment he deserves in Maud Ellmann's book which uses poststructuralist jargon to disfigure any form that Eliot might inadvertently have left alive: " . . . to figure death is to disfigure the self, and to abolish discourse in hallucination" [127], or so runs the refrain.

1.9 Voicings, Images of Voice

> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds
> by the shore; . . .
> I hear it in the deep heart's core.
> "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"

Real Presences (1989) by George Steiner, a resonant meditation on the human origins of poetry, music, and painting, is also a forthright critique of deconstructive literary theory. The abyss of "the madness of words" was de Man's temptation, while Miller's was what his "Yeats" called "the labyrinth of the wind." Steiner too is willing to tempt an abyss, but his is not a deconstructive abyss of language. Relying on his conviction of the primacy of art, its inwardness, and its agonistic nature, Steiner risks the more antithetical abyss of transcendence. He reverses Derrida's critique of logocentrism and its radical contextualizing of any transcendental signifier, arguing that mere immanence, the languageness of language (Fineman), is not the risk taken by artists, nor does it help us to comprehend the meaning of meaning, or our own poor humanity.

In the deep heart's core, Steiner hears the music of "felt meaning," or what Hartman called "voice-feeling":

> The private reader or listener can become an executant of felt meaning when he learns the poem or the musical passage by heart. To learn by heart is to afford the text or music an indwelling clarity and life-force. . . . No exegesis or criticism from without can so directly incorporate within us the formal means, the principles of executive organization of a semantic fact, be it verbal or musical. Accurate recollection and resort in remembrance . . . generate a shaping reciprocity between ourselves and that which the heart knows. [9]

Few critics of literary Romanticism write this way these days, choosing instead to propound the death of lyric consciousness (Rajan). Yet it seems to me that Wordsworth and Yeats, twin

pillars of Romantic lyricism, meet in Steiner's trope of the knowing that is the heart's knowing. Wordsworth virtually begins Romanticism with his Great Ode, its blessings, its "song of thanks and praise; / . . . [its] obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things / Fallings from us, vanishings"; and its "thanks to the human heart by which we live."[27] Which in Yeats becomes the music of the deep heart's core at Innisfree. Nor is Steiner willing to allow the heart's knowing to be dismissed as mere idealizing, or that bugbear trope, "essentializing":

> The issues here are political and social in the strongest sense. A cultivation of trained, shared remembrance sets a society in natural touch with its own past. What matters even more, it safeguards the core of individuality. [10, my emphasis]

The Steinerian wager on transcendence as the origin of art (recall Stevens' "impossible possible philosophers' man," his "mirror with a voice") throws him into conflict with deconstructors and historicizers alike. While the former would like to trap him in the textual labyrinth of aporia, the latter (Said and Lentricchia for example) would similarly like to trap him in the labyrinth of history and worldliness, literary texts being linked primarily or exclusively to social power relations. Steiner protests that

> no epistemology, no philosophy of art can lay claim to inclusiveness if it has nothing to teach us about the nature and meanings of music. Claude Levi-Strauss's affirmation [derived, I must add, from his precursor Rousseau] that "the invention of melody is the supreme mystery of man" seems to me of sober evidence.[28] [19]

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[27] "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Poetical Works, p. 461, 462.

[28] In his Grammatology (pp. 195-200) Derrida deconstructs Rousseau's mediatations on music, song, and voice.

He resists the effrontery of both deconstructive and historicist critical theory to claim sovereignty over the provinces of the creative. And he quarrels, in part, with a diminished, politicized form of deconstruction practiced today in American universities, the mechanical rather than vital legacy of Derrida and de Man that propagates the "dominion of secondary and parasitic discourse over immediacy, of the critical over the creative" [38, my emphasis]. (Apposite here is Hillis Miller's famous account of parasitic discourse in "The Critic as Host" [1977] in which the "original" host [the poem] becomes the parasite or guest of the commentary. Miller's work enacts this reversal of primary and secondary texts, but with such verve and vitality that a new and generative balance is struck between canonical poem and commentary. Miller's mere imitators are the suitable target of Steiner's critique.) Literary hierarchy becomes at best mystification and at worst politically reactionary.

All is death, discontinuity, and mere discourse. As a result, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" (1923) can and even ought to be read as if it were a political pamphlet. In William Johnsen's article on Yeats's poem, Leda is reduced to woman and the Swan-god Zeus is augmented-reduced to man, so that Johnsen can turn the poem into a revolutionary call for the sexual refusal of men by women. This would, he suggests, lead to "the positive equalizing of the sexes in a non-violent society" [88]. I will not pause to consider what "society" would exist or how it would last if its sexes did not have sex. But how a bird-god becomes a man, and why Leda should not represent all humanity when struck

by a transcendent power and knowledge, is left unexplained in favor of a political allegory that reads the poem as "a sonnet depicting a rape as a welcome sign of a better future" [80]. Such readings ignore a poem in order to put forward other claims, and in such a context Steiner's phrase, the "dominion of the secondary," is an apt phrase. His critique is acerbic, deeply felt, and seems to me right on the mark:

> No textuality, no art form, no mayfly of literary, musical or material contrivance is, a priori, ruled out of court. The bell wether of American universities assigns to its "core curriculum," that is to say, to its minimal requirements for literacy, a course on black women novelists of the early 1980s. Poets [and] novelists . . . of the most derivative or passing interest, are made the object of seminars and dissertations, of undergraduate lectures and post-doctoral research. The axioms of the transcendent . . . are invested in the overnight. [33]

Not only is the canon being flouted but so is basic literacy, as Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Yeats are sacrificed or converted so that criticism and teaching can become modes of social engineering.

But Steiner's main quarrel is not so much with imitative and politicized forms of deconstruction; it is much more with the primary, the original article. He defers to the "witty and challenging . . . acrobatics of deconstruction, . . . [especially when] aware of [its] own essential reductiveness" [85]; he values the new beginning of modernism invented through the negative risks of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, precursors of deconstruction:

> [With] Mallarmé and modernism, language comes home to its numinous freedom, to its disinvestment from the inchoate, derelict fabric of the world.
>
> Such total disinvestment can restore to words their magical energies, can wake within them the lost potential for benediction or anathema, for incantation and discovery. [98]

And the ascetic negations of Kafka are appreciated as "an Adamic transparency achieved by no other writer." His prose has "the immediacy of light" [113]. Yet Rimbaud's and Mallarmé's and Kafka's practices cannot be taken, Steiner insists, as sanction for deconstruction's powerful negations. The transcendental wagers that they made are precisely what Steiner sees as the object of deconstructive irony and deflation. And though he doesn't say so, he seems to have specifically in mind de Man's disfiguration of "the principle of intelligibility" in the essay on "Lyrical Voice" (quoted above), as well as Derrida's ongoing critique of onto-theology or the metaphysics of transcendental presence, when he comes to the center of his argument.

> What I want to do is to clarify . . . the theological and metaphysical repudiations which lie at the heart of the entire deconstructive enterprise. It is in regard to the poststructuralist, deconstructive sense of the illegitimacy of the intelligible, as it was grounded in a transcendent dimension or category, that I want to consider this mutiny of theory . . . against the authority of the poetic. [116]

Theory's mutiny against the authority of the poetic--this phrase suggests the violent, agonistic nature of the opponents on either side of the rift dividing poetry and commentary, the rift that I observed at the start. Load every rift with ore, said Keats. But what kind of ore is irony? The greatest irony here--and Steiner is painfully aware of it--is that it is the poetic figure of irony that de Man, for example, uses to empty out, to destitute, and to usurp a poetic object. Figure becomes disfiguration. Voice becomes death. Metaphor becomes the abyss. "There is no purity in <u>poiesis</u>," Steiner observes. "Metaphysical, political, social interests and concealments are at work throughout. Deconstruction will show that theory, visible

or spectral, dynamic or vestigial, haunts the would-be innocence of immediacy" [117]. Once poetic form can be shown to be polluted by impurities, the rift of aporia can be opened up and all language, poetry included, especially poetry in de Man's and Miller's case, can be shown to lack transcendental foundation, to wander aimlessly through immanence without origin or end, and ultimately to fall from "the principle of intelligibility" into "the madness of words."

> Derrida's formulation is beautifully incisive: "the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God." A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence. Thus the origin of the axiom of meaning and of the God-concept is a shared one. [19]

In "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915), a doctrinal poem concerning his antithetical poetics, Yeats wrote:

> The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
> The sentimentalist himself; while art
> Is but a vision of reality. [265]

Yeats spent twenty years writing and rewriting <u>A Vision</u> (1925, 1937), and a lifetime trying to perfect his own vision of reality. At times he was a rhetorician, at times a sentimentalist; but was his "vision" beyond impurities? The strong ironies of deconstruction teach us that to believe as much would involve, says Steiner, "a declared or undeclared delusion, an innocence or political-aesthetic cunning" [119]. And yet Steiner would have us make a wager on a sublime beyond our ken, a wager on the internalization of "the other." In a mood that is unmistakably Yeatsian, Steiner affirms his own wager on the

transcendent, where "the claims of the other's presence reach so deeply into the final precincts of aloneness" [137].

> We are, at key instants, strangers to ourselves, errant at the gates of our own psyche. We knock blindly at the doors of turbulence, of creativity, of inhibition within the terra incognita of ourselves. . . . Without the arts, form would remain unmet and strangeness without speech in the silence of the stone. . . . The encounter with the aesthetic is . . . that of an Annunciation, of a "terrible beauty" or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer inhabitable in quite the same way as it was before. A mastering intrusion has shifted the light. [139, 140, 143]

What is especially remarkable about this passage is not its conscious allusions to Yeats, the immediately recognizable "terrible beauty" from "Easter, 1916" (1916), and even the slightly less overt allusion to "the great wings beating still" from "Leda and the Swan." More remarkable are the covert, better yet, the unconscious allusions[29] to "The Magi" (1913)--"Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied, / The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor"--and the even more enigmatic allusion to "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927)--"A living man is blind and drinks his drop. / What matter if the ditches are impure?" And "But when I think of that my tongue's a stone." In fact, the dialectics of this great canonical poem--which I will discuss in detail in the fourth chapter--its quest for a blessing by the internalization of the Other, virtually guide and dominate the entire quoted passage from Steiner's prose, suggesting the power of Yeats, as Daniel O'Hara has argued, to influence (the theory of) literary criticism. "A mastering intrusion has shifted the

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[29] Harold Bloom will speak of "patterns of forgetting in a poem" [Agon 336].

light," indeed. And a voice has shifted, from Yeats to Steiner, from heart to heart.

But it is not that "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," as a discrete poem, is so crucial to Steiner's work, nor even that Yeats's body-of-work as such is so crucial. It is rather the exemplary, relatively contemporary and emblematical way in which Yeats's great poems warp the great tradition that precedes and follows him that is so utterly crucial--a place of crossing, if you will. Only one critic I know of can in any way satisfy the urge to know this "uncontrollable mystery" of breaking and re-making that <u>is</u> Yeats's tradition; only Harold Bloom has shown this sort of strength.

1.10 Bloom, the Voices of the Dead

> In tombs of gold and lapis lazuli
> Bodies of holy men and women exude
> Miraculous oil, odour of violet.
>
> But under heavy loads of trampled clay
> Lie bodies of the vampires full of blood;
> Their shrouds are bloody and their lips are wet.
> "Oil and Blood"

The genius of irony is a phrase that is used by O'Hara as the title of his beautifully provocative piece published in two versions, "The Genius of Irony: Nietzsche in Bloom." But to me the phrase is spoiled by reference to either writer, for Nietzsche was far too powerful a literalist of the imagination, to borrow Yeats's description of Blake, while Bloom entirely transcends irony, as I intend to show. The master, the genius of irony is Paul de Man, who once made the quite canny observation that there is no diacritical mark to indicate irony to a reader--but even if there were such a sign, it would be unread-

able, duplicitous, possibly not itself. Irony must be read into a text by a reader, at the risk of making what may have been intended as a literal statement into an ironic figure; alternatively, the reader might not read irony into a text, thus taking as literal what may have been intended as a figure. This epistemology of irony leads, as we have seen, to undecidable oscillation, the irony of irony. Gerard Manley Hopkins, strong poet in the same Romantic tradition that later engulfs the younger Yeats, wrote what are called "the terrible sonnets," among them being "Carrion Comfort":

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist--slack they may be--these last strands of man
> In me ór, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day came, not choose not to be.[30]

The de Manian reader of the Hopkins prosopopeia to the deathly figure of Despair would oscillate, bewildered, in the aporia between the speaker not feasting on the carrion of despair and the speaker ironically feasting on it by saying that he will not feast on it--how can we know the dancer from the dance? De Man greatly (but in Steiner's view, recklessly) empowers the reader to empty out poems with the trope of irony.

But is there not more to see and to know? Another way of looking at this issue is to realize that, inevitably, younger writers empty out their predecessors, believing themselves to be either more realistic and hard-headed or more progressively idealistic than previous generations of writers. Just as Plato ironized his predecessors, especially Homer, so Aristotle

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[30] Hopkins, p. 99.

ironized Plato.[31] Sometimes it seems that we have all been ironizing Plato ever since. But in poetry and its rival, criticism, is there only this endless round of emptying? The criticism of Harold Bloom is the only criticism I know of that has attempted a response--and what a vigorous response it has been--to the ironic negations of deconstruction, and this without falling back into the pieties of conventional formalism or into the moralizing mode of the post-deconstructive historicizers. We saw above that when Lentricchia looks at de Man and his aporia, he sees "the claustrophobic space of the literary man," claustrophobic because literature is too confining for Lentricchia, always closing in on him, whereas in the space of "history" he can breathe without fear. But what to him looks like claustrophobia, to me looks more like agoraphobia, the pure space of a free fall, without knowing if you have packed your parachute. "Exhilarating" is hardly word enough, for this dance-with-death.

The Satanic Verses (1988) begins precisely with just such a free fall, as

> Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky. [3]

The two falling figures reveal Rushdie's Manichaean Gnostic intuitions. One of them believes himself to be the Archangel Gabriel, and acts the role madly throughout, while the other

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[31] James Olney's book, The Rhizome and the Flower (1980), situates Yeats and Jung within the context of Plato, his precursors, and much of the Platonic tradition; but it does not gauge the angle at which the revisions from writer to writer have taken place. I will discuss Olney in chapter four in assessing Yeats's agon with Platonism.

figure is temporarily transformed, a bit like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's The Metamorphosis, into a goat-Devil. At the novel's conclusion the main character enacts a dramatic reconciliation with the voice of his dying father just before the death. "To fall in love with one's father after the long angry decades was a serene and beautiful feeling; a renewing, life-giving thing" [523]. For Harold Bloom, as apparently for Salman Rushdie, poetry is not a free fall, or rather, not only a free fall. It only begins with irony, the inevitable first movement away from total immersion in a prior voice, but it moves on through other angles of relationship to that voice, angles which fill or restitute as well as empty. De Man would say that the only thing we can know is that we do not know, yet desperately desire to know, the dancer from the dance; but Bloom's rejoinder would be that poetry is not at all concerned with knowledge as such, unless it be the knowledge of "gnosis." The only thing that matters to a poet-as-poet is power over the self, rivals, and precursors, a power that can only be seen by reading the strength with which a trope breaks and re-makes a previous trope, or on the other hand, the weakness with which it merely repeats it. This is not to suggest that the question of knowledge can be simply dismissed or evaded. On the contrary; Yeats concludes his "Leda and the Swan" with the enigmatic question, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" [322], which only confirms the human obsession with knowledge. And as I shall argue along with Bloom, knowledge of the highest sort, a personal yet transcendental act of gnosis, is the quest of all strong poems. Nevertheless, knowledge that

is about something, knowledge of any episteme, the knowledge apposite to any epistemology is not the knowledge of poetry. "Man can embody truth," wrote Yeats a few days before he died, "but he cannot know it."[32] Embodying truth I take to be the gnosis of poetry, but knowing truth I take to be mere epistemology. For poetry to be poetry it cannot be confined to any logos, although it finds its freedom in the logos. Poetic freedom is the antithetical action, done in words, of crossing from a place to a stance. Bloom's criticism teaches us how, from the Bible to Beckett, poets have obsessively sought to empower themselves by enacting that crossing. Although the crossing inevitably entails a falling back again into a place of confinement or emptiness, it is the moments of restitution, of imagined fullness, of crossing from place to power or from ethos to pathos that most interest Bloom. For this is truly when the poem, the poet, and the tradition he writes in are not only broken but re-formed. This is the gnosis that knows the dancer from the dance. Just as "reality is an activity of the most august imagination" (Wallace Stevens), so Bloom imagines the dialectical patterning of the poetic act as a "catastrophe creation," a ruining of sacred truths, a gnostic breaking and re-making of the vessel that is tradition.

Bloom's relation to deconstruction has for a number of years been quite complicated. Based at Yale University together with de Man, Hillis Miller, and Hartman in the 1970s and early

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[32] Ellmann, The Man and the Masks, p. 289.

1980s,[33] Bloom was seen by many conservative literary scholars as just another rampaging deconstructor who saw poems as an excuse for tactlessly flaunting the critic's Nietzschean will-to-power over the text. And inasmuch as Bloom contributed an essay to Deconstruction and Criticism along side essays by Derrida, de Man, Miller, and Hartman, he also contributed to the popular misunderstanding of his criticism as deconstruction. But as he once said in an interview, the book's title was his "personal joke," one of his many jokes, but nobody got it--"that those four were deconstruction, and [he] was criticism."[34]

It does not take an over-subtle reading of Bloom to realize that since at least 1975, when in A Map of Misreading he critiqued Derrida's totalizing "scene of writing" with his own "scene of instruction," he has been overtly waging battle against deconstruction as he sees it. But it is not Derrida's philosophy or even Miller's criticism that most concerns Bloom. "The critical theorist who (after Nietzsche) troubles and wounds me most," says Bloom, "[is] Paul de Man" [Agon 29]. For it is de Man's deconstruction of the Romantic tradition in Britain from Wordsworth to Yeats (and implicitly in America from Whitman to Stevens) that eerily resembles and so profoundly threatens Bloom's critical vision of Romanticism.

As we have seen, deconstructors like de Man, Miller, and their acolytes have viewed the Romanticism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Yeats as a highly conscious, that is to say, ironic

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[33] De Man died in 1983, and Miller recently moved on to the University of California at Irvine, while Hartman and Bloom remain at Yale.

[34] Salusinszky, p. 68.

manipulation of the languageness of language, a self-deconstructing play within the immanence of language as death and discontinuity. This is the conscious embrace of language as the abyss. But it may also be, as Nietzsche teaches, a perspective on the abyss, a perspectivizing of the abyss, that is to say, a will-to-power over the abyss. Such a will-to-power will not suffice for Bloom, who in his ongoing critique of deconstruction has also revised his way of seeing his precursor, Nietzsche. In Kabbalah and Criticism (1975), Bloom asks:

> What is the difference between two closely related interpretive stances, one that asks, with Nietzsche: Who is the Interpreter, and what kind of power does he seek to gain over the text? And the other says, with Emerson, that only the truth as old as oneself reaches one, that "It is God within you that responds to God without . . . "? How, for interpreters, do the Will to Power and Self-Reliance differ? [118]

Bloom's critique of Nietzschean will-to-power and his embrace of Emersonian self-reliance continues to unfold as an important element of his critique of deconstruction. Later in Agon (1982) Bloom writes: "Reading seems to me now not so much Nietzsche's Will to Power over texts, as Schopenhauer's power to will texts, or rather texts of the Sublime, which is to say, of the Abyss, . . . the Abyss in its Gnostic sense" [17]. For de Man, the abyss is language, and he exercises his power over it by embracing it in a perspective, the perspective of aporia--the interminable deadly oscillation of undecidability. But for Bloom, the Abyss is not language and aporia is not the figuration of interminable doubt. If they were, the abyss, language, and aporia would be death; but a poem and its imagination are nothing if not a struggle to defeat death, to unite with the Abyss, to make divine the merely cosmic self.

When Hamlet writes to Ophelia,

> Doubt thou the stars are fire.
> Doubt that the sun doth move.
> Doubt truth to be a liar.
> But never doubt I love. [II, ii, 115-118; p. 106]

--the "truth," the power of the poetry cannot be located in whether or not the stars are fire, or the sun moves, or truth is a liar, or even whether or not Hamlet loves Ophelia. For as Steiner has said, "Anything can be said and, in consequence, written about anything" [53], and Hamlet's words and lines can be willed "to mean" virtually anything. But the truth, the power of the poetry is our persuasion, along with Hamlet's and Ophelia's, that his freedom, his power to make words mean is stronger than the power of words and circumstance to make Hamlet their slave--even though this persuasion be a lie. For Hamlet may indeed be a slave ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"). But as Bloom puts it,

> Language does not become poetry for us until we know language is telling us lies, because the truth is ambivalence and so also already death. Poetry has to be loved before we can know it as poetry, and must inspire ambivalence in us at the center of that love. Language [however] does not require love from us. . . . [Agon 30]

Like Steiner then, Bloom too makes his stance a wager on the transcendent, for to do otherwise would be to wager only on death, not on rebirth. To yield oneself up to the labyrinth of aporia is not to love the Abyss, the gigantic Other within and without. It is to make of language a new Demiurge--a fallen god, that, like Blake's Urizen, has usurped the Abyss and turned face and voice away from the Abyss. I realize that this prose may seem suddenly odd, even willfully perverse. But this is because we have moved, with Bloom, from the ironic language of logical

negation to the sublime language of gnostic myth, which is a language of negative dialectics, negative theology, negative transcendence, and according to Bloom, the only language appropriate to poetry. For in Bloom's eyes, contemporary deconstructions and historicisms as well as older scholarly formalisms (like New Criticism) are equally inadequate to poetry.

With their passion for the trope of "the actual" and their resistance to the anti-referentiality of the deconstructors, Said and Lentricchia propagate a new mimesis. While in making no link at origin or end between language and world, the deconstructors voice an anti-mimesis. But Bloom distinguishes his poetics from both of the above by articulating what he calls a "supermimesis" [e.g., 70, 177] that is more adequate to poetry:

> Nowadays, the theorists of negation have replaced the Demiurge by "language," but that is only to transform "language" into the Demiurge. From a Gnostic perspective, anti-mimetic and mimetic theories of creation merely repeat the ancient difference between Stoic and Platonic accounts, a difference that pragmatically makes little difference, as both . . . yield themselves up to the tyranny of time, to one or another rhetoric of temporality. . . . [They are just] two kinds of ironists, neither of whom is willing to press his dualism beyond the final bounds of demiurgic reason. [89]

Along with the Romantic poets he studies, Bloom is willing to press his gnostic dualism of cosmic mind and body versus acosmic pneuma or spirit beyond the bounds of mere ironic figuration. As Yeats's heroic precursor Blake said, "Less than all cannot satisfy man." If de Man is right to contend that all language is error or lies (and he is right), then why would any Romantic poet rest content with the lies of others as the condition of that poet's imagination? "Language is not the Demiurge, breaking the vessels to a fresh creation of catastrophe. Catastrophe is

indeed already the condition of language, the condition of the ruins of time, and of the defense against time, the deep lie at every reimagined origin" [30]. A poem, therefore, does not submit. Instead it defends itself against all anteriority, that is to say, against itself, against other poems, and ultimately against time.[35] It seeks persuasion, not cognition or knowledge in any fallen sense.

In Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (1977) Bloom confronts de Manian deconstruction and urges upon us a criticism that will transcend the limits of aporia, the "figuration of doubt" that for de Man dominates how tropes can know:

> For the deconstructive critic, a trope is a figure of knowing and not of willing, and so such a critic seeks to achieve, in relation to any poem--or to find in that poem--a cognitive moment [Hillis Miller's "linguistic moment"], a moment in which the Negative is realized. . . . But what can a cognitive or epistemological moment in a poem be? Where the will predominates, even in its own despite, how much is there left to know? . . . A deconstructive reading of a poem must treat the poem's urging of us, to whatever, as the poem's own questioning of the language of urging. The issue of the limits of deconstruction will be resolved only if we attain a vision of rhetoric more comprehensive than the deconstructors allow, that is if we can learn to see rhetoric as transcending the epistemology of tropes and as reentering the space of the will-to-persuasion. [387-388]

This space is what Bloom calls the poem as a lie-against-time. And in this space there may be a knowledge or a knowing, but not that of any epistemologist. Bloom's formula, it seems to me, is that a strong lie can be a gnosis--a knowing in which the knower becomes the known [Agon 170, 226]. But for the poem-as-lie to be strong it must enact a drastic and antithetical or evasive

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[35] This is Bloom's theme of revisionism, addressed throughout his work, but stated succinctly in his Wallace Stevens, p. 386-387.

freedom. It is a lie because, despite the condition of catastrophe, it must recreate self, world, and language through a "dialectic of negation, evasion, and extravagance":

> What a Gnostic or a strong poet knows is what only a strong reading of a belated poem or lie-against-time teaches: a freedom compounded of three elements, and these are: negation, evasion, and extravagance. [59]

Hans Jonas, in his classic study of historical Gnosticism, defined aporia as "bewilderment,"[36] a useful description of that figuration of doubt, of being lost in a wilderness or a maze. But what for de Man is the aporia of bewilderment, the madness of words, and death, is for Steiner and Bloom a new freedom. Instead of the cut within metaphor which divides it from itself, Steiner sees an arc of metaphor spanning a chasm, the Keatsian rift:

> Where it is most expressive, language, art, music makes sensible to us a root of secrecy within itself. The arc of metaphor, without which there can be neither shaped thought nor performative intelligibility, spans an undeclared foundation. [176]

Keats loads with ore what Steiner spans with an arc. And Bloom's sense of "poetic crossing,"[37] apropos of Keats and Steiner, radically re-sees the arc of metaphor and its root of secrecy. Like Yeats's lifelong effort to embody the truth, Bloom's revision of the arc that spans the rift reveals aporia, with joyous extravagance, to be the site of an evasive freedom. Far from being merely a topos of interminable error-ridden substitution of trope for trope, aporia is for Bloom the moment of freedom wherein a place becomes a stance:

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[36] The Gnostic Religion, p. 188.

[37] "Poetic Crossing" is the title of Bloom's theoretical "Coda" to his Wallace Stevens, wherein he offers a critique of de Man's aporia.

> A topos is truly not so much a commonplace or a memory place as more nearly the place of a voice, the place from which the voice of the dead breaks through. Hence, a topos is an image of voice or of speech, or the place where such an image is stored. The movement from topos to topos, the crossing, is always a crisis because it is a kind of judgment or criticism between images of voice and between the different kinds of figurative thinking that opposed topics [i.e., topoi] generate. [Wallace Stevens 399]

The Bloomian concept of evasion is crucial to this agonic sense of conflict between images of voice, this crossing from voice to voice. For it is in evasion and its freedom that poets live the illusion of voicing their own voice, an illusion that moves through six ratios or stances of dialectical identity with, and difference from, the voice of the precursor.

Before his Wallace Stevens and Agon, Bloom's poetic theory had offered a critique of de Manian aporia by way of his revisionary ratios and dialectics of misreading, within poems and between poems. Whereas de Manian misreading allows only the grand anti-mimetic trope of ironic emptying, Bloom's dialectics of misreading sees "patterns of forgetting in a poem" [Agon 336]; he sees poems as misreading precursor poems in six stances which alternately destitute, then restitute the voice of the precursor and the new poem, as I shall demonstrate in my final chapter. Thus Bloom's theory overcomes the ahistorical, ironic randomness of de Man's deconstruction. Similarly, Bloom's theory of stances allows for the emergence of a dialectic that is internal to a poem--a great post-Miltonic crisis lyric moving between three stances that limit and three stances that restore. Again this overcomes de Man's extreme asceticism wherein a great poem can only exhibit the stance of ironic self-emptying. Rather than seeing poems as troped and trapped into aporia, "that impossible-

to-solve mental dilemma" [Agon 274], Bloom envisions poems as acts of gnostic evasion or negative transcendence in which the poet seeks self-divination in a writing that is also a voicing of the poem. Such a writing is an agon with a composite internalized Other, including history, other poems, and the fallen self. Such an agon attempts to create from catastrophe and must lead to what Bloom calls a "Great Defeat." And yet it is the attempt which is ennobling, the stance which insists on transforming ethos to pathos. Bloom refuses, with a noble lie, to see poems as figures of death, as mere signs on a page:

> A poetic "text," as I interpret it, is not a gathering of signs on a page, but is a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory worth winning, the divinating triumph over oblivion. [Poetry and Repression 2]

That divinating triumph over oblivion is only won at the cost of a confrontation with death in its myriad and protean variety of forms. But more than a death, writing for Bloom must be a re-birth that happens "where the voice of the dead father breaks through" [Agon 245]. Clearly alluding to deconstructors like de Man and Miller, Bloom notes that "The marking, the will-to-inscribe, is the ethos of writing that our most advanced philosophers of rhetoric trace" [245]. But he is interested in a wager that crosses beyond ethos to "the knowing [that] is itself a voicing, a pathos, and [that] leads us back to the theme of presence that, in a strong poem, persuades us ever afresh, even as the illusions of a tired metaphysics cannot" [245].

Bloom's critique of deconstruction shows the way forward for criticism, just as did Yeats's 1928 letter to Sean O'Casey which sets out the primal and final responsibility of the artist:

> Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed? As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of the education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself, and had altogether different beliefs.[38]

It ought to be clear that in repudiating all moralizing imposition on art and poetry, Yeats envisions the making of art, music, poetry as an act that transforms and renews the artist. Vision, voice, and gnosis are inevitable, inalienable metaphors for this negative and evasive process of self-transformation. A poem can be nothing but "a dumb struggling thought seeking a mouth to utter it,"[39] said Yeats. His antipathy for the mimesis of a moralizing literature was no less vigorous than his rejection of any anti-mimesis that would glorify the random, dwell in the asceticism of pure irony, or undermine all genealogy. In the same essay that Miller uses ironically to quote the poet against himself, Yeats in a Bloomian spirit said of art that "all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt. . . . Ancient salt is best packing. . . . [I]magination must dance, must be carried beyond feeling into the aboriginal ice."[40] Like his precursor Yeats, and unlike his deconstructing colleagues, Bloom does not see language as the abyss, the void of arbitrary meaning, the madness of words, and death. In such a void there can be no value to a kiss. But like Dante and Shelley before him, and Bloom after him, Yeats knows that the kiss and the dance

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[38] Quoted by Whitaker, p. 98.

[39] Essays and Introductions, p. 317.

[40] "A General Introduction for my Work," Essays and Introductions, p. 522, 523.

are possible, even if achieved only at the great cost of a great defeat--"We free ourselves from obsession that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void."[41]

[41] Quoted by Whitaker, p. 113.

One had a lovely face
And two or three had charm
But charm and face were in vain
Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain.
"Memory"

Chapter Two
Mask, Dancer, Plato, Muse: Yeats and the Tropes of Influence

Having considered in the first chapter the severely ironic critical theory of deconstruction as well as the costs to be paid for invoking it to interpret Yeats, Romantic poetry, and lyrical voice, I now turn to the issue of Yeats criticism as a collective body or institution that has produced the composite figure we commonly refer to as "Yeats." I will review and revise biographical, New Critical, psychoanalytical, and philosophical accounts of "Yeats," deferring historical-political accounts to the third chapter. My aim will be to critique the weaknesses of these accounts and the weaknesses of the composite figure that emerges from them, all the while suggesting what I take to be the best critical theoretical approach to "Yeats" and to the poems. Broadly speaking, my trajectory will be similar to that of Daniel O'Hara in "Yeats in Theory" (1987)--an article strongly influenced by the critical theory of Harold Bloom. But where

O'Hara emphasized the great influence of Yeats generally over American critics and theorists (R. P. Blackmur, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and Paul de Man), I will concentrate specifically on the influence of A Vision and especially "Among School Children" over various critics such as Richard Ellmann, T. R. Henn, Joseph Adams, Cleanth Brooks, Frank Kermode, the early Paul de Man, David Lynch, and Robert Snukal.

For the most part, we now go back to a consideration of criticism that is antediluvian in being pre-deconstructive, even though some of the texts to be considered were written and published after that cataclysmic moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s when deconstruction shocked English literature programs in North America. Biographical and psychoanalytical readings of Yeats have in common a tendency to use the poems as a means of shedding light on aspects of the life of the man--his private affairs, his public engagements, his spiritualist obsessions, his psychological anxieties, and so on. Critics interested more in the poetry than in the life often either focus too narrowly on each poem as a discrete text thereby neglecting its relations to a larger poetic matrix, or they consider Yeats's work merely as a reflection of myths, symbols, and a presumed doctrine. Philosophy-oriented critics see the poems as examples of various philosophical arguments and positions, rather than more properly as poetic acts breaking and remaking Yeats's poetic tradition.

All these approaches have their strengths, their temptations, and their pleasures, because all in some degree are the result of what Yeats called "sedentary toil":

> Why should you leave the lamp
> Burning alone beside an open book,
> And trace these characters upon the sands?
> A style is found by sedentary toil
> And by the imitation of great masters.
> ["Ego Dominus Tuus" 266]

Yeats's critics, enchanted by him as a great master, seek to imitate him. They sit and they toil, and in so doing, they create achievements that earn our respect. But were they truly to imitate their master, they would not merely bend his poetic energies into limited figurations of his life or his psyche or his philosophy. They would do as he did to his masters, Shelley and Blake.

2.1 Ellmann and the Influence of the Mask

> Those men that in their writings are most wise
> Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.
> "Ego Dominus Tuus"

In Yeats criticism, Richard Ellmann is the name that dominates the field of literary biography. Published in 1948, nine years after the poet's death, Yeats: The Man and the Masks was his first book on the poet. A few other books preceded his, one by Louis MacNeice in 1941 and one by Joseph Hone in 1942, but MacNeice's book was a highly idiosyncratic expression of worry over the gap between Yeatsian poetic freedom and socialist responsibility, while Hone's book was virtually a straight forward biography. It was Ellmann's book that so greatly influenced the literary biographies to follow his. By usurping Yeats's trope of "the mask" as a grand trope in an attempt to integrate an interpretation of Yeats's life with his work, Ellmann inaugurated a form of Yeats criticism that would find imitators for decades.

But Ellmann used the poet's trope of the mask in a way that was entirely different from Yeats's own use of it. For Ellmann the mask was a mimetic and a psychological concept that never changed, but simply allowed him to describe the man, not the poet, in terms of a split within the biographical self which motivated Yeats's well-known poetic desire for "Unity of Being." Ellmann summarizes the stories of doubling and splitting in the lives of Yeats's friends and acquaintances, George Russell/A.E., Oscar Wilde, and William Sharp/Fiona Macleod, and then writes:

> Yeats came to maturity in this atmosphere of doubling and splitting of the self, but his mental growth was parallel to that of other writers and did not derive from them. . . . Yeats noted everywhere about him confirmation of his sense of internal division. But as we have seen, that division had its origin in childhood with a revolt . . . against his father and his father's world. He sought in vain the unself-conscious life which he associated with his mother's family. . . . Thus many personal factors and many examples, and beyond these the spirit of the times, made him see his life as a quarrel between two parts of his being. [77]

The passage above is, in my view, the crucial passage in <u>The Man and the Masks</u>. Its importance can be recognized when we see that psychological biography is the origin and end of Ellmann's narrative. A man's life is to be understood in terms of his mind, and literary works come from the particular psychology of that mind:

> What [George] Moore did not realize was that Yeats, during the 'nineties, had not one style but two, that he used the one to undercut the other, and that as a result he was less committed to any one way of writing than he appeared. The same uncertainty which made him set up a tension in his life between opposing conceptions of his personality, and a further tension between the principles of opposition and fusion, affected all his thought and kept him for a long time from deciding unequivocally upon a manner of expression. [138]

The Man and the Masks is Ellmann's best contribution to the field of Yeats studies because it used the concept of "tension between the principles of opposition and fusion" to drive his narrative description of Yeats-the-man. Less concerned with the life and times of the poet than with his poems, The Identity of Yeats (1954) is a fine example of practical literary criticism; while Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden (1967) is interesting for the biographical matrix of literary men that it depicts. Yet neither can measure up to Ellmann's first book which so influenced later studies because of its domestication of the trope that Yeats called "the mask." The trope that for Yeats was an image of voice in the poetic act of self-transformation decays for Ellmann into the more accessible, biographical notion of a psychological self splitting and striving for unity. Ellmann's sense of "the mask" is relatively stable because it is the motor principle of the psyche in all its guises, poses, permutations, leading to a composite figure called "Yeats." But Yeats's own sense of the mask is highly volatile because it is beyond the psyche and its guises. More radical in his dualism, Yeats made his mask the voice of the antithetical self which, when under severe pressure, becomes the gnostic spark which is alien to any mere psychological mask. For Yeats, the concept of the mask was much closer to Derrida's non-concept of differance than to Ellmann's sense of it. It was a gnostic, self-revisionary, poetic trope--a trope antithetical to itself as in the formula that one equals one plus or minus (1 = 1+/-), a formula that I will have more to say about later on. Despite Ellmann's swerve from his master, The Man and the Masks was the

first book to purloin a major Yeatsian trope and use it to trope Yeats into a figure.

Yeats's trope of the mask (mainly elaborated in A Vision [1925, 1937])[1] and his related tropes of the antithetical self and the "Daimon" (mainly elaborated in the earlier Per Amica Silentia Lunae [1918]) have their ancestry in Dante's "Virgil," in Milton's "Satan," in the "Rousseau" of Shelley's The Truimph of Life, and surprisingly enough, in Yeats's ambivalent internalization of Wordsworth's trope of "nature" as a primordial, achieved anti-self. I will have more to say about Yeats and his precursors, especially Shelley, as this dissertation develops, but discussion of this ancestry is not my main aim here. More to my point are the many instances of critical studies derived from Yeats's tropes, but also legitimated by Ellmann's use of "the mask."

In 1950, two years after Ellmann's book, T. R. Henn published The Lonely Tower. The central trope of the book he takes from several canonical poems such as "The Phases of the Moon" (1918), "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927), and "Blood and the Moon" (1927), as well as from the book of poems Yeats titled The Tower (1928). But Henn also takes the trope from the same passage of "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937) that, as we saw in the first chapter, J. Hillis Miller used--but only after cleaning the passage of its salt, its references to traditionality--to turn or trope Yeats into a deconstructor avant la lettre:

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[1] Unless otherwies noted, all references to A Vision are to the 1937 edition (corrected in 1962).

> I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. I commit my emotions to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing. [522]

Clearly, the tower is a compelling trope in Yeats's work, a trope which, if we take up the implication of Henn's epigraph, Yeats derived from Shelley's Prince Athanase.[2] More importantly for me here, Henn uses "the tower" in much the same way that Ellmann used "the mask"--as a trope taken from the poet's armory of tropes but used reductively by the critic to suggest the central dimensions of the poet's mind as it sees and as it sees itself. But Henn diverges from Ellmann in the way he sees the poet's mind:

> . . . man ascends to the topmost room, to find spiritual peace. In Ideas of Good and Evil [1903] Yeats describes the tower as the symbol of the mind looking outward upon men and things, as well as the symbol of the mind turned inward upon itself. At night bats fly round it, butterflies beat their wings against it. Both are traditionally souls or disembodied spirits. They seek to gain entry, to communicate the wisdom of the dead, but are too fragile to do so. [14]

Throughout the book, and in passing, Henn observes the various bats and butterflies--"the towering dead / With their nightingales and psalms," as Dylan Thomas turns his Keatsian-Yeatsian composite precursor--beating their wings against Yeats's tower, his mind. But for Henn, the poet's mind must not be seen as a place of "tension between the principles of opposition and fusion," as in the more subtle and ironic Ellmann. For Henn, the

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[2] These lines from Prince Athanase form the central epigraph of the book and are quoted again by Henn in a footnote on p. 14:

> His soul had wedded Wisdom, and her dower
> Is love and justice, clothed in which he sate
> Apart from men, as in a lonely tower.

mind is the lonely tower and the tower is loosely equivalent to its output, the poet's body-of-work, not to its conflicts with itself or with "the towering dead," the butterflies and bats who are the poet's precursors. Henn is more concerned to describe the structure of the tower as body-of-work, its stone and mortar, its interior spaces and its winding stairs, than to see the tower as mind-in-tension, or like Bloom, to reveal the tower's losing battle to defend itself from the wings of the dead. Ellmann must frequently meditate on the usefulness of his central trope, the mask, because he is using it as a heuristic device to elaborate a certain poetic psychology; Henn, on the other hand, does not brood over "the tower." He is more interested to describe the general poetic pattern that he sees, the myths, the symbols, and especially the Yeatsian doctrine he perceives. Nevertheless, like Ellmann before him he must steal a burning branch from Yeats's fire in order to light up his own story of Yeats's poetry, to create his own "Yeats."

The crucial observation to be made concerning my argument about Yeats, Ellmann, and the influence of the mask is that, to a larger extent than criticism has so far realized, Yeats virtually invented the institution of Yeats criticism. Similarly, with his 1893 study of his precursor William Blake, co-written with Edwin Ellis, Yeats can truly be said to have invented Blake criticism. Even Northrop Frye's Fearful Symmetry (1947) cannot manage to see Blake except through the strong inaugural vision of Yeats.[3] The phenomenon that I have

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[3] In Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision (1955), Hazard Adams, who is an excellent scholar but certainly no scholar of "influence" in Bloom's sense, traces out the history of critical approaches to Blake [44-55]. Yet he

described of Yeats's trope of the mask decaying into Ellmann's mask, and that of his tower becoming Henn's tower, mediated and legitimated through Ellmann's use of the mask--this phenomenon remains today the identifying mark of Yeats criticism. Another way of putting this is to say that no critic has yet transumed Yeats, although Paul de Man and, as we shall see, Harold Bloom come closest to this transumption of their precursor. In the first chapter (1.9),[4] I demonstrated how even a critic as strong as George Steiner relied upon the Yeatsian vision of the negative dialectics of self and soul. After Ellmann and Henn there are many examples of critics who, like Steiner, are inspired by a Yeatsian aesthetic to produce their criticism, most of them unhappily falling short of Steiner's sublime provocative strength.

In Romantic Image (1957) Frank Kermode made his early mark on criticism and theory. Intending to vent his misgivings about the prevailing Eliotic aesthetic of the dissociation of sensibility, Kermode invoked the counter-dissociative Yeatsian tropes of "the tree" and more persuasively "the dancer," tropes which culminate in "Among School Children," in order to develop his conception of the modernity of Romantic imagism:

> [The poet's] aristocratic ideal, which links Yeats's theory of history with the Romantic theory of imagery, applies equally to the beauty of woman and to the beauty of the work of art. Proportion, movement,

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describes the Yeats-Ellis edition as "an ambitious undertaking, the first attempt by anyone to interpret Blake's system in detail" [44-45], as "often brilliant and provocative" [47], and speaks of Yeats as "Blake's first real interpreter" [54], despite general disagreement over Yeats's use of the term "mysticism" to describe Blake's poetry and thought.

[4] References to previous points of discussion will be made by chapter and section in parantheses.

> meaning, are not intellectual properties, but belong to that reality of the imagination which is a symbolic reality. The beauty of a woman, and particularly of a woman in movement, is the emblem of the work of art or Image. [57]

Like "the mask" and "the tower" before it, "the dancer" here becomes another grand trope for an understanding of "Yeats." But in Kermode the claims transcend a discussion of his "Yeats." "The dancer" becomes the figure for a more general critical aesthetic. The effect of such a trope is startling for what it teaches about the power of Yeats to influence critical thought. What must be said about Frye should also be said about Kermode. Like "the great wheel" used in Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, which was published in 1957, the same year as Kermode's book, and which anatomized literary form much as Yeats had anatomized literary history on great cosmic wheels in A Vision, "the dancer" used in Kermode's Romantic Image contributed to the "Yeatsianizing" of criticism and theory--a vile but an accurate phrase suggesting the effective and growing ascendency of Yeatsian over Eliotic critical tropes.

2.2 The Anti-Ellmann Anti-Mask

> The signs and shapes;
> All those abstractions that you fancied were
> From the great Treatise of Parmenides;
> All, all those gyres and cubes and midnight things
> Are but a new expression of her body
> Drunk with the bitter sweetness of her youth.
> "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid"

In our own day of "poststructuralmania," another vile phrase, the fortunes of "the mask" have taken a new turn. In Yeats and the Masks of Syntax (1984), Joseph Adams turns "the mask" with a sharply ironic twist. Rather than the gnostic

supermimesis of Yeats's "mask," rather than the psychological mimesis of Ellmann's "mask," Adams' "mask" is an anti-mimetic trope--he prefers the term "antiplatonic"--which submerges all consciousness, even poetic consciousness, under a tide of differential linguistics. "Syntactic masks," according to Adams, are "anomalous structures" that exemplify

> a shift in the relation of subjectivity to language, with the subject seen as a textual product or construct rather than a full centre of consciousness expressing itself through language. Syntactic masks also exemplify the role of "difference" in language. . . . Both these aspects link the masks with a larger cultural and philosophical shift . . . in modern language, literature and thought, . . . [forming] part of an emerging antiplatonism. [1]

Adams makes his argument without once referring to Ellmann, without even including The Man and the Masks in his "selected bibliography." This anti-mimetic Yeatsian linguist, it seems, would not want to appear to be descended from, or even associated with, a mimetic Yeatsian. Instead, Adams prefers to find the fathering force of his "syntactic masks" in A Vision, but his Yeatsian credentials are not persuasive since he devotes only one paragraph (p. 11) to discuss "the Mask" and A Vision. On the other hand, he clearly wishes to appear as a follower of Gilles Deleuze by citing him repeatedly as his authority. Yet Adams' prose often seems more influenced by the tropes of Paul de Man than by those of other poststructuralists:

> . . . an oscillation is set up between alternative possibilities. With neither syntactic form becoming fully possible, no final meaning can be assigned. Form and meaning become radically dislodged from one another. . . . [T]wo mutually exclusive syntactic alternatives do somehow occur simultaneously in the same words. Syntactic masks thus become radically undecidable elements stuck into the normal flow of discourse. [4]

Although he claims that "platonism [is] dominant in both Yeats and modern culture," Adams confidently insists on "the penetration of antiplatonism into Yeats's language," and refers to "Yeats's syntactic masks" [1, my emphasis], though the term is obviously his own. Drawn into the vexed question of Yeats's relation to the Platonic tradition, a question that I will entertain in chapter four, he asserts quite flatly that "antiplatonism" defines the thought of A Vision by tying his syntactic masks to A Vision and its "antiplatonic theory" of the subject:

> In Yeats's model as in Deleuze's, the subject is never completely separate from the primordial field of tensions defining it ("My instructors identify consciousness with conflict," A Vision, 214.) The subject, the individual consciousness, is finally only a result within the system of gyres. It only comes about through the systematic play of oppositions, reciprocities and interdependencies among the "Four Principles" and the "Four Faculties" (including the Mask). [11]

Without a theory of the genealogy of tropes, the anti-mimeticist falls into absurdity. Tropological legitimacy is taken from the father (syntactic masks are Yeatsian), yet mind and meaning are secondary effects, mere illusions of the arbitrary differential laws of language.

The reduction of A Vision to anti-Platonic anti-mimeticism seems to me to be "gorgeous nonsense" (Bloom), yet I find it a useful trope to highlight my own differences with mimeticists like Ellmann and anti-mimeticists like Adams. It appears to me that Yeats's vision shares nothing with either of them, unless we say that his extravagant negation of both positions is a kind of "sharing" with them. For what ought to be clear is that both Ellmann and Adams are reductionists of "the mask" and are only

arguing about degrees of irony.[5] Ellmann wants to reduce "the mask" to an imitative image which he can then use as a tool to shape the psychology of Yeats-the-man. Adams, on the other hand and with stronger irony, wants to reduce the mask to a non-image which is not imitative of any psychology, and which will substitute "the languageness of language" (Fineman, 1.8) for psychology, consciousness, and life.

Yeats, however, is elsewhere. His "mask" (not to mention his "tower" and his "dancer") is irreducible to either the irony of psycho-biography or to the more severe irony of the absence of psychology and the subject in differential linguistics. Yeats's "mask" transcends both of these by being at once far less and far more than the two of them. They both reify the trope of the mask, but Yeats is a great poet because his work is an ongoing project that evasively negates his tropes in the making of new tropes, and "the mask" is only one of his emblems for this antithetical activity.

No doubt, Yeats is often tempted by what could be called the Parmenidean ideal, Parmenides having been maybe the first historical protagonist of that anti-mimetic form of thought that today goes by the name of poststructuralism. Nevertheless, it comes as a surprise that in one sentence Adams reduces A Vision to mere determinism--"The subject, the individual consciousness, is finally only a result of the system of gyres" [11]--and in doing so, he exposes a great ignorance. For there is little

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[5] Making a similar point about recent debates between M. H. Abrams and J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom writes: "Increasingly, I suspect that Abrams and Hillis Miller, when they debate interpretive modes, truly dispute only degrees of irony, of the human gap between expectation and fulfillment" [Agon 31].

value to A Vision unless it be a quest for the tropes which will temporarily suffice to guarantee Yeats's poetic freedom, by transcending the unsatisfying conventions and orthodoxies of mimetic idealism, and the overwhelmingly corrosive ironies of historical necessity (the gyres). "I hail the superhuman," says Yeats. Being a great poet, Yeats must impose himself on mimetic and anti-mimetic alike, or die into the mere repetition of the tropes of other poets, including his own past selves.

> Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over in my mind, exploring all its details, defining and again defining its elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra. I have felt the convictions of a lifetime melt though at an age when the mind should be rigid, and others take their place, and these in turn give way to others. . . . Then I draw myself up into the symbol and it seems as if I should know all if I could but banish such memories and find everything in the symbol.
>
> But nothing comes--though this moment was to reward me for all my toil. Perhaps I am too old. Surely something would have come when I meditated under the direction of the Cabalists. What discords will drive Europe to that artificial unity--only dry or drying sticks can be tied into a bundle--which is the decadence of every civilisation? . . . Then I understand. I have already said all that can be said. The particulars are the work of the Thirteenth Cone or cycle which is in every man and is called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things and knows all things, it knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret.
> [A Vision 301-302]

2.3 Schooling, and Cleanth Brooks

> . . . the children's eyes
> In momentary wonder stare upon
> A sixty-year-old smiling public man.
> "Among School Children"

A crucial insight of Bloomian criticism concerns the uncanny power of some poems to influence not just later poems, but also

criticism and theory. "Among School Children" possesses this uncanny power and may turn out to be, like Wordsworth's Great Ode, the most influential poem of its era. I would argue that no other single poem, not even "The Waste Land," has influenced the criticism and theory of poetry as the Yeats poem has. If critics are compelled to speculate about the possibility of poetic vision, they come to deal with "Among School Children," which was already there imposing itself on them. They intuited the possibility of poetic vision because "Among School Children" gave them that possibility with inescapable persuasiveness.

And yet they betrayed the poem, by reducing it. They took, but did not give back in the same measure. Cleanth Brooks could "only" return a practical theory of paradox, tension, and reconciliation--a critical move embellished a decade later by Frank Kermode with his attention to the trope of "the dancer." Paul de Man could "only" return the more bitterly truthful error or irony of interminable oscillation between mutually exclusive imperatives--how can we know the dancer from the dance? David Lynch brilliantly reduces the poem by turning it merely into symptoms of a psychoanalytic condition, while Robert Snukal typifies the compulsion to reduce the poem to a philosophical doctrine or debate.

I

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way--the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy--
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age--
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage--
And had that colour upon cheek or hair
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind--
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once--enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts--O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise--
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

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

Cleanth Brooks is one of a few major names associated with the formalist movement called New Criticism. The Well Wrought Urn (1947) contributed fundamentally, as a practical application of the principles of New Criticism, to the jobs of teaching poetry and writing about poetry. Following chapters on Wordsworth's Great Ode and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" among others, we find a chapter on "Among School Children." Brooks plainly intends to use it along with the other poems to exemplify his main thesis about the complex structure of lyric poetry, its paradoxical tensions and its "achieved harmony" [159], which looks suspiciously like Yeats's "Unity of Being." Brooks intends to use the poem, but more tellingly, the poem uses him, acting as the horizon within which he sees, or better yet, as the light by which he sees.[6] His reading of the poem is logically argued but sadly incomplete because it cannot get beyond being merely a dull reflection of the structure of the poem's "super-

[6] In Destructive Poetics Paul Bové makes a similar point, suggesting that A Vision functions as "the 'center' of [Brooks'] Modern Poetry and the Tradition" (1939) [107].

structural" brilliance. In fact, if the poem were as dull as Brooks' reading makes it seem, few would bother to read it.

To be fair, Brooks does note an important point that has escaped the view of all other commentators on the poem, so far as I am aware, and that is the relationship between it and Wordsworth's Great Ode. Yeats critics have been blind to Wordsworth's influence over him;[7] he is usually described as having no link or only an antipathetic relationship to Wordsworth. But having mooted a golden insight, Brooks does little with it except to observe that both poems deal with the child, the man, and "the process of growing up," and that both reflect "the Platonic doctrine of prenatal recollection" [145]. Like many other critics, Brooks then proceeds to explicate that Platonic doctrine and Yeats's reflection of it for the imagistic structure of the poem, along the way noting the poem's allusion to Plato's Symposium. But a critic with an eye for more than the mimetic reflection of images and doctrines, a critic with an eye for the revisionary acts that break and remake poetic careers and literary traditions would be keen to speculate on the origins of "Among School Children," its haunting by the "Intimations" Ode and by Plato, and its compulsion to free its own voice of the shadowy dead, to exorcise the voices of "the towering dead with their nightingales and psalms."

Instead, Brooks stumbles, especially over the challenge of the poem's last stanza; its subtle revisionism is beyond him.

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[7] Patrick J. Keane's book, Yeats's Interactions with Tradition (1987), is the only work I am aware of that deals with Wordsworth's influence on Yeats. But Keane concentrates almost exclusively on passages about the French Revolution in The Prelude said to echo in "The Second Coming." Keane's sense of "interaction with tradition" falls far short of the Bloomian revisionary sense of influence that I operate in this thesis.

In life the second chance may be possible, but in poetry the second chance is an illusion. The art of poetry is to embrace the illusion and make it feel like the first and only chance.[8] Yeats wagers his poetic career in "Among School Children" to try to get it right, once and for all. Until this moment he has written poem after poem, obsessed by questions and questioning, especially about the possibility of knowing, and here he begins in "the long schoolroom questioning." Until this moment he has been a tower under siege by internalized "bats and butterflies," or if you will, with bees and starlings: "My wall is loosening; honeybees, / Come build in the empty house of the stare" [312]. The poetic self has come to see itself as nothing but a trope, to be destroyed and remade again and again in the act of writing poems. In "Among School Children," the first half of the fourth stanza, the entire fifth stanza and the latter half of the eighth stanza are questions, each demanding an answer concerning the various idealisms that have been, until now, a bulwark against death, a lie against time and suffering. But will they hold again? Will one more lie hold against the ravages of time? and be for the poet "A compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?" Will cheeks of perfect beauty drink the wind?

Brooks seems to think that Yeats faces a question of choosing between idealism and materialism, and he answers that "Yeats chooses both and neither."

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[8] Alluding to a passage in Nietzsche, Bloom writes: "A trope is thus a way of carrying a perpetual imperfection across the river of Becoming, while thinking we carry a goddess" [Agon 32].

> One cannot know the world of being save through the world of becoming [nor the dance save through the dancer, we seem to overhear] (though one must remember that the world of becoming is a meaningless flux apart from the world of being which it implies). [152]

Brooks concludes that "The last stanza does not refute Plato--is not intended to refute Plato" [153], but he is dancing with shadows. Materialism was never a temptation for Yeats as a poet. Yeats's career-long contempt for materialism of any sort was the sine qua non of his poetry writing, his first basic negation. The battle in the poems and in "Among School Children" is not between materialism and Plato, but between gnosticism and the various permutations of Platonism that have seduced Yeats throughout his career, including his occult spiritualism, his Cabbalism, his Neoplatonism, and so on. These are all forms of thought that idealize spirit either as beyond human life or else as trapped into a cycle of death-in-life and life-in-death.[9] Antithetical to everything, even to itself, Yeats's gnosticism is a more severe dualism that puts in question all these idealisms by re-seeing all systematic and mystically solidifying thought. Yeats's gnosticism vaults the poet toward a counter-lie that gains pathos and persuasiveness only through its refusal to be fixed into any trope, its power to negate and evade all reification, as in the formula 1 = 1+/-.

But the cost of such a gnostic quest is high. In "Among School Children" Yeats writes possibly his most noble defeat.

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[9] In the poem "Byzantium" Yeats uses these as tropes for the gnostic vision: "I hail the superhuman; / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death" [363]. But here I use them as tropes of Platonic idealism. My meditation on the relation between Platonism and gnostic vision will come in chapter four.

The poem's success comes in its sublime re-voicing of Wordsworthian serenity:

> What though the radiance which was once so bright
> Be now forever taken from my sight,
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind;
> In the primal sympathy
> Which having been must ever be;
> In the soothing thoughts that spring
> Out of human suffering;
> In the faith that looks through death,
> In the years that bring the philosophic mind.[10]

But the poem's defeat comes in its ambivalent rejection and acceptance of the various Platonisms it questioned. "Among School Children" succeeds in negating the seductive power of religious asceticism (the body "bruised to pleasure soul"), aesthetic idealism ("beauty born out of its own despair") and philosophic mysticism ("wisdom [born] out of midnight oil")--which were all tropes of serious temptation for the poet and which argue just how close Yeats was to his Wordsworthian precursor. But these successes are ambivalently thrown back into question when the final four lines re-affirm the idealism of form through the glorification of the chestnut tree, and yet force a doubting of that form by questioning the knowing of the dancer from the dance. Unlike that knowing visionary moment in the third stanza when the speaker's "heart is driven wild: / She stands before me as a living child"; unlike that amazingly deflated sublime moment in the fourth stanza when Aristotle and his golden precursors, Plato and Pythagoras, become, like the speaker, mere "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird"; and

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[10] "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," from canto X.

surprisingly enough, unlike that bitterly dialectical moment of the fifth stanza when mother and son engage in the knowledge of each other's past and future suffering--unlike these, the moment of the final stanza comes to rest in the formal beauty of dance and tree, and the questioning of that form. In other words, the gnostic visionary fails, in this poem, to achieve thematically a negative transcendence of his various idealisms. But what is so striking about this poem, and what frees it to enforce a strong influence over later poems, criticism, and theory, is that "Among School Children" impresses upon the reader the feeling of being in the "presence" (Steiner) of a superhuman strength. And this feeling is the result of two things: the poem's huge self-revision, that is its negation, evasion and crossing beyond its own tropes and Yeats's tropes in earlier poems, and its radical re-voicing of the Wordsworthian Sublime. In Yeats, the wound of defeat can be a blessing. In contemporary criticism and theory, that blessing obliges us to see with his eyes and to speak with his voice, unless and until we too can re-envision his enterprise.

2.4 Dancing School, and Frank Kermode

> Let the new faces play what tricks they will
> In the old rooms; night can outbalance day,
> Our shadows rove the garden gravel still,
> The living seem more shadowy than they.
> "The New Faces"

Earlier I mentioned that Frank Kermode's use of the trope of "the dancer" in Romantic Image bears analysis for its debt to Richard Ellmann's use of "the mask." Of equal importance, however, is the complex relation that links the argument of

Romantic Image to "Among School Children" through Cleanth Brooks and New Criticism. Published ten years after The Well Wrought Urn, Romantic Image takes a more intensely Yeatsian stance as a solution to the problem of creating and practicing New Criticism as a theory. The Urn culminates its argument for structural tension, balance, and harmony in the lyric with reference to the awesome tropes of "Among School Children," even as it tries to disperse our sense of its debt to Yeats by using several other poems and poets to exemplify the argument. Ten years on, however, and Kermode virtually centers his whole New Critical aesthetic on the trope of "the dancer"--a startling correction and revision of Brooks's stance toward the precursor, and an insightful anticipation of de Man's deconstruction of the image, his splitting of the dancer from the dance.

Romantic Image is an aptly titled work. Not only does it move beyond the narrow New Critical concern with the paradoxical harmonious structure of discrete autonomous poems, but it also returns the poetry studied to its visionary Romantic home. Brooks was loath to discuss the importance of social relations to poems. These were extrinsic matters, irrelevant to the structure of well-wrought urns. But Kermode's work begins with the social isolation of the artist, picking up on what Yeats considers an aspect of the antithetical quality of poetry. Yeats and English Romantic poets bear comparison to Baudelaire and other French Symbolists:

> An awareness of the Image involves, for English poets also, a sense of powerful forces extruding them from the life of their society, a sense of irreconcilable difference and precarious communication. . . . To be

> cut off from life and action, in one way or another, is necessary as a preparation for the "vision." . . . [The artist] must be lonely, haunted, victimised, devoted to suffering rather than action

--in order to feel "the power of joy" in "the act of the imagination" [6]. Already we see the anti-naturalism, misread by Joseph Adams as linguistic "antiplatonism," of Yeats's romantic image. Poetry does not reflect or imitate life, nature, the psyche of the poet, or even language, for the poets in this tradition see "the Romantic theory of the Image as anti-discursive" [72]; poetry powerfully negates them through imaginative action.

> The Image has nothing to do with organic life [in which I include the psyche], though it may appear to have; its purity of outline is possible only in a sphere far removed from that in which humanity constantly obtrudes its preoccupations. [64]

Thus linking Yeats to precursors such as Blake, Coleridge, Pater, and Wilde (without attempting to measure among them their comparative revisionary strengths), Kermode identifies as Romantic the aesthetic ideology that they share.

It is from this context that Kermode launches into the most detailed analysis of the trope of "the dancer" that we have. He follows through the appearance and the importance of "the dancer" in the works of some of the most celebrated artists and poets of the day, especially Pater, Wilde, and Mallarmé, and then proceeds to trace what is for him "the Image of the Dancer" as it appears throughout Yeats's plays as well as his poems. And in "Among School Children" Yeats's trope of "the dancer" achieves its ultimate perfection.

> [T]he dancer, inseparable from her dance, devoid of expression--that human activity which interferes with the Image--turning, with a movement beyond that of

> life, in her narrow luminous circle and costing [the artist] everything; the bronze and marble that does not provide the satisfactions of the living beauty but represent [sic] a higher order of truth, of being as against becoming, which is dead only in that it cannot change: these are the images of the Image that . . . culminate, in Yeats, in the Dancer-image of "Among Schoolchildren."[11] [91]

Whereas Brooks tentatively and defensively thought that the poem's "last stanza does not refute Plato--is not intended to refute Plato" [153], Kermode would seem to believe that the victory is entirely Plato's, that the poem fulfills the Platonic ideal.

> [T]here is nothing but the dance, and she [the dancer] and the dance are inconceivable apart, indivisible as body and soul, meaning and form, ought to be. The Dancer . . . can exist only in the pre-destined dancing-place, where, free from Adam's curse [Kermode here alludes to one of the Yeats poems that is a precursor-poem revised by "Among School Children"], beauty is born of itself, without the labour of childbirth or the labour of art; where art means wholly what it <u>is</u>. [85]

Kermode's transcendentalizing vision of the poem through the perception of the absolute unity of dancer and dance has been, until the appearance of Paul de Man, the most influential view of the poem. For instance, Denis Donoghue, in his own <u>Yeats</u> (1970), writes of the "great stanza" and its "aura of beatitude":

> Life assumes the freedom of art, art the fullness of life. Fact, time, place, and person converge upon tree and dancer; when we say that tree and dancer are symbols [Kermode uses "Image"], we mean that mere things are touched with supernatural radiance. Their unity is indissoluble. [89]

With this sort of idealization of Yeats having become a critical commonplace--drawn, as I see it, from the utter strength with

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[11] According to the <u>Variorium</u> (p. 443), this was the spelling of the title only in the two earliest publications of the poem, in <u>The Dial</u> and <u>The London Mercury</u>, both August 1927.

which Yeats contests the tradition of poetic idealism in Wordsworth and Plato--it is little wonder that a movement of ironic emptying would arrive to turn or trope this idealizing view inside out.

2.5 Kermodean Schooling, and Paul de Man

> Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
> Or, as great sages say,
> Men dance on deathless feet.
> "Mohini Chatterjee"

Daniel O'Hara's article "Yeats in Theory" rightly points out the debt of Paul de Man's critical speculations to the Yeatsian Sublime. O'Hara does not mention Kermode's Romantic Image possibly because of lack of space or because he is telling a story of Yeats's influence over "critical theory in America" [366], not in Britain. Kermode may be an Englishman, but the role of his book in the unfolding of de Man's critical theory cannot be dismissed, nor can the specific importance of "Among School Children," which O'Hara only alludes to in passing.

I will come to de Man's use of the trope of "the dancer" presently, but it is a fitting irony, I believe, that Kermode anticipated de Man in more than just the centralizing of the trope of "the dancer." Even prosopopeia, which I discussed in the first chapter as a crucial trope among de Man's arsenal of tropes for the deconstruction of lyrical voice, even prosopopeia de Man may owe to Kermode. For in his commentary upon "the dancer," Kermode relies heavily on what he calls a Paterian-Yeatsian "paradox of making a dead face stand for all that is most 'vital' in art" [65]. This phrasing would seem to suggest an allusion to "the mask," yet Kermode neither mentions Ellmann

at all, nor does he discuss A Vision or any other Yeats work in terms of "the mask" as a trope for the voice or the face of the dead. Nevertheless, his discussion emphasizes the importance of "[t]he dead face which has another kind of life, distinct from that human life associated with intellectual [I would add psychological and 'psychic'] activity" [91, my emphasis]. Kermode's trope of "the dancer," therefore, is certainly stronger in its appreciation of Yeatsian anti-naturalism than Ellmann's mimetic trope of "the mask," yet it is later quite overtaken by the negative power in de Man's "disfiguration" of lyrical voice, his wielding of the trope of prosopopeia as "the voice-from-beyond-the-grave."[12] The crowning irony in this story of the swerving of tropes from "mask" through "dancer" to prosopopeia is that, in light of the recent uncovering of de Man's collaborationist wartime journalism, the interpretation of his mature well-known work in relation to the earlier buried work may require the usurpation of Yeats's antithetical trope of "the mask."[13]

In the first chapter (1.3), I discussed the exquisite fit that de Man noticed between his sense of aporia and the last line of "Among School Children." But I also mentioned in a footnote that de Man's use of the trope of "the dancer" in "Semiology and Rhetoric" (1973), a standard work of deconstructive poetics, was prepared by his use of it thirteen years earlier in his PhD thesis on Mallarmé and Yeats. The appearance of "the dancer" in

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[12] Rhetoric of Romanticism, p. 77.

[13] In discussing the severe contrast between the de Man that she and others knew and the de Man of the long-hidden wartime journalism, Barbara Johnson has said that "the critic to whom de Man now appears to have been most polemically and mercilessly opposed was his own former self. But who was that masked de Man?" [14]

the later essay, because of its drastic simplicity, has a casualness about it that is deceptive, for in the earlier dissertation there was clearly a more labored analysis of the rhetorical relation between "dancer" and "dance"--all coming in the context of de Man's reaction to Kermode's use of "the dancer" in Romantic Image which was published just three years before the date of the dissertation.

There are several references to Romantic Image in "Image and Emblem in Yeats," the part of the dissertation recently published posthumously in de Man's Rhetoric of Romanticism (1984). It seems as though Kermode's sense of "the Image" presented a certain challenge to de Man. Whereas Kermode had troped Yeats back into a transcendental Romanticism, de Man was interested to see Yeats's romanticism, now perceived with a lower case "r," "de-transcendentalized" and split within itself. Whereas Kermode sees the Romantic Image as the embodiment of Yeatsian Unity of Being, and "the Dancer" as the culmination of the Image, de Man sees image and emblem in Yeats, with neither being truly transcendental and each the negation of the other. Yet for both Kermode and de Man, the secret knowledge of the workings of the Romantic Image or of image and emblem is hidden within the tropes of "Among School Children."

For de Man, the "image" is more properly the "natural image." It is a metaphor, being "able to cross the gap between subject and [natural] object without apparent effort, and to unite them within [a] single unity" [153]. In other words, the image is a mimetic use of language to represent natural objects. This definition would not seem so startling, were it not for the

fact that even here, in 1960, de Man emphasizes the priority of the split within the metaphor, "the logical discontinuity that disrupts the natural image" [158]. Though this gap will later come to represent the discontinuous structure of the sign according to deconstruction, this is not the gap which de Man is particularly concerned about in his PhD thesis. Rather it is the rift between image and emblem which intrigues him here. For the emblem in de Man does not follow the image in uniting subject and object in a sign. The emblem is anti-mimetic. Comparing two early examples in Yeats, de Man says:

> In "Ephemera," [the words "star" and "meteor"] are mimetic nouns referring to natural objects which the poet claims to present to us as perceived by him. In "The White Birds," the same nouns have no mimetic referent whatever; in no way can it be said that the poem is "about" actual stars or actual meteors; the images have given up all pretense at being natural objects and have become something else. [164-165]

Claiming to be following Yeats, de Man calls these anti-mimetic objects "emblems," and speaks of Yeats's style as "evolv[ing] from image to emblem," and of "Yeats's strategic attempt to disentangle himself from the predicament reflected in his earliest style. Hence the effort, in the later work," de Man goes on, "to bridge or, rather, to conceal the gap that separates the emblem from the natural image" [170]. This argument amounts to a radical revolt against mimeticism, and it is precisely here that "Among School Children" becomes so important for de Man, for it becomes his ultimate instance of "emblems masquerading as images" [194].

Kermode's interpretation of the poem becomes de Man's main target for failing to distinguish between image and emblem. De Man rightly describes Kermode's reading of the poem as

> heralding the triumph of the reconciliatory image. . . . It might seem far-fetched or even perverse to find here [in the poem's final four lines] anything but a splendid statement glorifying organic, natural form, its sensuous experience and fundamental unity [197]

--but de Man "perversely" intends to do just that:

> One naturally assumes that the question, "Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" and "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" are to be read as rhetorical questions that express unity and state the impossibility of distinguishing the part from the whole, the action from the actor, or the form from its creator. Assuming however that a difference exists between what is represented by the dancer and what is represented by the dance, by the leaf, and by the blossom, the question could just as well express the bewilderment [recall from chapter one that Hans Jonas notes "bewilderment" as the meaning of aporia] of someone who, faced with two different possibilities, does not know what choice to make. In that case, the question would not be rhetorical at all, but urgently addressed to the "presences" in hope of receiving an answer. [200]

From here de Man goes on to identify the "tree," the "dancer," and the "dance" as emblems, rather than as images, by associating them with the "anti-natural," the "unearthly," the "divine," and "the symbol of the 'body'" [201, 202].

These passages are important for the sense in which they clearly inaugurate what will later become tropes of de Manian deconstruction. But Kermode's role in the genealogy of tropes should not be lost, nor of course should Yeats's. In his zeal to identify Kermode's "Romantic Image" with the "natural image" that he wants to undermine, de Man seems to have forgotten that Kermode was a strong enough dualist or ironist to alienate the "Romantic Image" from nature. As I noted above, Kermode says that

> The Image has nothing to do with organic life, though it may appear to have; its purity of outline is possible only in a sphere far removed from that in which humanity constantly obtrudes its preoccupations. [64]

This passage and others like it show that, contrary to de Man's apparent wish to dissociate his theory of poetry from Kermode's, the two of them have in common a perception of Yeatsian anti-naturalism. De Man's swerve outside and beyond his precursor, Kermode, comes in the intensification of his ironic stance, so that instead of the trope of "the dancer" subsuming the trope of "the dance" in an idealized reconciliation, we have a new trope that insists on "dancer" and "dance" negating each other.

> The ways of the image and of the emblem are distinct and opposed; the final line [of "Among School Children"] is not a rhetorical statement of reconciliation by an anguished question; it is our perilous fate not to know if the glimpses of unity which we perceive at times can be made more permanent by natural ways or by the ascesis of renunciation, by images or by emblems. [202]

We can speculate on the measure of de Man's influence over Yeats criticism through his PhD thesis and its focus on "Among School Children" by simply observing its effect on an article published twenty years later. J. Hillis Miller, who in my view is one of the most inventive and independent of contemporary literary critical theorists, published an article titled "The Rewording Shell: Natural Image and Symbolic Emblem in Yeats's Early Poetry" (1980). Not only is his title drawn directly from the early de Man; not only does he recognize, like O'Hara, that "The poetry of W. B. Yeats has played a special role in twentieth-century English and American literary criticism" [75]; not only does he cite Cleanth Brooks and Frank Kermode's <u>Romantic Image</u> as special examples of that role; not only does the trope

of prosopopeia play a crucial part in his interpretation--but Miller also generates his whole argument for the deconstruction of New Criticism from the final four lines of "Among School Children."

> The "rhetorical" questions at the end of "Among School Children" are, however, far from merely rhetorical. A full reading of the poem would show them to be unresolved oppositions which cannot by any means be synthesized. They leave the poem open, anything but organically unified or unifiable. Far from confirming New Critical theory, Yeats's poetry from the beginning puts in question this or any other unified theory of poetry. [76]

What I find most marvellous of all, however, is Yeats's role concerning these ironies. Based upon "Among School Children" and its paradoxical intrinsic structure, Cleanth Brooks develops a theory of poetry that emphasizes balance and harmony in discrete poetic units. Based upon "Among School Children," Kermode pushes Cleanth Brooks's theory beyond attention to discrete poems with paradox and harmony by invoking the trope of "the dancer" and calling it "the central icon of Yeats and of the whole tradition" [89]. And based upon "Among School Children," de Man (and Hillis Miller) severely ironize(s) Kermode's idealization of "the dancer" by rigorously reading it as emblematical or anti-natural, and as a discontinuous negation of "the dance" rather than as identical to "the dance." But Yeats stands beyond these degrees of irony. As I have been arguing, "Among School Children" transcends its various critical and theoretical reductions. Not only does it father them all, but its vision can rest neither in mimetic idealisms nor in counter-mimetic negations. Despite the powerfully seductive charm of the Miller-de Man approach, I must distinguish my own reading for the poem from theirs.

The voice of the poem is too strong, too antithetical to itself, for such reductions. Even though, as I argued above (2.3), the poem's defeat is its thematic failure to achieve a negative transcendence of idealism, its victory is its achievement of a style, a re-voicing of the Wordsworthian Sublime through a relentless interrogation of the tropes of Yeatsian Platonism. The poem may not be adequately described as an "organic" balance of being and becoming (Brooks), nor as an achievement of ideal form (Kermode), but the deconstructive alternative does not suffice. The mutual negation of "dancer" and "dance," the undecidable oscillation between natural image and symbolic emblem, cannot account for the poem's preternatural strength in confronting the Wordsworthian-Platonic precursor, or in begetting a series of critical readings and theories. The poem's strength can only receive a sufficient critical description from an approach that appreciates the making of a poem as an act attempting a gnosis, achieved (or not achieved, as the case may be) by the breaking and remaking of prior voices. As Yeats says in another famous poem, in lines that re-see and re-trope the dancing images of "Among School Children"--"Marbles of the dancing floor / Break bitter furies of complexity, / Those images that yet / Fresh images beget, / That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" [364].

2.6 Psychoanalysis, the Master, and the Muse

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
> "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

To this point we have focused on Ellmann's trope of "the mask" as a psychological biographical reduction of Yeats. We have considered tropes such as "the dancer," "the tower," and "the mask" for their roles in spawning a series of textual approaches to Yeats. And we have examined in detail the relations of influence among the tropes that link and revise these various reductions of Yeats. Whether mimetic or anti-mimetic, the tropes that emerge from A Vision and "Among School Children" to construct "Yeats," practical criticism, and critical theory, are tropes that Yeats usurped from his tradition, and that impose themselves on his critics who seek a way into his life, his work, and his critical-theoretical legacy. What still remains to be considered in this chapter are the psychoanalytic and philosophical reductions of Yeats epitomized in work by David Lynch and Robert Snukal, both of whom rely heavily though not exclusively on "Among School Children," that daemonically influential poem.

The similarities and the differences between Ellmann's The Man and the Masks and Lynch's Yeats: The Poetics of the Self (1979) deserve to be clearly drawn out. The two books share a concern to depict the life of Yeats, and this life they see and describe through psychological categories and arguments. To this end, quotations from the works of the poet are used to shed further light on the arguments and conclusions made about the life of the poet-as-man. And here the similarities largely end.

If Lynch uses a trope from Yeats as a master-trope around which he can bend and twist his image of "Yeats," it is certainly not "the mask." In fact, Lynch uses The Man and the Masks to suggest the type of psychological biography that his own work pits itself against, the type that is based "more or less explicitly [on] oedipal hypotheses" [194]. Furthermore, he makes the point--very useful in the context of my thesis that Yeats invented Yeats criticism--that the many works utilizing the drama of father and son to portray Yeats all derive from the poet's own self-portrait.

> On the whole neither Yeats's biographers (critical and otherwise) nor the few students of his poetry inclined to approach it from a psychological point of view have had much to add to his own interpretation of his story in Reveries over Childhood and Youth. [194]

Lynch intends his book as a new departure then, a new break from the standardized Yeatsian trope of "a timid and sensitive son (whose 'wandering mind' already shows signs of poetical temperament) tyrannized over by his admirable and aggressive father" [195].

But what Lynch substitutes for this "oedipal" trope is no less derived from Yeats's prior figurations. This is the trope of "the muse" in her many and ambivalent forms, sometimes called "the mother," but most often called "the woman lost" by Lynch, who takes the phrase from "The Tower" (1925):

> Does imagination dwell the most
> Upon a woman won or woman lost?
> If on the lost, admit you turned aside
> From a great labyrinth out of pride,
> Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
> Or anything called conscience once;
> And if memory recur, the sun's
> Under eclipse and the day blotted out. [305]

By concentrating on "the woman lost," Lynch can tell a story not told in quite the same way before or since by any critic of Yeats. Though the story of Maud Gonne and Yeats has been widely circulated, here the story of Maud Gonne is integrated with the story of other important women in the life of the man, especially his mother Susan Yeats, but also his wife George, his friend and literary collaborator Augusta Lady Gregory, and his mistress and friend Olivia Shakespear ("Diana Vernon" in his diaries). On one level, the straight biographical level, the role of Susan Yeats is given a new prominence, but more importantly the status of "the muse" is studied as never before in Yeats criticism, as Lynch unfolds the psychoanalytical significances of "the muse" for a poet obsessed with tropes concerning "the woman lost." What is most important to me, however, is that the figure of "the muse" receives perhaps its deepest and most enigmatically sublime troping in the fifth stanza of "Among School Children," which is precisely where Lynch's speculations become most insightful. For it is here that issues such as the relations among muse, lover, mother, generation, memory, and creativity are laid out by Yeats in such provocative and memorable form.

> What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
> Honey of generation had betrayed,
> And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
> As recollection or the drug decide,
> Would think her son, did she but see that shape
> With sixty or more winters on its head,
> A compensation for the pang of his birth,
> Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

This stanza becomes, to use a figure, the still center around which the whole of Lynch's meticulously drawn out argument rotates. Lynch sees Yeats's poetic obsession with "the woman lost" as a reflection of his frustrated love of Maud Gonne. The

obsession takes the form of a fascination for "the power of the 'woman lost' to excite fantasies in which things seem to fall apart" [24].[14] But the obsession with the Muse as "the woman lost" Lynch reads as a displacement of a more primal loss, the loss of primary narcissism which is the story that matters, the pre-oedipal story of sons and mothers. This story is so powerful, according to Lynch, that it explains Yeats's poems and his creativity.

Lynch takes the subject of "Among School Children" to be "the feeling of depression and decrepitude [that] Yeats associated with the 'rage . . . against old age," while he reads the poem's conclusion as "an expression of the beatitude of the remade self" [43]. The problem that Lynch hereby sets himself is to explain how the self-emptying irony and asceticism of rage against old age can become beatitude. Oedipal rivalry for Lynch, even a triumph of the son over the father for the affections of the mother, is not primal enough. Only the attempt to heal the narcissistic scar can explain the poem and the poems, and the fifth stanza embodies this movement back to the origins of individual consciousness. The author paraphrases this movement in which memory is crucial:

> When I try to express how I feel when I feel old, he says, I think of how a mother feels about her son. I feel the way the son would feel if he knew he had become something she did not love; the limits of my affection for myself are the limits of her affection for him. . . . [I know this because of] a memory: I know how she would feel about me because I knew how she felt about me then. . . . [The son rages because

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[14] By this phrasing, Lynch alludes to "The Second Coming," wherein "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold." He thus links Yeatsian poetic apocalypse to "the excitement over which the Muse presides" [25].

> his] first lesson in life was that he could never fulfill his mother's hope. . . .
>
> The story of the son who became a poet, then, is the story of the phase of psychological development that determines [the quality] . . . of maternal affection. . . . It is in this "pre-oedipal" phase that the "spiritual" or what psychoanalysis would call the "narcissistic" issues of personality are defined, as the poet suggests, by the image of the self reflected in the mirror of a mother's love. What is at stake is precisely the sense of wholeness that Yeats found "no natural thing." [47, 50]

The strength of Lynch's analysis is that is seems to explain the poet's rage against decrepitude by way of his desire to return to the origins of a primal narcissism that was for Yeats painfully lacking in wholeness; it also seems to explain the poet's "rhetorical intimation of an idealized and ecstatic reunion of self and other" in the sublime final stanza, by way of his desire to escape "the shameful burden of self-consciousness imposed by the maternal 'image'" [52]. I say "seems to explain" because, in effect, Lynch is playing with mirrors, in a new mimesis.

His biographical passages about mothers and mistresses break new ground, especially because of the way that they support his psychoanalytical passages. And these passages, which turn mothers and mistresses (whether won or lost) into muses, also break new ground in Yeats studies by explaining, in very close argument and in great detail, the poems and especially the Cuchulain cycle of plays in terms of narcissism, hypochondria, hysteria, oral deprivation, neurosis, psychosis, and so on. But the flaw in this strategy is that it takes psychoanalysis as an allegory of poetry, and poems or passages in poems as symptoms of psychoanalytic conditions. It seems to me that the author of

The Poetics of the Self has not finally overcome the influence of the author of The Man and the Masks if he merely gives a new twist to Ellmann's mimetic strategy of drawing a portrait of the life of the poet-as-man through the use of psychological categories to explain various poems and plays. Admittedly, Lynch gets away from Ellmann's emphasis on an "oedipal" model, especially by his provocative substitution of "muse" for "mask" as the trope which will tell the story of the poet's psychology. But it does not seem at all appropriate to the poems to reduce them to a psychoanalytical diagnosis of the poet-as-man. I do not doubt the diagnosis. I am not qualified to doubt it, and it may indeed be quite accurate. But the life of a poem is not reducible to its maker's psyche or illnesses.

A poem like "Among School Children" may invite a diagnosis, but its trajectory suggests a gnosis. The psyche or the mind is, like the body that it operates, a fallen thing, an element of the detritus of the cosmos, and is exactly what needs transfiguration through the fiery process of the making of the poem. In "Byzantium," that eminently gnostic poem, the poet writes: "Before me floats an image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade"; and "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork" [363]. In these four lines Yeats quests after tropes that will negate body and mind to envision a gnosis--"more image" and "more miracle" than psyche or body. In "Among School Children" the final stanza also strives for such a gnosis, but falls just short of that special knowing in which the knower becomes the known--How can we know the dancer from the dance?

2.7 Philosophy, Poetry, Plato's Revenge

> O mind your feet, O mind your feet,
> Keep dancing like a wave,
> And under every dancer
> A dead man in his grave.
> "A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety"

High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W. B. Yeats (1973) by Robert Snukal is a mixed blessing for Yeatsians. Its heavily Kantian reading of Yeats does more to coerce the poems into a reflection of Kantian philosophy than to read the poems as poems. In the case of "Among School Children," Alfred North Whitehead presides over the tropes of the poem. And its bizarre soup of inept misreadings and fascinating insights can leave a reader nonplussed. Commenting on "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927), like "Among School Children" one of the more brilliant and influential poems of this century, Snukal misses its most remarkable feature, its gnostic dialectics: "Yeats's cosmology disdains the opportunity of release. . . . [He] insists that if you simply forget about heaven you are able to achieve a secular blessedness" [30, 32]. Comments like these are far wide of the mark, yet Snukal is right on the mark when it comes to Yeats's position on the essential freedom of the will and his hostility to social determinism:

> To pity a man is to reduce him to the status of victim; Yeats's point [in general] is that the only moral attitude, the only attitude that recognizes humanity, is to acknowledge each individual's struggle against the accidents of life. The argument depends on a recognition that life can only be viewed qualitatively, and this recognition is possible only when we hold firmly to the knowledge that death is inevitable. [157]

We can see just how these two statements, the first so weak and the second so persuasive, can coexist in the same book when we

realize that Snukal, like Joseph Adams in The Masks of Syntax, is devoted to a thesis in which Yeats must be seen as anti-Platonic. It may therefore be a measure of just how wrong both Adams and Snukal are about Yeats that, while subordinating their discussions to the trope of Yeats as anti-Platonist, Adams sees Yeats as a pure determinist who embraces the gyres and refuses the freedom of the will as a delusion, yet Snukal sees Yeats as a champion of free will over determinism. It seems to me that neither Adams nor Snukal has well-understood Yeats's problematic endorsement and revision of the Platonic tradition.

My discussion of this problematic will come in my fourth chapter, but it will not run amiss here to prefigure that discussion by contrasting Snukal with Lynch and with Brooks, since the three of them deal with Yeats through the emphatic centralizing of "Among School Children" in their work. Whereas Lynch's commentary on the poem virtually equals his book in miniature, Brooks and Snukal allow their books to culminate inexorably in their final chapters' devotion to the poem. Lynch takes no stand on Yeats's Platonism. He just notes that the poem's "deliberate alteration of Plato's parable in the second stanza" [45] is an allusion to the myth of the creation of the sexes in the Symposium, and he offers some detail on Yeats's use of Porphyry's doctrine of "pre-natal freedom" in the fifth stanza.[15] By not taking a position on the propriety of Yeats's

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[15] Among its three appendices, Snukal's book includes in full "Thomas Taylor's edition of Porphyry's essay, 'On the Cave of the Nymphs, in the thirteenth book of the Odyssey,'" to which Yeats directs his readers in a note on "Among School Children." [Yeats's Poems 759]

Platonism in the poem, Lynch implies that Yeats may be taken to be a faithful Platonist in some general sense.

Brooks insists for his part that the poem's emphasis on the sensual body "does not refute Plato" [153], nor does it embrace Plato, for he sees the poem as a balanced non-choice between idealism and materialism [152], the exact inverse of de Man's compulsory yet impossible choice. In Brooks's argument, we must not "read into the vision of the chestnut-tree an affirmation of the beautiful, careless play of nature, and thus a rebuke of Plato's holding nature a mere play 'of spume' upon a 'ghostly paradigm of things'" [153]. Apparently Brooks feels that reading the poem as a rebuke to Plato is a danger he must warn against. Yet this is precisely Snukal's reading of the poem, which he sees as a refutation of Plato <u>because</u> of the balance it strikes between Heraclitean flux and Pythagorean pattern: "I shall contend," writes Snukal, "that 'Among School Children' should be read . . . [as] profoundly anti-Platonic" [193]:

> And the conclusion that [Yeats] reaches is that if we take the "eternal ideas," the presences, that symbolise all heavenly glory, to be anything other than abstractions, if we hold, with Plato, that we have found reality instead of an image, then we can only serve to break hearts. For we live in a complex world of process . . . [that] can only seem senseless and hostile unless we see the connexity or prehensive unity, which holds both event and eternal idea in a continuing relationship with what has gone before and after. [196-197]

Snukal approves of what we might call "the blossoming Yeats," for he sees the poet as much like the "great-rooted blossomer" of the poem, which "produces not something eternal, but something fragile and transient. But in doing so it is 'rooted' in what has passed and it gives promise for the future; it is an example

of fruitfulness in time" [215]. And quoting the first four lines of the last stanza, Snukal continues what he imagines to be his faithfully Yeatsian protest against Platonic dualism: "And in the final stanza we are given, not an abstraction, not a pattern imitated, but the joyous participation in life of the whole man" [215]. Snukal draws out the portrait of "the blossoming Yeats," concluding that "it is in the conjoining of flux and pattern that we discover reality. . . . The [brightening] glance discovers that we cannot discover [or know] the dancer without the enduring pattern [the dance] of real events" [217]. Thus, the question, How can we know the dancer from the dance? becomes the statement, we cannot discover the dancer without the pattern of the dance. Flux and pattern are conjoined, unified. Yet, as Snukal would have it, this conjoining happens as part of a counter-Platonism.

I would argue, however, that it is more likely that such a conjoining is a Platonism. "Should Jupiter and Saturn meet / O what a crop of mummy wheat!" [406, A Vision 302] writes Yeats in a little poem called "Conjunctions." Surely the conjoining of flux and pattern that Snukal makes happen in the poem can only come about as an apperception or intuition of an ideal. His Whiteheadean notions of "connexity" and "prehensive unity" are derived from and firmly rooted in the Neoplatonic tradition, attempting to resolve the problem of the dualism of being and becoming by troping both into one ideal monism--"Unity of Being" as Yeats puts it in his more Paterian and Platonizing moments. And as James Olney has demonstrated, but on a very different level of argument, one of the distinguishing features of Plato's idealism is his conjoining of his precursors, Heraclitus and

Pythagoras whom we might call the philosophers of flux and of pattern, into one single system of thought. I would argue that neither Brooks nor Snukal is right about the poem, that it is neither anti-Platonic (Snukal) nor simply a refusal to choose (Brooks). And it is certainly not an embracing of Platonism as must be implied in the view that the poem gives us a "blossoming Yeats" where 1 = 1, where the One embraces and subsumes all flux and pattern. But the poem may certainly give us an antithetical, a "Blooming Yeats" wherein 1 = 1+/-, where dancer and dance evade becoming One.

What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?
"Ego Dominus Tuus"

Chapter Three
The Negative Dialectics of Yeatsian History

In the first chapter of this dissertation (1.6) I asserted that the crucial question shadowing historicist theories of poetry concerns whether, and if so, how history affects poetry. This shadow persists because it is not at all clear that historicism ever gets beyond treating poetry as no more than a reflection of historical processes and events. The over-powering determinism of what Yeats calls "the gyres" enforces a mimeticism--all the rage these days in various forms of "New Historicism." It therefore becomes imperative to respond to this mimetic approach to poetry not by throwing out the relevance of history to poetry, but by re-seeing the dialectics of poetry and history.

In this chapter I intend to lay out my perspective on this dialectics. To do so I will invoke what I call "Yeatsian history," which is a gnostic sense of the antithetical relation of poem to history, and will (for the most part) contrast it to

the sense of history that the institutions of Yeats studies and theory have tried to impose upon our poet. "Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unaging intellect" [301], writes Yeats whose poetic career is nothing if not a subtle and sublime monument of resistance to being chained down by "worldliness" (Said), or as it were, the dragging of road metal.

> The fascination of what's difficult
> Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
> Spontaneous joy and natural content
> Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
> That must, as if it had not holy blood
> Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud
> Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
> As though it dragged road metal. My curse on plays
> That have to be set up in fifty ways,
> On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
> Theatre business, management of men.
> I swear before the dawn comes round again
> I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.
> ["The Fascination of What's Difficult" 188]

On another occasion, Yeats may become "Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite" of an old shopkeeper, but he crosses out of this ethos into a place "on the lonely height where all are in God's eye," a place of self-power which transforms the human condition, the sweat and strain of dragging road metal, into the vision that "There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot, / A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry" ["Paudeen" 211].

"The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1909-1910) and "Paudeen" (1913) both show implicitly that the dialectics of poetry and history is no easy matter of the poet simply claiming independence. In "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), the poet claims that he "will arise and go now, and go" to a place where "peace comes dropping slow" [74]. That this is a desire

unfulfilled in natural fact is less important than the possibility that it is fulfilled in the making of the poetic vision. Throughout his career, however, Yeats never ceases to revise his sense of his relation to history. Fierce independence is only one of his stances toward history, for he can also fiercely assert his part in the real and its horrors.

> Come, fix upon me that accusing eye.
> I thirst for accusation. All that was sung,
> All that was said in Ireland is a lie
> Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
> Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.
> ["Parnell's Funeral" 395-396]

The point is that the dialectics of poetry and history is too complicated to be reduced to the mimetic image of history breeding its reflection as poetry--though Yeats strongly ironizes his own past poetry ("All that was sung") by declaring that his poems were among the lies "Bred out of the contagion of the throng." Mimesis is but a partial explanation at best. In "The Decay of Lying," Oscar Wilde, Irish master-wit and Yeatsian precursor, would turn Aristotelian mimesis inside out, and proclaim that it is life that imitates art.

> Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines. It is not necessarily realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith. So far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is the history of its own progress. . . . All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. . . . Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life, . . . [and] Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art. [319-320]

Wilde's formula solves the problem of the poet being a slave to nature, but also increases the artist's responsibility. For if poetry were just a reflection of history, then history, not the

artist, would take the blame. But given Wilde's formula, Yeats was haunted not just by his Romantic precursors, but also by the remorseful thought, as here in "Man and the Echo" (1938), that his work had so powerfully intervened in the stream of historical event that misery and death had resulted.

> Man
> In a cleft that's christened Alt
> Under broken stone I halt
> At the bottom of a pit
> That broad noon has never lit,
> And shout a secret to the stone.
> All that I have said and done,
> Now that I am old and ill,
> Turns into a question till
> I lie awake night after night
> And never get the answers right.
> Did that play of mine send out
> Certain men the English shot?
> Did words of mine put too great strain
> On that woman's reeling brain?
> Could my spoken words have checked
> That whereby a house lay wrecked?
> And all seems evil until I
> Sleepless would lie down and die.
>
> Echo
> Lie down and die. . . . [469]

In this chapter, therefore, I will argue that the relation of Yeats's poetry to history may be re-thought, that the poems' most characteristic feature is their special mode of negation or resistance of "the actual" (Lentricchia). But the linguistic mode of negation proposed by de Man and his followers will not suffice, for this mode produces an anti-naturalism whose only poetic stance is irony. Though all poems begin in irony in order to begin, though irony is since Nietzsche the characteristic stance of contemporary criticism and theory towards its objects and its precursors, it would be a mistake for criticism to transfer that stance to poetry, especially poetry of this range and caliber. Reading poetry as an allegory of criticism is not

impossible to do. In fact, it is the strength of contemporary criticism as well as its error. De Man's Allegories of Reading (1979) and other writings such as his "Shelley Disfigured" (1979) perform this sort of criticism, troping great artists of literature from Rousseau's day to our own into his (de Man's) ironic theory. But I propose that our choices are not limited to the mimetic mode of historicists who would give us the world and not the poetry, nor to the anti-mimetic mode of the deconstructors who would give us the poetry as always an ironic emptying-out of the world or of the self. I propose a critical literary theory that, in doing both, does neither of these yet transcends them.

The world and the self are undoubtedly the stuff of poetry, and yet the poetic negation of the world and the self does not reduce poetry always and only to an ironic perspective on world and self. Poetic activity of the sort that Yeats and his authentic precursors and epheboi perform transfigures or transforms both world and self in the making of the vision. That achieved moment of transfiguration may come in great poetry, and if it does, it comes as in the tropes of "The Phases of the Moon" (1918):

> All thought becomes an image and the soul
> Becomes a body: that body and that soul
> Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
> Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
> Body and soul cast out and cast away
> Beyond the visible world. [296]

In the negative dialectics of poetic vision the existence of natural forms is not imitated, nor merely linguistically negated; absorbing nature and its negation in order to re-figure, to cast out new life, the negative dialectics of poetic vision passes

through a kind of death: " . . . Things unborn, things that are gone / From needle's eye still goad it on" [406].

3.1 Partisan Poetics: Harrison and the Violence of Tropes

> O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
> Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
> And Childhood a delight for every sense,
> But take our greatness with our violence?
> "Ancestral Houses"

The failures of the historicizing type of criticism when applied to Yeats can be seen in their crudest form in John R. Harrison's The Reactionaries (1966). In his chapter on Yeats, Harrison's purpose seems to be not only to criticize opinions and values expressed at times by Yeats, but also to prosecute and convict the man of the crime of being a "reactionary," an "authoritarian." To this end, poems, letters, other quoted writings, and opinions and memories of acquaintances are narrated to make Yeats's particular sort of conservatism appear as fascism. Lost in the hubbub, the poetry is distorted into an echo of all that Harrison despises. Centering his discussion on Yeats-the-man, Harrison proceeds as if the man were identical to the poet by simply transferring to the poet the attitudes that he finds in the man. He then is able to read the poems as though they exemplify the attitudes that he finds so execrable in the man. Louis MacNeice fifteen years before, though of a similar political persuasion, was at least deeply ambivalent about the power of the Yeatsian Sublime to court visions of horror. But Harrison shows no compunction about the integrity of the poetry while criticizing the poet-as-man.

Commenting on Yeats's early attraction to the socialism of William Morris, Harrison writes:

> [Yeats] never seemed particularly concerned with the well-being of the masses, and he certainly had no sympathy with ordinary humanity that one would expect a socialist to have. There are numerous references by people who knew him to his lack of human sympathy, his coldness and aloofness. . . . He was probably attracted [to Morris's writings] more by the idea of helping to cause some momentous change than by sympathy for the poor. . . . Many sensitive people are attracted by socialistic ideas and ideals in youth; of these, few go as far in the other directions as Yeats did in later life. [41-42]

In this argument-by-innuendo, Yeats is decried for not expressing the social ideals that the author presumably has and thinks that everyone, including poets, should express. But Yeats's rejection of socialism and its myth of ultimate progress toward world social equality ("He had no faith in the idea of progress, the belief that society is developing towards perfection" [61]) ought to be no more important or revealing than his rejection of orthodox Christianity and its myth of the ultimate defeat of evil, an issue that Harrison ignores presumably because he is not defensive about Christian ideology. He seems to hold that social optimism, the ethics of socialist ideology, is the ultimate measure of a man; if he is right, then Yeats stands duly condemned--unlike "[t]he communist poets of the 1930s [who] welcomed the declining influence of noble families and traditional values . . . [and who] sought the destruction of wealth, privilege and hierarchy" [51].

An irony embedded in his position is that the violence required to destroy wealth, privilege, and hierarchy Harrison does not scrutinize or criticize, yet the violence required to

preserve wealth, privilege, and hierarchy Harrison virtually equates with fascism:

> George Orwell said that Yeats's "tendency" was fascist, that throughout his life his outlook was that of those who reach fascism by the aristocratic route. We have seen that he believed in a rigid hierarchy, concentration of power in a few hands, and unquestioning obedience to a leader by virtue of his personal supremacy. This is very close to the fascist ideal. [50]

Following this logic, only the violence of a social pessimist with a nostalgic longing for aristocracy ought to be criticized, while the levelling violence that would destroy aristocracy is not recognized as violence and as problematic for social ethics. Furthermore, the easy association of nostalgia for aristocracy with fascism is a peculiarly muddy kind of thinking which is often used to attempt to justify the class violence of the anti-democratic left. Likewise, the assertion that Yeats "believed in a rigid hierarchy, concentration of power in a few hands, and unquestioning obedience to a leader" beggars belief. Belief in the value of hierarchy for human society is surely no great sin, nor is it equivalent to belief in a <u>rigid</u> hierarchy, whatever that means. In fact, hierarchy in some form would appear to be culturally inalienable to the species. Moreover, the charges of belief in the concentration of power and in unquestioning obedience are sweeping abstractions that falsify the subtlety of Yeats's writings.

What are these charges based on? What evidence does Harrison bring to bear witness? Nothing but a few stray lines of poetry, bitterly ironic ballads written when Yeats in the early 1930s was testing the limits of his pessimism by casting it into nostalgia for a lost social order:

> The soldier takes pride in saluting his captain,
> The devotee proffers a knee to his lord,
> Some back a mare thrown from a thoroughbred,
> Troy backed its Helen; Troy died and adored.

And

> When nations are empty up there at the top,
> When order has weakened or faction is strong,
> Time for us all to pick out a good tune,
> Take to the roads and go marching along.

And

> Where are the captains that govern mankind?
> What happens to a tree that has nothing within it?
> [50-51]

Taken from "Three Songs to the Same Tune" (1933, 1934), which is a poem that anti-Yeatsians conventionally fall back on to support their accusations of fascism against him, these lines hardly amount to anything like persuasive evidence of a belief in the concentration of power or in unquestioning obedience to a leader--especially in light of the thrice-repeated refrain which Harrison studiously elides in his quoted evidence:

> "Who'd care to dig 'em," said the old, old man,
> "Those six feet marked in chalk?
> Much I talk, more I walk;
> Time I were buried," said the old, old man. [398]

The refrain targets its bitterly intense irony on the poetic self, troped as "the old, old man." Surely, the old man's death-wish undermines the lines that Harrison quotes with their swaggering nostalgia for pride in social decorum. And in any case, surely a poet cannot be rightly blamed for observing social decadence or chaos, and for bringing a warning of it in verse to the public, unless the bearer of bad news is to be condemned for bringing the news.

Not at all do I intend to imply by this discussion that poems like "Three Songs to the Same Tune" and others that might

be grouped with it, such as "Three Marching Songs" (1938, which repeats some lines from the earlier "Three Songs to the Same Tune") are significant poems in the Yeatsian canon. Although Yeats did make significant changes to these poems, changes of tone as Lucy McDiarmid in Saving Civilization (1984) has shown, these poems in fact do nothing to advance the profound gnostic sense of self-revision that is the distinctive mark of Yeats's poetic career. That is to say, these poems do not confront and consume his past poems; they do not burn with revisionary fire. I see their relevance to the canon as more topical than poetical. McDiarmid explains that

> elaborate retractions were made by Yeats, in a whole series of changes in his marching songs. He fiddled with them virtually every time they were reprinted, trying--so the changes would lead one to believe--to get rid of the tone of harangue. [77-78]

She goes into great detail showing how he hedged and surrounded these marching songs with a long introduction and an even longer commentary after the poem [Variorum 543, 835], and points out that in one case Yeats cancelled a line of carping "antidemocratic disgust" in favor of a more salutary "praise of aristocracy" [78], and, I would add, of tragic heroism: "'What's equality?--Muck in the yard' becomes 'Troy looked on Helen; it died and adored'" [78], and, I note, finally becomes "Troy backed its Helen, Troy died and adored" [398, Variorum 547]. We shall presently see how Seamus Deane politically ironizes the Yeatsian myth of "tragic heroism." However, as a measure of the irresponsibility of placing the criticism of poetry in the service of a political agenda, consider that, despite Yeats's retraction, the deleted line about "equality [being] muck in the

yard" is the single example chosen by Richard Kearney in "Myth and Motherland" (1985) to illustrate his claim of a link between "Yeats's literary cult of mythic heroes" and his "fascist rhetoric" [78].

A poet's canon is made of the poems that strongly revise his prior strong poems, as I shall explain in later chapters. Yeats's late and bitter ballads play an insignificant role in the making of his canon, but superior and more properly canonical poems such as "The Statues" (1938) which I will discuss later in this chapter, "The Gyres" (1936?), and "A Bronze Head" (1937 or 1938) present a more serious challenge.[1] "The Gyres" is easy prey to anti-Yeatsians, for it seems to lend itself to the weak reading that the poet is glorying in tragic suffering.

> Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;
> Empedocles has thrown all things about;
> Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;
> We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.
>
> What matter though numb nightmare ride on top,
> And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?
> What matter? . . .
> . . . . . .
> What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice,
> And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice!" [411]

All hangs on how one reads the tone of "laugh in tragic joy" and "Rejoice!" for utter human depravity and cruelty can certainly not be blamed on the poet. Is Yeats truly saying "I love violence" or "Violence is good"? Again, in "A Bronze Head" Yeats seems to invite the charge that he sees blood-letting as a good thing. In the final stanza he speaks with contempt of "this foul

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[1] In The Identity of Yeats, which as I noted in chapter one is my usual source for dates of poems, Ellmann gives no dates for "The Gyres" and "A Bronze Head." A. Norman Jeffares supplies these dates as probable in Yeats's Poems, p. 621 and p. 638.

world in its decline and fall," and of the reversal of fortunes that has brought "gangling stocks" to power while "great stocks run dry, / Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty, / Heroic reverie mocked by clown and knave," all prompting the speaker to wonder "what was left for massacre to save" [464].

Harrison is almost right to note that "the word 'save' implies that the massacre will be beneficial to some people at least" [66 my emphasis]. But I say "almost right" because the poem is clearly a meditation on an event (his visit to a museum) in the past, and a meditation on "what was left:" "I thought her supernatural," he writes, ". . . And wondered what was left for massacre to save." Far from being "inclined to welcome the coming catastrophe which will save whatever is left to save" [66] as Harrison would have it, the poem exhorts us to come to a visionary sense of tragedy in which our contemplation of the terrors of the past will help us somehow to transcend the inevitable horrors to come. As he writes in "Lapis Lazuli" (1936), another poem on this anguishing theme of human cruelty and self-destruction, "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay" [413]. Similarly, "The Gyres" speaks of "numb nightmare" and "irrational streams of blood." But would it not be irrational to speak of "The Gyres" (Harrison curiously does not mention the poem) as though Yeats were actually baying for blood and nightmare? "Now could I drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on," reveals Shakespeare's Hamlet in a brief soliloquy [III, 2, 397-399; p. 142]; but would it not be foolish to understand Hamlet as a vampire, or Shakespeare, because he wrote

tragedies, as an advocate of murder and revenge? Yet Harrison paints Yeats as a kind of war-monger who was "looking forward to more violence with apparent relish" [67]. It seems that Harrison would prefer that poets only explicitly protest violence and pity its victims, rather than push beyond these limits to the dialectical possibility and the darker truth that we transcend violence only by going through it.

Admittedly, "A Bronze Head" and "The Gyres" seem to invite misinterpretation, but a sensitive knowledge of Yeats's poetic career should forestall such weak readings. His whole career sought release from, not imprisonment in, the gyres of repetitive historical depravity. Being an incorrigible self-revisionist, Yeats pushes his assumptions and desires to the extreme, and therefore sometimes submits his vision to crushing defeat, as famously in "The Second Coming" (1919) where there is no transcendence of the ethos of fated repetition, and "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed timed is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" [294]. Yet even here it should be clear that the poet's human sympathies lie with "the ceremony of innocence," and emphatically <u>not</u> with "the blood-dimmed tide." And the later "Lapis Lazuli" surpasses "The Gyres" and "A Bronze Head" in that its tone is more precisely controlled while expressing a similar idea. Utter tragic defeat is accepted not because Yeats loved blood and gore, but because once faced with tragedy, we have truly no other choice but to survive it, to transfigure it--"Gaiety transfiguring all that dread." And it is art and the artist which can show the way, if

way there be. With a voice of utter serenity in the face of defeat, Yeats writes:

> On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
> Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
> Old civilisations put to the sword.
> Then they and their wisdom went to rack:
> No handiwork of Callimachus,
> Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
> Made draperies that seemed to rise
> When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
> His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
> Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
> All things fall and are built again,
> And those that build them again are gay. [412-413]

Given this context in which Yeats sees poetry as a mode of transgression that seeks to mutate historical pessimism (as figured in the trope of "the gyres") not by simply wishing it into optimism but more rigorously by opening himself to its wounding power, it is all the more disappointing to see how Harrison abuses the poems in order to support his attack on the man. The following passage is typical of the way he treats the poems.

> [Yeats] did not want original minds stifled by formal education. But the alternatives are poet or ignoramus. Yeats is prepared to let the majority remain illiterate as long as a few good poets are produced. The passionate, intuitive life which he said he wanted is apparently impossible if this kind of thing is allowed to happen:
>
> > "The children learn to cipher and to sing,
> > To study reading-books and histories,[2]
> > To cut and sew, be neat in everything
> > In the best modern way." [60-61]

Harrison's using of these lines from the first stanza of "Among School Children" as evidence for the argument that Yeats was prepared to let the majority remain illiterate betrays again his

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[2] According to the Variorium, ". . . and histories," is the version of the line published in Collected Poems, while " . . . and history," is the version given in Yeats's Poems and all other editions.

partisan agenda, reveals his deafness to the poetry, and runs counter to other evidence. Certainly, the poem's "walk through the long schoolroom" provides the poet with an occasion and an ethos to recollect and re-envision the beauties and the traumas of a lifetime. As such, the poem is not a meditation on the purpose and value of literacy and numeracy in Irish general education, although Harrison seems to wish it were. But the fact that it is not such a meditation should hardly lead us to conclude that "Yeats [was] prepared to let the majority remain illiterate as long as a few good poets [were] produced." Undoubtedly, his speculations on formal education could be eccentric or quirky ("Teach nothing but Greek, Gaelic, mathematics, and perhaps one modern language," he prescribes in On the Boiler [1938]); yet his speeches as a member of the Senate (1922-1928) of the Irish Free State contribute to the body of his speculations, and seek to persuade through conviction rather than through shock and irony, as in On the Boiler.

Yeats's contribution to the Senate debate of March 1926 (following his official visit to St. Otteran's School, Waterford, in February, the setting of "Among School Children")[3] flatly contradicts Harrison's portrait, and reveals a figure "shocked by what [he] saw," protesting the condition of Irish schools, and urging fundamental improvements for them.

> I saw schools where the children were learning their lessons by artificial light at noon-day, because the windows were too small. I saw schools where two classes were being held side by side, because there was not room to give a separate class to each. That means wear and tear to the nerves of the children and to the temper of the teachers.

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[3] Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: A New Biography (1988), p. 228.

> . . . Many of the schools are filthy. A minority of the children who come to them, I should say a substantial minority, are filthy. There are no adequate basins, sometimes no basins at all, in which the children could wash themselves. . . . But you cannot have [improvements] done unless the country is prepared to spend the money.
>
> It should be a matter of honour to the State no matter how poor it may be, to spend the money. . . . If you do not do that you will not have a centre of civilization in the schools. . . .[4]

Yeats concludes his speech, saying that it was delivered with

> two clear principles in mind. One is that we ought to be able to give the child of the poor as good an education as we give to the child of the rich. . . . [And the other is] that the child itself must be the end in education.

His first principle needs no comment, but his second one does. Not "various religious systems," not "patriotism," not "the idea of the nation," but the child is to be of paramount importance. "I suggest," he concludes, "that whether we teach either Irish history, Anglo-Irish literature or Gaelic, we should always see that the child is the object and not any of our special purposes." The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats were first published in 1960, six years before The Reactionaries, yet a yawning gulf opens up between the Harrison "Yeats" of two alternatives, either "poet or ignoramus," and the Yeats of the Senate who would put the interests of the school child above the special interests of church, state, or party. One begins to suspect that the Harrison "Yeats" is a distortion serving little else but partisan interests.

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[4] This and the following quotations come from The Senate Speeches, pp. 108-109 and 111-112. The editor, Pearce, has mixed British spelling (centre) with American spelling (civilization) although Yeats to my knowledge always used British.

3.2 O'Brien and the Poetics of the Rock

> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings.
> "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"

I have brooded at some length upon The Reactionaries not because it is an influential contribution to Yeats studies. This it is not. But highlighting Harrison's crucial error exposes an issue that dogs later historicizing critics--the error of treating a poem as though it were a political pamphlet. Before going on to consider other permutations of this error and their consequences for Yeats studies and critical theory, it would be well to examine the single most devastating criticism that Yeats's politics has received, an article that has influenced historical approaches to Yeats ever since.

Conor Cruise O'Brien's lengthy essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats" (1965), has so compellingly argued its case that it has become the unavoidable standard work on the subject. Casually, Edward Said terms it the "famous account of Yeats's politics," and it has provoked such anxiety in another writer, Elizabeth [Butler-] Cullingford, that she has devoted an entire book, Yeats, Ireland and Fascism (1981), to its refutation. In his Field Day Theatre Company pamphlet, "Yeats and Decolonization" (1988), Said goes on the describe himself as "someone who . . . had once been influenced by Conor Cruise O'Brien's famous account," which he then rightly observes is "an essay whose claims are . . . hopelessly inadequate when contrasted with the information and analysis put forward by Elizabeth Cullingford" [19]. Even Harrison's book, which came out just two years after "Passion and Cunning,"

alludes to it, though only in passing.[5] And as late as 1988 in his book, Yeats and Politics in the 1930s Paul Scott Stanfield would write that even "twenty years after its writing [O'Brien's essay] remains the best single effort on Yeats's politics" [67]. Its argument is so persuasive that, until Cullingford, the trope "Yeats-the-fascist" could be taken as an indisputable fact of nature, equivalent to "Yeats-the-Senator" or "Yeats-the-director-of-the-Abbey Theatre" in Dublin. Even after Cullingford, Stanfield is loyal to the O'Brien camp, for when he says that he finds O'Brien's essay "perceptive and informed" [67], what he means, as his book shows, is that he accepts O'Brien's perspective and is himself informed by it. "Passion and Cunning" has been useful to its readers not because it states "the truth" finally about Yeats's politics, but because it stands as one extreme in the perspectivizing of those politics. Coming to the crux of the matter with more delicacy and aplomb than I could ever muster, Cullingford points out that

> The word "fascism," however, is commonly used [nowadays] as a synonym for "Nazism," and carries implications of brutal totalitarianism, genocidal racism, and desire for world conquest, which it never possessed during the early twenties. Paradoxically the word has also been weakened into a term of indiscriminate abuse, usually aimed at anyone even marginally right of centre. This linguistic imprecision [I would call it the will-to-power through tropes] has been fatal to Yeats's reputation. [145]

Whether seen as linguistic imprecision or tropological will-to-power, it may be that those who would paint Yeats the color "fascist" are less concerned to read the poet and his works than

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[5] Harrison, pp. 52, 59, 69.

to grind an axe, assuage their own bad consciences, and curry favor with the pious.[6]

Since Cullingford has so masterfully elaborated the counter-arguments, it will not be my purpose here to retrace the counterpoint of her dance with O'Brien. For in a sense, neither O'Brien nor Stanfield nor Cullingford is concerned to argue, as Harrison did, on the basis of the poems that Yeats was or was not a fascist. All three are caught up much more in the politics of the man, in which case the poet and his poems are largely irrelevant, except of course as they may seem to add lustre to an argument. O'Brien is not too bashful to admit that he is not much concerned with the poems as such, whereas I am concerned with little else. After a long and detailed analysis of Yeats's conservative politics, "the forms of his actual involvement, at certain critical times, in the political life of his own day" [210], an analysis supported by quotations from poems, essays, but especially letters, O'Brien finally comes to consider the importance of the politics for the poems-as-poems. In doing so, he inclines toward an admission that there is a chasm dividing poetry from political discourse and practice. Nevertheless, he muddles this admission by trying to posit a "force" that is

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[6] I hasten to add that the recent furious debate over Paul de Man's posthumously uncovered wartime journalism bears analogies to the issues concerned with Yeats and the question of fascism. Suffice it here to point out that Derrida's two articles on de Man's hidden journalism, "Paul de Man's War" and "Biodegradables" which I mentioned in chapter one, argue not that de Man was "innocent" but that his accusers, in their fervor to condemn him and deconstruction, display a conspicuous failure to read what he wrote. Two of the latest twists to this debate should be noted. In her recent introduction to de Man's Critical Writings, 1953-1978 (1989), Lindsay Waters condemns the Nazi propaganda that de Man published during the war, yet affirms the value of his deconstructive work. On the other hand, in Sign of the Times (1991) David Lehman deplores deconstruction as virtually co-extensive with the young de Man's fascism.

"anterior" and "fundamental" to both poetry and politics. Stumbling, he fumbles his intuition of this "force."

> How can those of us who loathe such politics [the politics of fascism] continue not merely to admire but to love the poetry, and perhaps most of all the poems with a political bearing?
>
> . . . Very little seems to be known--and perhaps little can be known--of how this process of transformation works. How can that patter of Mussolini prose "produce" such a poem? [He alludes to "Leda and the Swan" and to Yeats's comment on its origins, found in The Variorum Edition of the Poems, p. 828.] How can that political ugly ducking be turned into this glorious Swan? . . .
>
> Is the connection then between the politics and the poetry only trivial and superficial? There is, I think, a deeper connection: if the political prose and the poetry are thought of, not as "substance" and "metaphor," "content" and "style," but as cognate expressions of a fundamental force, anterior to both politics and poetry.
>
> That force was, I suggest, Yeats's profound and tragic intuitive--and intelligent--awareness, in his maturity and old age, of what the First World War had set loose, of what was already moving towards Hitler and the Second World War. [273-275]

At this stage in his essay, O'Brien finally and haltingly begins to ask the sort of questions that animate my own research. "Transformation," "substance," "metaphor," "force"--O'Brien may be disgusted by what he insists is Yeats's fascism, indeed his essay fulminates at the figure of Yeats that he draws, aristocratic, authoritarian, anti-Catholic, fanatical, fascist, but he is honest enough to recognize at the end of his essay that what happens in a poem is some kind of "transmutation" about which "perhaps little can be known" [274].

Salman Rushdie, that impish genius of transmutation, playfully hints that the imaginative event which so mystifies O'Brien is a "P2C2E," "a process too complicated to explain."

In Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990) "P2C2E" functions as a comic refrain in a novel whose passion is to secure the impulse of story-telling by an achieved-knowing, a gnosis of the absolute freedom of its origins. What I am trying to suggest is that O'Brien has the stick by the wrong end. He is right to see that something like a "transmutation" happens when, in a poem, "A terrible beauty is born" [274, quoting from the famous "Easter, 1916"], when a "political ugly duckling [can] be turned into [a] glorious Swan."[7] But his undeveloped intuition--an insight that allows him throughout the essay to denigrate the man by reference to the poems--that there is "a fundamental force, anterior to both politics and poetry" is entirely mistaken. Is there anything transformative about politics? Change, evolution, revolution, and conflict are not transformative. To re-arrange the elements of the Heraclitean flux is not transformative. Yeats knew this when he drew the figure of "Parnell" (1937),

> Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
> "Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone."
> [430]

--and when he wrote "The Great Day" (1937),

> Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
> A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
> Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
> The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.
> [430]

Alas, for politics is the art of telling the public another lie while trying to persuade them that they should not believe that

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[7] In the first chapter we saw that William Johnsen turned "Leda" into "woman" and "swan" into "man," in order to make "an ideological analysis of [the poem] based on feminism [and] Marxism" [10], says the editor, Leonard Orr. Here O'Brien turns the whole poem into "Swan."

you told them a different lie yesterday. Poetry is certainly a lie, but its lie is of a distinctly different order. Its lie is aimed at itself, or another poem, or at time, not at the public.[8] Not simple re-arrangement of elements, but transformation is of the essence in poetry that aspires to the Sublime. The "force" that O'Brien finally seeks as the link between poetry and politics and that he finds so mysterious--even as he has proceeded throughout the essay to ironize its mystery by reading poems as mere illustrations of political discourses and practices--the "force" links poetry to the world and to history in an entirely different way than O'Brien imagines. For O'Brien ignores or forgets or remains dimly unaware of the poetic function of what Yeats called the "antithetical," the crucial element of what I call "Yeatsian history."

Yeats's antithetical poetics is a dialectical poetics in which the power of world history to wound is welcomed by the imagination. Ultimately that power is the power of death. Death and the imagination engage, and in the struggle, if a poem results, that poem transfigures not the world but itself and other poems and, if strong enough, time. But to expect poems to achieve some kind of ameliorative social work, to stop war, to halt injustice, to build a new society, is an enticing but misplaced expectation. The redemptive power of poetry does not redeem the world by turning it into a heaven. Nor does music, painting, or any other art. Yeats's precursor Shelley may have

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[8] In Wallace Stevens, Harold Bloom summarizes his view of the poetic lie: "Poems lie primarily against three adversaries: 1) themselves 2) other poems 3) time" [386-387].

seemed to believe that poetry could redeem the world. Is this not the theme of Prometheus Unbound which Yeats thought a great holy book?[9] But more profoundly, Shelley's poem transforms the world not a wit, but transforms itself and the tradition of visionary poems immensely while somehow answering the poet's desire to satisfy his desire for divination in the act of writing. Even Shelley's heroic cry at the conclusion to "A Defence of Poetry" that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, should not be read as testimony to social optimism.

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. [159]

Far from suggesting that poets actually re-create and redeem the world in their poems, Shelley suggests that through the power of their tropes poets enforce a new vision or way of seeing the world, which means especially the way that other poems have seen the world. But the world, a fallen heap of bodies and minds, remains stony, intractable, and untouched, beyond our power to turn or trope it into a real heaven. "Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" runs the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens, as Shelleyan a poet as Yeats was; but in the final analysis the redemption and transformation of the "reality" remain but a noble lie. Or as Harold Bloom has put it, regarding Wordsworth's sublime struggle with death, in Ruin the Sacred Truths (1989), "Any sublime that founds itself upon the power of

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[9] In his essay, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900), Yeats speaks of the "certain place" of Prometheus Unbound "among the sacred books of the world" [Essays and Introductions 65].

the mind over a universe of death must smash itself to fragments on that rock of otherness constituted at last by death our death" [133, sic].

Yet any criticism that seeks to chain poetry upon the rock of the world and its politics will find that the spirit of poetry, like Prometheus, will refuse to submit, for submission means, in poetic terms, the death of the imagination. In his turning of the Wordsworthian sublime in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890) Yeats writes: "I will arise and go now, for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore" [74]. When a poet sets to arise and go, the world of "the roadway" and "the pavements grey" is left behind. And when a poet hears "lake water lapping . . . in the deep heart's core," the presence of the world of roadway and pavements grey has been not only negated but also transfigured--a "P2C2E," no doubt; and a lie of that music in the deep heart's core that the poet feels as a compulsion to re-create, in the world's despite.

3.3 Nietzschean Perspectives: The Tyranny of Critique

> We fed the heart on fantasies,
> The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
> More substance in our enmities
> Than in our love.
> "The Stare's Nest by My Window"

In more recent years, the figure of "Yeats" in relation to history and politics has been turned with greater subtlety than the "Yeats" of either Harrison or O'Brien, but that turning may be no less misleading for criticism and theory. Since the advent of structuralism and poststructuralism to literary studies, critics and theorists have been more wary of Yeats, treading with

greater circumspection on his turf and over his tropes, aware somehow of his uncanny strength-to-influence, and his cunning passion for politics wedded to an acutely ironic sense of history and human destiny--dangerous ground for any critic to tread. They find that they must deal with a visionary poet, playwright, essayist, occultist, theatre director, Senator, and Nobel-laureate of incalculable self-irony and comic extravagance. They fail to deal adequately with his genius when they flatten out his comic irony into literal statement. For what can these examples be but of comic genius?

> . . . when, during the [Irish] Civil War [June 1922 to May 1923], he was asked by an English statesman whether he supported [President] Cosgrave . . . [Yeats] answered, "Oh, I support the gunmen--on both sides". . . ; and when he startled an interviewer by picking up Sato's sword, swinging it over his head, and crying, "Conflict! More conflict!" [Stanfield 68][10]

Wary though they be of Yeats's strength, today's critics and theorists also bring to their occupations a new ruthlessness no doubt modelled on Yeats himself, but also derived from other sources.

Here the name of Nietzsche, whom Yeats is known to have read with devilish delight especially in 1902, must not go unnamed.[11]

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[10] The dates of the civil war I have taken from Ellmann's Man and the Masks, p. 244. Stanfield's first example comes from Grattan Freyer's political biography, W. B. Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition (1981), p. 78; his second example, whose punctuation he has altered, comes from Joseph Hone's biography W. B. Yeats 1865-1939 (1942). In Hone's version of the 1937 interview, the comic quality is allowed to appear. "'[Interviewer]: Can you give me a message to India?' Yeats: 'Let 100,000 men of one side meet the other. That is my message to India, insistence on the antinomy.' He strode swiftly across the room, took up Sato's sword, and unsheathed it dramatically and shouted, 'Conflict, more conflict'" [459].

[11] "In September 1902 John Quinn sent Yeats his own copy of Thus Spake Zarathustra and impersonal copies of The Case of Wagner and The Genealogy of Morals. For months thereafter Yeats seems to have read virtually nothing but Nietzsche" [Donoghue, Yeats 54].

In The Identity of Yeats Ellmann compares Yeats's ideas to Nietzsche's [91-98]. Seemingly influenced by Ellmann, Denis Donoghue in Yeats (1971) makes the astonishing claim that Nietzsche, more than any other poet or writer, is "the crucial figure in Yeats's poetic life" [48]. In Yeats and Nietzsche (1982) Otto Bohlmann, like Ellmann, extensively compares the two. Most persuasive of the works dealing with Yeats and Nietzsche, Patrick Keane's story of Yeats's Interactions with Tradition (1987) places Nietzsche as the central influence on Yeats's thought. But without a theory of influence, of how tropes usurp and defend against prior tropes, such comparisons are of little value to a poetics that is in search of a negative dialectics. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, contemporary theory re-enacts Nietzsche's concern with the critic's stance, the critic's perspective. We share "Nietzsche's suspiciousness: who is the interpreter anyway, and precisely what power does he seek to gain over the text."[12] Nietzsche's influence over Anglo-American criticism and theory, which cannot be underestimated, comes refracted not only through Yeats, but through the more indirect route of contemporary French critical thought, including Foucault. I have explored the radical Nietzschean poetics of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, emphasized the extent to which Yeats authorizes their abyssal readings of his work, and suggested how I would creatively correct their readings. But a wary ruthlessness of a different order has entered the hallowed halls of Yeats studies.

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[12] The Breaking of the Vessels, p. 3.

Those Nietzscheans who affiliate with Foucault rather than with Derrida, who see "history" and "historicizing" as the big tropes to dominate and undo all other tropes, have turned against de Man and Miller as though their tropes of undecidability and aporia were in bad faith in being oblivious to the inescapable demands of historicism. These new historicizers must be wary, because they are keenly conscious of their own belatedness in confronting the acute irony that Yeats hedges his visions with. Reckless name-calling in the manner of Harrison and O'Brien will no longer suffice. Yet though wary and no longer reckless, they remain ruthless in advancing their own historicizing irony as the only legitimate perspective on our poet. "The postmodernizing of Yeats," as proclaimed by one recent editor, is an ongoing project that covers the poetry beneath a thick and sticky coat of postmodernist theorizing. "The shift is from the object of study [the poems] to the tools and ideas [the theories] that can be used to approach an old subject anew," writes Leonard Orr, editor of Yeats and Postmodernism (1991), to introduce "the idea behind" the collection of essays and its title [6]. Note how gingerly yet decisively the poetry is trampled.

I have already presented in the first chapter (1.8) a summary of William Johnsen's "ideological analysis of 'Leda and the Swan' based on feminism [and] Marxism" [10], as the editor puts it, and have briefly explained my objections to its bizarre utopia that Yeats was an unknowing prophet of the separation of the sexes. But another contribution to Orr's collection would stand quite well along side Johnsen's as co-representative of the volume's uninspiring trajectory, and this would be Cheryl Herr's

essay, "Yeats and Foucault." Much like another piece recently published in Diacritics, on Hamlet and Derrida, Herr's article puts forward the charming illusion that a great poet is an imitator of one of our contemporary poststructuralist critical theorists.

In his "Nuclear Piece: Mémoires of Hamlet and the Time to Come" (1990), Nicholas Royale claims "to show that [Derrida's] Mémoires provides a reading of Hamlet but also, and perhaps more distinctively, that Hamlet provides a reading of Mémoires"[41]. But Royale's performance unfortunately does not carry out even this all-to-easy vacillation between Shakespeare and Derrida, each reading and being read against the other. On the contrary, what Royale performs is virtually limited to the reading of Hamlet against and through Derrida. Throughout his "Nuclear Piece" Royale fails to offer the reader the view that deconstruction is a latter day distortion or derivative of Shakespeare; while the reverse is given all his energy--that Hamlet is best seen and interpreted as a play haunted by the ghostly fathering tropes of Derrida's critical theory. Early on, for example, Royale deals with Derrida's concern with "'that which, in writing, always includes the power of a death machine,'" and he shows that "[i]n Hamlet, and as if as a warning of things to come, one might think of the extent to which characters, plot, and structure are effects of a death machine, constituted by dispatches, missives, codes," [43] and so on.

Royale's "Piece" is a playful and dazzling tour de force, in the high style of the best of deconstructive criticism, but its stationing of Shakespeare as Derrida's ephebe begs the

question of how, except through the critic's will-to-power over Shakespeare, a work of such massive poetic influence as Hamlet can possibly be seen as influenced by deconstruction. Harold Bloom's criticism is not averse to reading the voice of the father through the voice of the son; he calls this revisionary ratio "apophrades" or "the return of the dead," and the trope "transumption." But it only happens, he claims, when the critic perceives a unique and "uncanny effect," that is, when "the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor [Shakespeare] were writing it, but as though the later poet [Derrida] himself had written the precursor's characteristic work."[13]

It is doubtful that the alignment that Bloom describes pertains to the triad of Royale, Derrida, and Shakespeare, though I hardly wish to underplay the strength and influence of Derrida's Nietzschean ironies. What is more likely is that deconstruction remains fully within the tropological vision that constitutes the originality that we inevitably call the Shakespearean mode. As Bloom has put it in his recent book, Ruin the Sacred Truths,

> We cannot see the originality of an originality that has become a contingency or facticity for us. . . . To say that, after God, Shakespeare has invented most is actually to note that most of what we have naturalized as prior literary representation stems first from the J writer and his revisionists,[14] and from Homer, but secondarily and yet more powerfully from Shakespeare. [53-54]

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[13] The Anxiety of Influence, p. 16. I shall deal with apophrades and transumption in my final chapter.

[14] Within a year or so of Ruin, Bloom published The Book of J (1991), devoted entirely to the Yahwist, whom he there deals with, brilliantly and provocatively, as a woman.

Nevertheless, Cheryl Herr's version of "Yeats and Foucault" performs, like Royale, a reversal of the alignment of influences, but with none of the aplomb and brilliance that is Royale's. In the editor's terms, the Herr essay "provides a conversation or a juxtaposition of the major concepts of Foucault's work, especially the notion of episteme from The Order of Things, and Yeats's Vision" [10-11]. But Orr's description weakly underestimates the degree of distortion in Herr's re-alignment of influences. For her article enforces the perspective that it is Foucault's tropes, his version of history that lends strength to Yeats's Vision. Given this absurd reversal, her depiction of Bloom's poetics as derived from Foucault's tropes falls into place as merely whimsical and entertaining. The perspective that she does get right, but this is no great insight, is that Nietzsche is behind the three of them. It is a measure of just how irrelevant much Nietzschean critical theory is today to Yeatsian and Bloomian poetics that Nietzsche can be used to justify the troping of Yeats and Bloom into Foucault.

Beginning with some modesty, Herr claims that Foucault's Order of Things "presents a structural model that helps us to understand the historical significance of Yeats's work A Vision" [146]. While this limited point may be granted, though it has little to do with the antithetical quality of Yeatsian poetics, her argument quickly turns into arbitrary willfulness. The phases of the Great Wheel of A Vision are seen as a version of Foucault's "episteme," and Foucault's description of how "[p]ower and discipline inhere in the system as a whole" [152] is echoed by Yeats. Even though she ambiguously uses the verb "to echo in"

both transitively and intransitively so that it is not clear who echoes whom, the thrust is clearly that Foucault sets the tropological pace for Yeats to follow:

> [Foucault's] vision of an integrated disciplinary mechanism of culture echoes eerily in Yeats's system. . . . At the same time, a horoscope [the Great Wheel], especially one as totalizing as that evolved by Yeats and his Instructors, suggests . . . that history systematically disciplines individual behavior at points that appear to be empowering, as well as at points that locate suffering and disfranchisement. . . . Like Foucault, Yeats becomes aware that each era, like each phase of the moon . . . , imposes limitations on thought and action. . . . His thought resonates with Foucault's discussion of the underlying unity of classical discourse. [152, 154, 158-159]

Conveniently ignoring the fact that A Vision is not a work of history, but rather a highly eccentric speculation on the historical form of the work of the literary imagination, concerned more with the possibility of transcendence than with imprisonment in historical immanence, Herr treats Yeats as a historian of Foucauldian persuasion, as one who feels helpless before history. From this perspective it is no great leap to twist Bloom into a Foucauldian. Easily done. Simply turn Bloom's theory of the internalization of poetic influence into an externalized historicism. Regarding Yeats's poetic misprision of Blake, Herr says that

> Bloom's passionately specific charting of [their] difference yields the conviction that deep structural, temporally determined ruptures separate the two poets. And Foucault's image of the episteme works as well as any for representing that cultural shift. [158]

Doubtless, Nietzsche is a father-figure shared by Yeats, Bloom, and Foucault, though not all three in equal measure or in the same psychic direction. Only Bloom's theory of influence can shed light on the precise forms of each writer's misprision of

Nietzsche. I shall later discuss in some detail the Nietzsche-Yeats dyad, while the best discussion of the Nietzsche-Bloom dyad is the previously mentioned (1.10) article by Daniel O'Hara called "The Genius of Irony: Nietzsche in Bloom." But what must not be overlooked is that Nietzsche authorizes and inspires Herr in her bizarre misprision of Bloom and Yeats as Foucauldians. It is decisive and amazing, therefore, that both Herr and/or her editor Orr manage to oversee and overlook a glaring error (Herr/Orr) in her narrative of Yeats and Foucault as siblings moving together down the path of epistemological historicism, under the benevolent eye of their father Nietzsche:

> On the margins of history, carrying well-worn volumes of The Will to Knowledge [sic, this is Foucault's title, but Herr and Orr intend The Will to Power by Nietzsche], Yeats and Foucault walk side by side, shouldering against oddly familiar rough beasts that do not acknowledge them and that they cannot name. [147]

In following sections of this chapter I will elaborate my critique of the criticism that is today's new mimeticism and its ideologizing will-to-power over Yeatsian poetics.

3.4 Ideology, Seamus Deane, Irish Apocalypse

> . . . hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.
> "The Magi"

With the publication of his essay "Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea" in the collection called Ireland's Field Day (1985), Seamus Deane has staked out for himself the position of angry young man in Irish letters today.[15] Though his stance

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[15] In his "Afterword" to the collection, Denis Donoghue observes that the "real anger [of the collection is] Seamus Deane's" [111].

owes more to the rebelliousness of the young James Joyce toward Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival than to Yeats himself, it is not without its Yeatsian aspects insofar as Yeats's rebellion against Ireland can be said to have intensified with his aging. There must be some irony in the fact that a young critical scholar who can write with such passion and conviction about Yeats should choose Yeats as his great bogeyman--the source of all things to be rejected and expelled from Irish culture, according to Deane's narrative. Denis Donoghue's salutary "Afterword" to the volume calls it "a tribute to Yeats that Deane finds him largely responsible for our obsession with the fate of being Irish" [118]. But the issue runs deeper than the deconstructive irony of Deane owing a discursive debt to Yeats because he resists and argues against what he sees as Yeats's mystified and mystifying politics. More profoundly, Deane's very arguments are anticipated and authorized by Yeats himself. This haunting of Deane's voice by Yeats's only intensifies in his later essay, "Yeats: The Creation of an Audience" (1989).

With a truly Nietzschean flair for the massive re-perspectivizing of a whole tradition, "Heroic Styles" turns Deane's reading of Yeats's relation to history on its head. The tradition that begins with Yeats and includes Joyce (despite Joyce's attempt to ironize it) in Deane's view reads Irish history as though it were literature. Choosing neither Yeats nor Joyce, Deane's negation is a reversal, reading literature as history, thus demystifying the rhetoric of figuration by returning it to history. Furthermore--and this is how Deane's

Nietzschean approach gets a Foucauldian twist[16]--Deane sees Yeats's writing as an ideological reading of history. He reduces the Yeatsian sublime to the writing of a political myth, "heroic attempts," he says, "to unite culture of intellect with the emotion of multitude, or, in political terms, constitutional politics with the forces of revolution" [48]. This myth is ideological (in being tragic or heroic) because in its hidden agenda Yeats nostalgically idealizes a process in which the forces of cultural intellect are defeated by a revolutionary multitude.

> The triumph of the forces of revolution is glossed in all cases as the success of a philistine modernism over a rich and integrated organic culture. Yeats's promiscuity in his courtship of heroic figures--Cuchulainn [sic], John O'Leary, Parnell, the 1916 leaders, Synge, Mussolini, Kevin O'Higgins, General O'Duffy--is an understandable form of anxiety in one who sought to find in a single figure the capacity to give reality to a spiritual leadership for which (as he consistently admitted) the conditions had already disappeared. Such figures could only operate as symbols. Their significance lay in their disdain for the provincial, squalid aspects of a mob culture which is the Yeatsian version of the other face of Irish nationalism. [48]

Though preferring "pluralism" [45] and "vitalism" [52] to Yeats's "univocal, heroic" [52] style, James Joyce fares no better than Yeats in Deane's masterful if obsessive portrayal of the aesthetic ideology of Ireland's two founding literary genii. (In the previously mentioned "Myth and Motherland" by Richard Kearney, the other major, i.e., most provocative, essay in Ireland's Field Day, Yeats alone, rather than along with Joyce,

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[16] Donoghue makes a similar observation, "infer[ring] that Deane has been reading Foucault, and especially his attacks on ideological systems . . . which coerce the individual without even telling him that he is to be constrained" [111].

becomes the odious object of contempt. While "Yeats's mythologising [was] sanctimonious clap-trap" [71], a "perversion" leading to "bigotry, racism, anti-semitism, fascism, totalitarianism" [79]--can the list get longer?--Joyce's mythologizing projected "genuine utopias . . . with the goal of universal liberation" [79]. If Kearney and Deane cannot agree on Joyce, then at least they can agree on Yeats.) Literature must be stripped and exposed for its reactionary ideology, and returned to history from whence it came and which it has defiled; and the ideologically alert critic is its champion. With so much at stake, such large claims being made, it matters little if along the way a poet's emblems are treated as having been (like de Man's prosopopeia) dead emblems all along, since heroic figures can "only operate as symbols"; or if by innuendo he appears as a homosexual courting male heroes. What is urgent is to explode the big myth, dissolve the mystique, for then we might build a new Ireland free of Yeats's repressive elitist myth of tragic heroism.

Near the end of "Heroic Styles" Deane makes an impassioned plea for a radical dissolution or undoing of the Yeatsian vision of Irishness.

> The oppressiveness of the tradition we inherit has its source in our own readiness to accept the mystique of Irishness as an inalienable feature of our writing and, indeed, of much else in our culture. That mystique is itself an alienating force. To accept it is to become involved in the spiritual heroics of a Yeats or a Pearse, to believe in the incarnation of the nation in the individual. To reject it is to make a fetish of exile, alienation and dislocation in the manner of Joyce or Beckett. Between these hot and cold rhetorics there is little room for choice.
> [57-58]

Yeatsian vision becomes the obstacle to peace in Ireland, as Deane concludes that the "dissolution of that mystique is an urgent necessity if any lasting solution to the North is to be found" [58]. He attempts here to step outside of a Yeatsian visionary mystique and its negative or mirror image, a Joycean counter-mystique, in order to dissolve them away, to create a new politics by transcending the gyres of Irish cultural identity. But if Yeats's literature can be perspectivized to reveal the hidden political ideology that the critic wants to dissolve away, then surely that political ideology can be perspectivized to reveal the literary narrative it conceals. In Deane's case, the story of the dissolution of the gyres, the moment when human history is no longer trapped in cycles of mystification, is surely the story of Yeats's poetic career taken as a whole--it is the story of the quest for "the Thirteenth Cone" of A Vision, just as it is the quest for antithetical freedom in several of Yeats's best, most canonical poems, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children," and "Byzantium" to name just a few. If my speculations are right, then Deane's attempt to step outside of the Yeatsian voice and vision is only a step back inside them, concealed beneath an ironic Nietzschean perspectivizing and Foucauldian ideologizing twist, but all the more Yeatsian in being a quest for apocalyptic release from the gyres.

My conclusion amounts to what Bloom might call a re-seeing, a re-estimating, and a re-aiming of Deane's anxious postmodernizing turn as in fact no more than an updated model of Yeatsian

romanticism.[17] Echoing Blake's insight that as a poet he must create his own system or be enslaved by another,[18] and echoing the conclusion to a letter that Yeats wrote not long before he died, that "[t]he abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence"[19]--Donoghue comments that

> The man to beat is Yeats. . . . But while an argument can be refuted, and a thesis undermined, a vision can only be answered by another one. I don't think any historian's evidence would make a difference to Yeats's vision, or dislodge it from our minds. Only another vision as complete as Yeats's, could take its place. [120]

Though certainly no theorist of Bloomian influence, here Donoghue touches on Deane's problem and everyone's problem--belatedness. Deane's apparent demonization of Yeats may in fact betray Yeats's "daemonization" of him.[20]

But it is also important to point out that Deane's argument goes astray long before he turns his Nietzschean reversal on Yeats. His claim is that Yeats reads history as poetry, a reading that he would then reverse. But the relation between poetry and history, as Yeats knew, is far more subtle than this. The events of Easter 1916, for example, are not simply read as if they were poetic or heroic, or simply converted into poetry.

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[17] In various places in his work Bloom describes revisionism as a dialectical triad of re-seeing, re-esteeming or re-estimating, and re-aiming, for example in A Map of Misreading p. 4, and Poetry and Repression, p. 253.

[18] The allusion is to a passage from Blake's Jerusalem (Ch. 1, plate 10, line 20), as noted by Fite in his book on Bloom, p. 181.

[19] The Letters of W. B. Yeats, January 4, 1939, p. 922.

[20] "Daemonization" is a technical term in Bloom's arsenal of tropes concerning the angles of influence that may link precursor and ephebe. I shall discuss "daemonization" and other Bloomian tropes in subsequent chapters.

At least Conor Cruise O'Brien was anxious enough to speculate upon the mystery in the transformation of politics into poetry. Deane's flat irony that Yeats read history as if it were poetry betrays his own simple mimetic approach to poetry, thoroughly un-dialectical in its impulse. He sees poetry as no more than an imitation of history, and with Nietzschean vigor he blames Yeats for having reversed the mirror, claiming that Yeats thought that history imitates poetry. Sadly, Deane's argument amounts to nothing more than a re-staging of Plato's contempt, in The Republic, for poetry as a failed form of mimesis, in contrast to the successful form of mimesis in logical discursive thought. And like Plato, Deane seems to desire the banishment of poets from the new republic that will transcend the gyres. In doing so, he forgets that, like the poet, he too is a dreamer. He forgets the dialectic of "The Realists" (1912):[21]

> Hope that you may understand!
> What can books of men that wive
> In a dragon-guarded land,
> Paintings of the dolphin-drawn
> Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons
> Do, but awake a hope to live
> That had gone
> With the dragons? [222]

Both romantic poet and belated, ironic, self-denying critic write books and make love in a strife-torn, dragon-ridden Ireland, dream of something pearly and beyond, and wish to awake from the nightmare of reality.

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[21] Jeffares gives 1912 as the date of first publication, but neither Ellmann nor Jeffares gives a date of composition.

3.5 Deane and Figures of the Heart

> And I took the blame out of all sense and reason,
> Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
> Riddled with light.
> "The Cold Heaven"

In "The Creation of an Audience" Deane's tone and stance appear less aggressive and angry toward Yeats, more reconciled to the precursor. But this is not to say that he is any less insistent on the correctness of his self-styled realism, or less critical of "the pretence," "the rich deceit" [38], the tactics of "the séance" [39], and "the elaborate game of deception" [45] that he reads in(to) Yeats. Nor is he any less indignant about Yeats's "hatred of the modern world" which Deane, like Kearney, O'Brien, and Harrison, finds easy to associate with "Fascism" [43]. But by making his essay an extended interpretive paraphrase or translation of Yeats, he strikes a tone more placid, less accusatory. In fact, at some points a reader might be forgiven for believing that Deane has come to appreciate the subtle power of the negative dialectics of Yeatsian history, for he notes that the attempt to create an audience

> concentrated [Yeats's] attention on the difficult problem of the relationship between historical actuality and the gesture of a poet who wished to alter it. What reality did the gesture have? In fact, what reality did any form of cultural activity have when confronted by a reality of such intransigence? It was a question Yeats was to meditate upon for the rest of his career. The creation of an audience led him to the question of the function and the nature of art in history. [34]

Deane goes on to provide an account of the relationship of Yeatsian art to history, but only from the perspective of the supposed interests of that history. The creation of an audience in his poetry "permits him to create dialogue where monologue had

previously dominated" [34], but that audience being only partly real, becomes more and more fictional, a movement away from the real, a poetic deception. "[Yeats] learned to negotiate between legendary and historical figures by assuming them both to be ideal types of the audience for which he was writing" [37]. But the debilitating nature of this "elaborate game of deception" is intensified when the audience, already falsified, is further divided along three ideological lines, "sectarian difference, . . . English-Irish stress [,] and . . . the tension between mass consciousness and the consciousness of the organic group" [34]. Deane's citing of this third split incites his strongest criticisms; his reaction to Yeatsian elitism animates his prose. The poetry becomes "a poetry of and for the select few who had preserved the values of true culture" [36]. Its "heroes and heroines are . . . opponents of the mass mind" [37]. And the "hatred" that motivates the poetry Deane explicitly links to "Fascism":

> It is a hunger for Unity of Being against heterogeneity. It is the ultimate expression of the defence of the organic against the mechanical and abstract which Yeats, like so many others, regarded as the dominant feature of modern civilisation. [43]

I would argue most urgently that the "hatred" Yeats speaks of, being a gnostic "hatred," is entirely alien to fascist hatred, though it may be convenient for ideologues like Deane to associate them. For as I see it, it is Deane's acceptance of a mimetic theory of poetry that leads him into his ideological critique of Yeats; or better yet, he founds his ideologizing--his curious special pleading for the rights of "heterogeneity" as against "Unity of Being," for "the mechanical and abstract" as

against "the organic"--upon a mimetic theory that literalizes the tropes or the images of poems. He takes "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1937-1938),[22] one of Yeats's finest achievements in the self-revisionary defense against his prior tropes, as a literalizing document of self-criticism.

> By becoming so entranced by the mythological images of ancient Ireland, he had failed to pursue, even reach, his true theme--hatred of the modern world, preparation for the coming cataclysm which would see its collapse. Had he paid more attention to modern Ireland in itself, not merely to modern Ireland as a contrasting ground for ancient Ireland, he might have found his theme more fully. [43]

Leaving aside Deane's overt translation of the poetry into ideology, this passage may paraphrase "the message" of the poem, but it does nothing to illuminate the negative dialectics that are the life-blood of the poem, dialectics that lie against prior "mythological images," or what Yeats calls in the poem "Heart-mysteries," by feigning their ironization, feigning to put them once and for all into their proper perspective. Of the poem's five stanzas, the final two stanzas read as follows:

> And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
> Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
> Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
> It was the dream itself enchanted me:
> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate memory.
> Players and painted stage took all my love,
> And not those things that they were emblems of.

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[22] Date of composition given in Yeats's Poems, p. 641.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. [472]

Yeats's sense of history and of his own poetic history is too nuanced, too antithetical to itself, to permit Deane's literalizing view. To lie down in the shop of the heart cannot be, as Deane would have it, to chastise the self for having failed to pursue one's true theme. Rather it must be to welcome upon the self the more austere and antithetical knowledge that the heart's freedom and its tropes were always a lie. "Never give all the heart," wrote Yeats, "for love / Will hardly seem worth thinking of / To passionate women if it seem / Certain, and they never dream that it fades out from kiss to kiss" [131]. The heart that listened to the music of "the deep heart's core" at Innisfree [74]; the heart that is told "O heart! O heart! if she'd but turn her head, / You'd know the folly of being comforted" [130]; the hearts that "with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream" [288]; the heart that would be "Consume[d] . . . away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" [301]; and the heart that spoke of being "Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!" [367]--each heart is given a death by transumption so that the foul shop of the heart might live its antithetical life, a life that is also a lie, a life that "must lie" as well as "must lie down."

Here, near the final midnight of his life and his career, yet still obsessed with "Heart-mysteries" and with "Themes of the embittered heart" [471], Yeats summons the strength to envision once again what Harold Bloom calls by the names of "the breaking of the vessels" and "catastrophe creation," that is to say, a gnosis whose elements are negation, evasion and extravagance.[23] The figurative language of a poet's sublime, though in a dialectic with the literal, must never submit to the literal. The hearts of the past are negated--but not directly, only evasively, lying down, as it were, instead of standing up. In such a movement the freedom of the heart can be known once again, even if extravagantly in the form of a voice-lie, re-born by welcoming upon the self the implacable and the intransigent--history and death.

3.6 Against Deane: Edward Said's Utopian Turn

> What shall I do with this absurdity--
> O heart, O troubled heart--this caricature,
> Decrepit age that has been tied to me
> As to a dog's tail?
> "The Tower"

Given Deane's general condemnation of Yeats, restrained in "The Creation of an Audience," but vitriolic in "Heroic Styles," it comes as a pleasant surprise that "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution," though published like "Heroic Styles" in 1985, has little of the latter's anti-Yeatsian piety. The two pieces do, however, share the same theme and intention--to read, reduce, and translate Yeats's poetics into politics; to understand the convergence of Yeats's art with history in terms of the supposed

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[23] Agon, e.g., pp. 59, 250.

interests of history; to substitute history for poetry by arguing as if poems are best taken as ideas that imitate or reflect historical processes.

> "The Statues" best exemplifies [Yeats's] dilemma. In no other poem did he more eagerly seek an accommodation between his occultist system and his vision of Ireland. The demands of that poem are great and its ambition, especially for "We Irish," almost measureless, but its rhetoric is strained, spoiled by a kind of oratory which arises from convictions that lie outside of the poem's range of reference. I want to discover the sources of such strain . . . by tracing back his ideas of Ireland and of revolution.
>
> . . . To describe Yeats's politics, and to a large extent his achievement, as colonial is not at all to diminish it. His career is, especially in its close, marked by incoherence and by an almost wilful mysticism. Yet his demand was always that Ireland should retain its culture by keeping awake its consciousness of metaphysical questions. By doing so it kept its own identity and its links with ancient European culture alive. As always with Yeats, to be traditionalist in the modern world was to be revolutionary. [38, 49]

Here we observe Deane not only passing by an opportunity to lambast Yeats for a reactionary metaphysics, but also granting that metaphysics a measure of legitimacy as "revolutionary." (In "Heroic Styles" only the critic's effort to step outside of the gyres of history can be seen as revolutionary, while Yeatsian metaphysics is regarded as a plague upon Irish history.) Furthermore, Deane questions whether or not Yeats's "temperament" "can seriously and accurately be described as fascist" [47]. His conclusion is that "[Yeats's] so-called fascism is, in fact, an almost pure specimen of the colonialist mentality" [49]--a surprising conclusion, given his all-too-easy identification of Yeats with fascism in "Heroic Styles." But are "temperament," "wilful mysticism," "incoherence," and being a "revolutionary traditionalist" really germane to the <u>poems</u>? Or is Deane just

involved in an upbeat, allusive political biography? He says that the poet is

> in desperate straits. [Yeats] is translating into politics the implications of his aesthetic. He denies, for instance, [in "Easter, 1916"] the bourgeois character of the Irish rebellion in order to preserve it as an aristocratic emblem caught in the tide of bourgeois life. [46]

And of the play, A Full Moon in March, Deane says that "[s]ex and violence produce poetry. Aristocrat [the Queen] and peasant [the Swineherd] produce, out of a violent fusion, art" [47]. But is it not Deane who is the agent of the translating into politics while producing his interpretation? It is not Yeats who translates aesthetics into politics, but the critic who translates poems into politics. Sex and violence do not produce poetry. Sex produces pleasure and children ("honey of generation" he calls it in "Among School Children"), and violence pain, not poems. Yeats writes poems that, in a process too complicated to explain (P2C2E), transfigure the indescribable burden of history, politics, violence, and sex into art. It is Yeats's gnostic hatred, his loving opening of himself to past wounds and potential wounds that mysteriously creates his sublime art. "After Long Silence" (1929) attempts to carry this impossible burden and to shed a bit of friendly light upon this dark mystery:

> Speech after long silence; it is right,
> All other lovers being estranged or dead,
> Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,
> The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,
> That we descant and yet again descant
> Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song:
> Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
> We loved each other and were ignorant. [380]

Edward Said is well-pleased with Deane's performance in "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution." In his own essay on "Yeats and Decolonization" mentioned above (3.2), Said says that Deane's essay "must stand as the most interesting and brilliant account of Yeats's idea of revolution" [13]. But being a strong agonist, Said has his article turn on his differences with Deane. Both of them are historicizing mimeticists, arguing that Yeats's poems are best read for the ideological content they conceal. Nevertheless, Said wishes to protest and correct what he sees as Deane's "nativism," his having "fall[en] into the nativist position too willingly, as if nativism were the only alternative for a resisting and decolonizing nationalism" [15]. Said sees nativism as a binary discourse that "reinforces the distinction [between ruler and ruled] by revaluating the weaker or subservient partner" [15], and he would replace this nativism with a more forward-looking liberationism which "involves, in Fanon's words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness" [16]. The strength of Said's essay--despite its mimetic longing, its perspective that poetry, having no formal independent dynamics, merely reflects the overwhelming discursive practices, such as imperialism and racism, that surround it--is that it locates Yeats's best poetry between the moment of nativism and the moment of liberationism in Irish history. For all his evasions into orientalism, and ideological materialist discourse, Said may yet come to be seen as a scholar more influenced by Emerson than he would care to admit. For by intuiting Yeats's poetic power to lie in the moment of crossing and crisis between nativism and liberationism, he repeats and

revises Emerson's dialectical vision, summarized by Bloom as fate, freedom, and power.[24] Said repeats Emerson's dialectic but also revises it by seeing Yeats as never achieving the crossing into the power of liberationism, as always fascinated by the freedom of violence but falling back into the fate of nativism.

> Yeats is very much the same as other poets resisting imperialism, in his insistence on a new narrative for his people, his anger at the schemes for partition (and enthusiasm for its felt opposite, the requirement of wholeness), the celebration and commemoration of violence in bringing about a new order, and the sinuous inter-weaving of loyalty and betrayal in the nationalist setting. . . . Yeats struggles to announce the contours of an "imagined" or ideal community, crystallized not only by its sense of itself but also of its enemy. . . . [He] is a poet whose early work sounds the nationalist note and stands finally at the very threshold it cannot actually ever cross. . . . This at least gives him credit for adumbrating the liberationist and utopian revolutionism in his poetry that has been belied, and to some extent cancelled out, by his late reactionary politics. . . . His greatest decolonizing works quite literally conceive of the birth of violence, or the violent birth of change, as in "Leda and the Swan," instants at which there is a blinding flash of simultaneity presented to his colonial eyes. . . . Yeats situates himself at that juncture where the violence of change is unarguable, but where the results of the violence beseech necessary, if not always sufficient reason.
> [17, 18, 20-21]

The historical moment when nativism becomes liberationism is of necessity, in Said's view, a moment of violent historical transformation, and it is the moment that Yeats's poetry is said to reflect. But turning his attention to what he sees as Deane's fall into nativism, Said diagnoses it as just a symptom of a deeper error. For he suggests that we should resist the

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[24] Bloom's discussions of Emerson's dialectic are scattered throughout his work, but his Wallace Stevens and his Agon present significant developments of this theme.

attractions of "Adorno's 'negative dialectic'" which he sees operating in Deane's presentation. Deane culminates his piece on "The Idea of Revolution" with quotations from Adorno on negative dialectics [49-50], and this offers Said the occasion for a general warning.

> In a world from which the harsh strains of capitalism has removed thought and reflection [sic], a poet who can stimulate a sense of the eternal and of death into consciousness is the true rebel, a figure whose colonial diminishments spur him to a negative apprehension of his society and of "civilized" modernity.
>
> The final Adornian formulation of Yeats's quandary as it appears to the contemporary critic is of course powerful and it is attractive. Yet might we not suspect it a little of wanting to excuse Yeats's unacceptable and indigestible reactionary politics--his outright fascism, his fantasies of home and families, his incoherently occult divagations--by seeking to translate them into an instance of Adorno's "negative dialectic," thereby rendering Yeats more heroic than a crudely political reading would have suggested?
>
> . . . From the perspective of liberation then, Yeats's slide into incoherence and mysticism, his rejection of politics and his arrogant but often charming espousal of fascism (or if not fascism then authoritarianism perhaps even of the South American kind), appear as something not to be excused, something that should not too quickly and alchemically be dialecticised into the negative utopian mode.
> [14, 16]

What is so utterly astonishing about Said's "small corrective to Deane's conclusions" [14] is that it highlights the absolute distinction between Deane's version of Adornian negative dialectics and my own Bloomian sense of negative dialectics. Far from taking to heart Said's warning which amounts to a prescription that poetry and poetics be further enslaved to a historicizing and politicizing discourse, I would encourage any trace or grain of transcendental rhetorics that may be present

in Deane. Instead of taming Deane's rhetoric into worldliness reflected in poetry, I would push his dualism further in order that it might carry the tremendous weight of Yeats's own dualisms. "Hatred of God may bring the soul to God" [404], writes Yeats in a fit of dualistic passion. Critics can reduce such a line of poetry to politics, history, ideology or whatever they prefer, but the line is attempting to bear the burden of a dualism that transcends all orthodox dualisms, whether Judaic, Platonic, Christian, Islamic, or Cartesian.

Said's weak dualisms will not suffice our poet. Liberationism is no doubt a transcendent category, from the perspective of nativism; but surely Said's quandary must be that liberationism remains a worldly form of transcendence, if there can be such an oddity. Is it not more likely that liberationism mimics more of nativism than Said would find comfortable? His analysis is that nativism counters colonialism by resisting it, while remaining caught up in the material dialectics of colonialism by simply revaluating the terms of the binary relationship between colonizer and colonized. Does liberationism fare any better, or is it too caught up in the materialism and the interests that it would deny? Either it remains inalienably enmeshed in the muck and the mire, or it becomes a pure utopia. But if the latter, then why so much anxiety and hubbub about Deane's utopian use of Adorno?

The answer must be that Said cannot see that his own liberationist utopia is utopian. Marvellously, he sees it as worldly, "worldliness" being a key concept in Said's major works. On the other hand, Said imagines that Deane's Adornian maneuvers

threaten to push beyond worldliness to a more ethereal realm. But he need have no such fear; Deane's arguments in "The Idea of Revolution" toy with a sense of negative dialectics, but do not deliver anything like the profoundly dualistic sense that in his poetry Yeats brings to his engagement with history, his struggle to transcend the ethos or the fate of worldliness. Furthermore, Deane's arguments in "Heroic Styles" and "The Creation of an Audience" convince that Said, not Yeats, is his master; that he would willingly pursue mimetic lines of thought that would manacle a poem to tropes of literalism, worldliness, ideology, and politics, rather than allow it the spiritual freedom of negative transcendence. Even though he mystifyingly grants to his own criticism, in "Heroic Styles," the power to transcend the gyres and create a new politics for Ireland, this Yeatsian impulse Deane exercises in profoundly anti-Yeatsian argument and theme. Such critical ambivalence, such emptying out of the voice of Yeats, should, however, come as no surprise given the anxious dynamics of influence between the precursor and his reluctant, recalcitrant ephebe, Seamus Deane posing as the new and final modernist. As Bloom has observed on a similar matter, "[t]he waves of Modernism from Eliot to the belated Modernism of Barthes and Foucault have played at emptying out the authorial subject, but this is an ancient play, and recurs in every Modernism from [the gnostics of] second-century B.C.E. Alexandria down to our moment" [Agon 48].

3.7 Williams' Statuesque Correctness

> --O Presences
> That passion, piety or affection knows,
> And that all heavenly glory symbolise--
> O self-born mockers of man's enterprise . . .
> "Among School Children"

It appears that Yeats's "political" poems utterly vex his politically-minded critics. They cannot fathom that to write a poem like "Easter, 1916" (1916), with its "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born" [287], means far less for Ireland than it means for poetry, the transformation of poetry, especially Yeats's poetry. In taking on the wounding burden of the Irish consciousness of Irish history, its violence, its horror, its self-sacrificial heroism, the poem does not change or even seek to change Ireland. Being an antithetical poet, and not a logical positivist, a historian, or a politician, Yeats opens himself to the world's horrors to re-create a purified vision, a new poem, not a new Ireland.

The most glaring weakness that I am aware of in this area is a recent article by Patrick Williams, "Cultural Coherence and Contradiction in Yeats" (1989). The article accuses Yeats of incoherence--mimicking Deane and Said, who also make this charge?--and self-contradiction, yet ironically enough it presents a "Yeats" who is highly coherent and not at all contradictory in terms of imperialism, anti-Semitism, misogynism, elitism, anything dark and ugly--all concealed but, thanks to Williams, revealed in this article. Taking the Freudian trope of "the return of the repressed" as a political imperative and quite literally, Williams seeks to ferret out the naughty ideology hidden in the poem call "The Statues" (1938), and to

take revenge against Yeats on behalf of the repressed and huddled masses of Asians, women, and workers, the silenced victims of reactionary Yeatsianism.

I do not here mean to suggest that Williams carefully deconstructs the poem in order to reveal its ideology; on the contrary, he pays only brief attention to the poem which remains throughout most of the essay little more than a backdrop against which he projects theoretically and morally motivated narratives and arguments. Williams can perform this maneuver because he claims that contemporary theory, in this case Bakhtin's "dialogism" and Said's critique of "orientalism," persuade that the ideological nature of discourse cannot be evaded. Discourse is "inescapably ideological" [25], he states. Poems thus betray an ideology which the critic must articulate. As Williams puts it, underplaying the degree to which he is doing coercive violence to the poem, he proposes "to examine some of the discourses in dialogue with Yeats's poem and with which the poem as a whole is in turn in dialogue, including those of culture, class, gender and race" [25].

Having asserted that poems and discourses are in dialogue with each other, the article has already reached endgame. The opponent (i.e., the poem) has been defeated by social theory, and all that remains for the theorist to do is the mopping up. With patience and acumen, Williams explains how the West has historically silenced and lorded over the East, how man has done likewise to woman, and higher to lower classes. Said's highly influential critique of orientalism is summarized, and Yeats's poem implicated in the crime.

> "The Statues" is, it would appear, classically, inescapably, Orientalist. It represents the putative triumph of the West in terms frequently encountered elsewhere in Orientalist and colonialist discourse: the defeat of Asiatic formlessness by European form, of Eastern chaos by Western order. [27]

Far more elusively, more by innuendo than by argument, Williams proceeds to embed the poem in anti-Semitism, suggesting that "[t]he poem also figures as an intervention in . . . the attempt by intellectuals to construct a purely European, autogenous Greece, free of contaminating influence either from 'African' Egypt or 'Semitic' Asia Minor" [29]. Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy is taken to be a controlling pre-text for "The Statues" and is depicted as racist and anti-Semitic, although left unexplained is how the latter point can be reconciled with Arnold's suggestion that the Hebraic element of his contemporary culture was a crucial source of its vitality and dynamism.[25]

"What matters," claims Williams, "is what the text [i.e., the poem] legitimates, the kinds of positions, attitudes, actions in the real world which it authorizes" [33]. He can never, of course, prove or even demonstrate that "The Statues" legitimates and authorizes or even encourages the horrors that he decries, but it is enough to overwhelm the reader with the suggestion that the attitudes he sees in the poem are somehow reproduced by the poem "in the real world." The counter-suggestion that "The

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[25] In the "Hebraism and Hellenism" chapter of the work, Arnold says that he regards Hebraism as the "force" or "energy driving at practice, this paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have" [163]. He goes on to say that "Hebraism,--and here is the source of its wonderful strength,--has always been severely preoccupied with the awful sense of the impossibility of being at ease in Zion; of the difficulties which oppose themselves to man's pursuit or attainment of that perfection of which Socrates talks so hopefully, and . . . so glibly" [168]. As Susan Handelman has noted (p. 170), Derrida quotes Arnold on the dialectics of Hebraism and Hellenism as epigraph for his essay on Lévinas in Writing and Difference.

Statues" is best seen as a poem that tropes other poems that put forward a vision of the negative dialectics of history, imagination and creative form--in "Shelley Disfigured" Paul de Man suggests that "it would be rewarding to read [Yeats's poem] in conjunction with The Triumph of Life" [95]--this suggestion seems not to occur to Williams. For he dismisses any criticism that focuses on the poetry, referring to it as "the relentless de-politicization of Yeats's work" [31], as a "transcendentalizing tendency" [31], and as "dangerously perverse" [32]. His vision of straightening out such perversity is to call a spade a spade: "The 'silencing' of the Orient to which we have already referred is an example of an even more deceitful and ungrateful denial of (cultural) indebtedness, . . . [the] Phoenician origin of that (apparently) quintessential Greek invention, the polis or city state" [34]. Williams has apparently not noticed that, in a passage of prose criticism that prefigures his visions of Greece in "The Statues" and "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats refers to Greece as "half-Asiatic."[26] Yeats's poem is deceitful and ungrateful due to its "construction of an Irish identity [that is] dependent--not to say parasitic--upon the prior existence of a stable Greek identity" [34], itself a racist falsification legitimated and authorized by the poem.

Women are next on the list of victims to be saved from Yeats's criminal poem.

> Women, the poem would seem to suggest, are largely irrelevant to the serious business of cultural struggle and transmission. Although they figure in the text as aetiolated adolescents on a par with the males, thereafter they rate mention only as consumers

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[26] "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," Essays and Introductions, p. 225.

> of dreams given form by male artists. . . . Woman is then the analogue of the Oriental in her total dependence on the European male sculptors for the gift of proper form--and this type of identification should come as no surprise, since, as Said points out, the Orient has been continuously represented as "feminine"--to the detriment of both.
>
> . . . [Regarding Asiatic formlessness], the male drive[s] to divide, separate, and impose order at all costs, . . . far from being laudable as Yeats would contend, are responsible for patriarchal repressiveness, political oppression, war, and all manner of contemporary horrors. [35-36]

As the male/father ogre melodramatically rears its ugly head, Williams submits himself (and his reader) to symbolic emasculation in atonement for the crime of being male, for Yeats's crime of poetically propagating the horror of male drives. Emasculation, or at least male-feminization, is the goal in quest, for how else can penis-penalized wretches imitate the ideologically correct Williams and identify with "the corresponding female tendency to include, to unite, to achieve a form of wholeness rather than a rigid ordering" [36]?

The conclusion to Williams' uncrowning of the king turns on class relations.

> The final silenced and disavowed Other whose exclusion the poem seeks is the lower classes, presumably the working class, since Yeats spends so much time elsewhere praising the peasantry. The "many-headed foam" which Europe overcame in the shape of the menacing Asiatic hordes now returns in the guise of the "filthy modern tide"--threatening society with destruction from within, rather than from without. [39]

It is quite clear that Williams abhors the attitudes that he fancies are Yeats's attitudes, the attitudes in the poem, and the attitudes of the "discourses" as he calls them, that pervade the poem which he refers to as an "ideological construct" [41]. The culpability of the Yeats poem in the narrative Williams advances

is a foregone conclusion because, as he sees it, the poem only exists to illustrate the larger discourse that he wants to expose. Nietzsche's will-to-power over a text never had a better emblem. But the hidden agenda of his will-to-power over Yeats stands fully revealed when we compare "Cultural Coherence and Contradiction in Yeats" with the second Williams article in the collection. Here he writes of "Difficult Subjects: Black British Women's Poetry," and the treatment he gives this topic sharply contrasts with that given Yeats. The style of strident moral indignation is replaced by a style of fawning obeisance.

> The ability to speak to and engage with the greatest number of people, and to achieve the minimum separation between poetry and everyday life, between poetry and politics, is an important shared aim for these writers [under discussion]. It is a position which finds support among cultural theorists and sociologists.
>
> . . . In their affiliative choices in the sphere of gender and politics, Black British women poets would certainly seem to be working in the realm of the "becoming-minor" [Deleuze and Guattari], opposed, for good historical reasons, to dreams of dominance, capable of leading their minor literature on its "sober revolutionary path." [122, 126]

In collapsing distinctions "between poetry and everyday life, between poetry and politics," it is clear that Williams is a mimeticist with no interest in a poetry antithetical to nature and the self, the poetry of the High Romantic Tradition. "Cultural theorists and sociologists," like himself, though feigning the denial of "dreams of dominance," are to become the new priests, the new arbiters of the syllabus for all right-thinking literate persons. Meanwhile the canon and its poets, from the Yawhist and Homer to Dante and Milton, from Blake and Shelley to Stevens and Yeats, will be scapegoated and sacrificed

on the altar of class, race, and "gender," and only those who speak the correct ideology or are of the correct skin color or sex may become our new laureates. The business of measuring the quality of a poetic utterance by standing it against its tradition of utterance will become, worse than an irrelevance, a reactionary exercise. Williams' performance begs the question--what is to be the purpose and function of criticism if it reduces itself to a flaccid longing for a poetry of mimetic literalizing that censors, excludes, and denies an antithetical poetry engaged with what Yeats, in his sublime madness and gnostic openness to the wounding power of history, called the "Vision of Evil"?[27]

3.8. Yeats, Stevens, and the Nobility of the Proper Dark

> Then my delivered soul herself shall learn
> A darker knowledge and in hatred turn
> From every thought of God mankind has had.
> "Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient"

In the process of making "The Statues" appear to be a literal, political pamphlet, Williams (who it would seem has never in his life written a poem) gravely mistakes the poem's quest for its "proper dark":

> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless, spawning fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face. [461]

This "proper dark," which Yeats here turns as the historical destiny of the Ireland of his day, I take to be a figure of the evasive imagination troping itself in its struggle with the

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[27] A Vision, p. 144.

overwhelming pressures of its facticity, and facticity for the imagination means its engagement of all that is not itself, that is to say, poetic anteriority or the history of poetic voice felt by the imagination in this poem as outwardness, as heterogeneity, ultimately as death. Thus, the daunting task of the imagination here is to defeat death or time by turning it into the source of the imagination's power to impose form on heterogeneous formlessness.

In other great poems, other intensely historical poems such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1919-1922), the imagination works to trope death by allowing the tide of historical violence to sweep over, crush, drown, or dismember it in Dionysiac frenzy:

> All break and vanish, and evil gathers head:
> Herodias' daughters have returned and again,
> A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
> Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
> Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;
> And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter
> All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,
> According to the wind, for all are blind. [317]

As we saw in the first chapter (1.1), it was the utter Dionysiac power of this poem that seduced J. Hillis Miller to the brilliant if wayward reading that all Yeats is a centerless cry in the labyrinth of the wind. But the negative dialectics of Yeatsian history involves a forceful revisionism. From the perspective of "The Statues," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is not life but death, an element of the burden of anteriority--along with poems like Blake's "Mental Traveller" (which is an important precursor poem to A Vision as well), Shelley's "Ozymandias," and Yeats's own poem "The Second Coming"--which threatens to chain the poet down onto a rock of death, a rock of massive otherness. "The Statues" certainly does not welcome that otherness in the same

way that "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" did. Rather than through a christlike dismemberment, here the imagination seeks the vitality of transcendence through an Apollonian imposition of order on chaos. What Williams reads as ideological repressiveness, exclusion, tyranny, is no more than a poetic vision of vitalism and nobility, figured through the creation of form rather than through its dismemberment.

Though this argument will seem extravagant and inexcusable to the likes of Williams, its centrality-in-eccentricity, its proper dark, can be envisioned by standing it next to speculations from The Necessary Angel (1951) of that other true ephebe of Shelley, Wallace Stevens:

> For the sensitive poet, conscious of negations, nothing is more difficult than the affirmations of nobility, and yet there is nothing that he requires of himself more persistently, since in them and in their kind, alone, are to be found those sanctions that are the reasons for his being and for that occasional ecstasy, or ecstatic freedom of mind, which is his special privilege. [35]

In quest of its proper dark or its ecstatic freedom of mind, the Yeats poem seeks a unique, a near-solipsistic nobility that is a force beyond outwardness, history, anteriority, death. Again in the words of Stevens,

> But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. . . . [Nobility] is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. [35-36]

If Wallace Stevens is right, and I passionately believe that he is, if poetic voice, poetic nobility is not a function of water but a force beyond the water pressing against the water, then the violence of the struggle between the force and the water cannot be measured or judged by an ethics of the water. To put it another way, that we may "Climb to our proper dark" is not a plea for a reactionary nationalism, orientalism, racism, or misogynism; but it is a plea for the special kind of elitism that vitalizes all things poetic or artistic. A poem either will not be written, or, if written, will not be a great poem, will not in any way influence the canon of poems and itself become canonical, if it takes as its purpose to defend a political doctrine or a moral orthodoxy. That way lies the death of the imagination, death by drowning.

On the other hand, if a poem is to be written at all, even more so if it is to have any influence upon the tradition of poems that it lives in, a poem must seek its proper dark; as in the formula 1 = 1+/-, it must be antithetical to itself, to its tradition, to all orthodoxy, to "the pressure of reality" as Stevens calls it. It must either enact a negative dialectics, or die a death that ignominiously submits to politics, nature, and the self as if these were forces more primordial than the noble force of the poetic genius--"a violence from within that protects us against a violence from without."

As George Steiner and Harold Bloom would argue, the element of risk is crucial here. The poet risks all on a word, because the prize is the pathos of divination. For the most part we all lose, even poets lose, having failed to risk enough, to strive

with the purity of a burning flame. But the great poems of the tradition which claims Yeats and which Yeats claims, is composed of poems that are part of that tradition because they refused to cower or to submit to the burden of belatedness. Critics and theorists like Harrison and O'Brien, Johnsen, Deane, Said, and Williams do nothing for poetry or criticism to the extent that they foster a perspectizing of poetry that sees it as valueless or reactionary unless it slavishly reflects their opposition to the proper dark, the elitism of the gnostic and agonistic Sublime. Such writers find "the freedom of self-delight," as Yeats once called it, an intolerable burden of social guilt. They invariably seek to suppress such elitism, which gnaws at them with the realization that it is the source of all great art and poetry. In a little essay called "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), published in The Cutting of an Agate and collected in Essays and Introductions, Yeats writes of this "freedom of self-delight" [254] as a "shaping joy" [255] that involves a "touch of extravagance" [254]. Would that we could follow him truly in his negative dialectics with history:

> This joy, because it must be always making and mastering, remains in the hands and in the tongue of the artist, but with his eyes he enters upon a submissive, sorrowful contemplation of the great irremediable things, and he is known from other men by making all he handles like himself, and yet by the unlikeness to himself of all that comes before him in a pure contemplation. It may be his enemy or his love or his cause that set him dreaming, and certainly the phoenix can but open her young wings in a flaming nest; but all hate and hope vanishes in the dream, and if his mistress brag of the song or his enemy fear it, it is not that either has its praise or blame, but that the twigs of the holy nest are not easily set afire. [254-255]

Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.
"A Dialogue of Self and Soul"

Chapter Four
Yeats's Gnostic Agon with Platonism

I have read somewhere a comment which ironizes our modern arrogance, suggesting that we are pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants, that the Bible, Homer, and Plato contain us and our thought, and all our anxious efforts to resist them. Although there may be some hyperbole interlaced with the irony here, the suggestion that even Dante and Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, Freud and Derrida are ineluctably caught up in the visions of their great precursors should withstand the most vigorous attempts of skeptics to debunk it. It may therefore be just as important for criticism and literary theory to speculate upon the process of the mutation of literary history as it is to stand against that history, seeking to undo the visions of the past, to strive and strike out for new directions. Our modern temptation to revel in Dionysiac fragmentation--epitomized I would say in the Anti-Oedipus (1977) of Deleuze and Guattari, which glorifies the social effects of schizophrenia while

indulging a myth of pure libido--owes its possibility of existence to the counter-impulse of the Apollonian towards the construction of order out of chaos. Wallace Stevens has suggested something like this in the coda to his Romantic poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," a poem that confronts the chaos of "the dark voice of the sea" with the counter-voice of song and poetry,

> Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. [129, 130]

--and again, in the pithy and comic section I of "Connoisseur of Chaos,"

> A. A violent order is disorder; and
> B. A great disorder is an order. These
> Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.) [215]

"Blessed rage for order" is surely a name or trope for the Apollonian impulse, an impulse originating much that we can describe in Yeats's poetry as the Yeatsian voice. "Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?" runs the first line of "The Statues" [460], a poem concerning the figurative qualities that contributed to the building of civilizations, ancient Greek and modern Irish. Yet embedded in the <u>rage</u> for order we recognize the equally Yeatsian impulse to discontinue, to fragment, to destroy, that is to say, to enjoy the energy of breaking out of the bounds of an ethos. J. Hillis Miller is quite right, as we saw in the first chapter, to read this latter impulse as the driving force within the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," its embrace of "Thunder of feet, tumult of images, / . . . in the labyrinth of the wind" [317]. But he is quite

wrong to totalize the Dionysian aspect of Yeats, turning it "by synecdoche," as he says [320], into the identifying feature of Yeatsian voice--which he sees with deconstructive irony as no voice at all, "the voice ultimately of 'nothing'" [324].

In the three preceding chapters I have emphasized the inadequacies, as I see them, of mimetic as well as anti-mimetic approaches to Yeats. I have suggested that his poetry would be unduly limited if seen as an imitation of traditional forms, historical discourses, or neurotic psychological anxieties. But equally I have claimed that the corrosive ironies of deconstructive negation, which reduce lyrical voice to a linguistic aporia or wilderness, are inadequate to the (Yeatsian) poetic impulse. The mimesis of Platonism, however, imposes special burdens on the would-be Yeats critic.

The theory that poetry imitates objects that are essentially alien to the material world holds more in common with the anti-naturalism of deconstruction (despite deconstruction's anti-mimeticism) than with materialist mimetic approaches such as the historicizing, psychoanalytic, and New Critical approaches dealt with and set aside in chapters two and three. Yeats's anti-naturalistic Platonism may seem to court the anti-naturalism that informs de Man's and Hillis Miller's criticism, but as I have argued in chapter one, deconstruction's linguistic abyss is not the Void that Yeats would kiss.[1] Yeats is drawn to another Void. The anti-naturalism of the Platonic tradition, which deconstruction inherits and against which it rebels through

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[1] I here allude to my comments and quotation of Yeats in the last paragraph of the first chapter.

linguistic undecidability, is Yeats's greatest temptation. It may be, therefore, that only a poetic theory and critical practice attuned to the power of the errors of all these approaches--deconstructive anti-mimeticism, materialist mimeticism, and the great origin of them all, Platonic anti-naturalist mimeticism--can productively engage with the Yeatsian Sublime. Such a theory and practice would be a "supermimesis," as Harold Bloom calls it,[2] willing to risk a negatively dialectical approach to the transcendental.

In this chapter my thesis is that the lyrical voice that criticism has learned to call Yeatsian comes about through the poet's agon with his native and acquired tendency toward Platonism in its many forms. As I see it, the best available analogue of the Yeatsian poetic stance is the heretical stance of historical Gnosticism against the received orthodoxy of Platonism and Christianity. In its impulse, which may be but the "throb of an artery," Yeatsian gnosis seeks to de-idealize various Platonic doctrines and to transform religious faith in an external God into poetic knowledge of a God within. To write a poem is (for Yeats) to attempt divination.

4.1 The Gnosis of "Self and Soul"

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attention upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into song?
> "The Spur"

Yeatsian gnosis, Yeatsian poetic divination, typically refuses Platonic ideals, other worldly Edens. If possible at

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[2] E.g., Agon pp. 70, 177.

all, it must come through a movement antithetical to itself, not just to its opposite. It must negate Platonic transcendence as well as time and this world. Its movement is downward and inward, rather than upward and outward. In "The Choice" (1931)[3] the voice of the poet who would perfect the work rather than the life "must refuse / A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark" [362]. This sketch of Yeatsian gnosis is fully drawn in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927), that eminently gnostic among Yeats's visionary poems. Tropes of darkness and blindness obsess the voices of the poem which seek to answer the question, How must I respond to spiritual darkness if that great defeat is to be transformed into a sublime poetic victory? "My Soul" tries to persuade "My Self" that gnosis is achieved in "scorn [of] the earth," in "the steep ascent" along "the winding stair," in the ascent to heaven, to the purity of silence in "ancestral night." But "My Self" stubbornly chooses to scorn "the tower / Emblematical of the night," insisting instead upon "emblems of the day," emblems of "love and war," emblems not of Platonic transcendence nor of Christian self-denial, but of worldly process, the antinomies of Empedocles, that great precursor of Plato.

I

My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
Upon the breathless starlit air,
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;
Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done:
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

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[3] Date taken from Yeats's Poems, p. 600.

My Self. The consecrated blade upon my knees
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass
Unspotted by the centuries;
That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn
From some court-lady's dress and round
The wooden scabbard bound and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.

My Soul. Why should the imagination of a man
Long past his prime remember things that are
Emblematical of love and war?
Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

My Self. Montashigi, third of his family, fashioned it
Five hundred years ago, about it lie
Flowers from I know not what embroidery--
Heart's purple--and all these I set
For emblems of the day against the tower
Emblematical of the night,
And claim as by a soldier's right
A charter to commit the crime once more.

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

II

My Self. A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;

The finished man among his enemies?--
How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?
And what's the good of an escape
If honour find him in the wintry blast?

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. [348-351]

The final declaration of "My Soul" speaks with the voice of Yeatsian "esoteric Platonism," as I shall call it. The response that "My Self" gives to the blandishments of "My Soul" is to refuse the movement of ascending to heaven in favor of descending through "life" in all its blind suffering and humiliation. "My Self" embraces what "My Soul" had rightly called "the crime of death and birth." In rejecting the ascent to heaven, "My Self" yet seeks its own path to gnosis or the knowing wherein the knower becomes the known. "My Soul" attempts to usurp this trope of gnosis for the purpose of seducing or cajoling "My Self" to seek ascent to heaven through Platonic meditation: "For intellect no longer knows / Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known." But the gnosis and the heroic vitalism of "My Self" comes in choosing to descend "again / And yet again," if necessary, into the crime of death and birth, there to achieve, if at all, the knowing that is a self-blessing. In descending through "life" rather than ascending up and out of life, "My Self" negates not only Platonic transcendence but also the antinomies of Empedocles, love and strife. Yeatsian gnosis is

antithetical to itself, as in the formula 1 = 1 +/-, because it is achieved in dialectical negation not only of what Yeats in A Vision calls the "primary" but also of the antithetical itself. Both ancestral night and the emblems of the day are negatively transcended in the gnosis of self-blessing. The death of night and the endless strife of day are overwhelmed by self-blessing, a catastrophe creation as Harold Bloom would call it.

In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" it is as though Yeats were once again re-writing Dante's Divine Comedy. In his youth he had been obsessed with the Celestial Rose of Paradiso, writing a whole series of works re-envisioning the Rose, troping the transcendental. In "The Secret Rose" (1896)[4] for example, he had written a plea for apocalypse:

> When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
> Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
> Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
> Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose? [105]

He now revises his great Italian precursor by accepting the descent into Hell, then refusing the ascent along the mountain of Purgatory to the Edenic summit, and the leap from Eden to the Rose of the Empyrean. He revises Dante by contracting and concentrating the whole of Purgatorio and Paradiso into a brief lyric moment, as though the beatific vision were to occur as Dante and his precursor Virgil climb down and out of Hell by way of Satan's leg.

We might yet go further, saying that the poet transforms Platonic ascent into a Blakean-Yeatsian vortex. Blake would urge the visionary,

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[4] Date of first publication, Yeats' Poems, p. 518; date of composition is unknown.

To see the World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.[5]

Still unsurpassed for insight and detail on the figure of the vortex in Blake and its influence on Yeats is Hazard Adams' book, Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision (1955). For Adams, the vortex suggests not a whirlpool or gyre--an emblem of the day--but an imaginative moment of inward expansiveness, such that "all images are really infinite perceptions, unified extensions of mind" [106]. Vortices of vision similar to the Blakean quatrain appear throughout Yeats's poetry, poems such as "A Meditation in Time of War" (1914), "Gratitude to the Unknown Instructors" (date unknown), and "A Needle's Eye" (date unknown):[6]

For one throb of the artery,
While on that old grey stone I sat
Under the old wind-broken tree,
I knew that One is animate,
Mankind inanimate phantasy. [297]

What they undertook to do
They brought to pass;
All things hang like a drop of dew
Upon a blade of grass. [369]

All the stream that's roaring by
Came out of a needle's eye;
Things unborn, things that are gone,
From needle's eye still goad it on. [406]

While the allusion to Plotinus, or more severely to the pre-Platonic Parmenides--"I knew that One is animate, / Mankind inanimate phantasy"--reflects Yeats's Platonic leanings, the throb of the artery (which is a Blakean trope), the drop of dew,

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[5] The introductory quatrain of "Auguries of Innocence," p. 132; Yeats slightly misquotes the first two lines in A Vision, p. 91.

[6] Neither Ellmann (The Identity of Yeats) nor Jeffares (Yeats's Poems) can give a date of composition for the latter two poems.

and the needle's eye suggest a visionary moment of gnosis. Like Blake's visionary urging, the speech of "My Self" seeks a vortex which will transform the crime of death and birth into a blessing in the act of self-forgiveness and the casting out of remorse.

In the first chapter (1.9) I suggested that "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" haunts a key passage of George Steiner's Real Presences, guiding and dominating it by a persuasive dialectics, a quest for a blessing through the internalization of the Other. "Among School Children," as I argued in the second chapter, has had a strong influence on modern criticism and theory. The same must be argued for "Self and Soul." Just as in his discussion of the dancer and the dance in Allegories of Reading (1979), Paul de Man confirmed and enacted this influence when, in "Lyric and Modernity" in Blindness and Insight (1971), he set the trajectory of modern poetics in relation to our critical dialogues of self and soul. He writes that

> truly modern poetry is a poetry that has become aware of the incessant conflict that opposes a self, still engaged in the daylight world of reality, of representation, and of life, to what Yeats calls the soul. . . . Modern poetry is described by Yeats as the conscious expression of a conflict within the function of language as representation and within the conception of language as the act of an autonomous self. [171]

De Man's strong misreading of Yeats, a reading that inaugurates the institutional richness of the ascetic deconstructive misunderstanding of lyric poetry, errs only in its deification of language, turning language into a new Demiurge, making gnosis an impossibility and aporia an inevitability. For de Man, language is the abyss; it is perplexity and poverty. For Bloom, however, language can be negated in a "catastrophe creation" that

transcends the perplexity and poverty of aporia, deifying ourselves rather than language, and thereby uniting us to the Abyss beyond any cosmic Demiurge. The Yeats poem does not represent, it enacts this deification in the most extravagant of dualisms--psyche against pneuma, "cosmic soul against acosmic self. In a poem like Yeats's A Dialogue of Self and Soul," writes Bloom, "this dualism attains a modern apotheosis" [Agon 7]. It is my claim that the gnostic quality of Yeatsian apotheosis deserves more sympathetic study.

4.2 Yeats Studies and the Play of Gnosis

> . . . and yet again descant
> Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song:
> Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
> We loved each other and were ignorant.
> "After Long Silence"

Although Yeats's Platonism could be assimilated safely to their work, critics of Yeats have variously missed, avoided, or dismissed the crucial importance of gnosis for the poet. As early as 1955 Hazard Adams suggested a link between gnosis and Yeats's poetics when he wrote, "Like Blake, [Yeats] attacked abstraction and defended the form of experience which dictates nondiscursively its own higher morality and comprehension, its gnosis" [151]. Adams also seemed to compare Yeats to an alchemist or a magus when he wrote, "The Yeats of the lonely tower, who struggles with learning like the fly in the vase, [is] the searcher for elusive gnostic power, . . . for the solution to antinomies beyond human understanding" [185]. Even though he invites some confusion between esoteric Platonism and gnosis in his comparison between alchemy and poetry, and even though his

allusion to "The struggle of the fly in marmalade," from the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915), weakens the antithetical force of the line by substituting marmalade with vase, the Adams inference about a gnostic agon in Yeats is accurate. Yet for the most part critical ignorance prevails.

There has been no shortage of studies of Yeats and Platonism in various guises. These usually deal with three areas: his reading of and allusions to Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Porphyry (through the work of their modern translators, Thomas Taylor and Stephen MacKenna); his links to modern Platonism from the Italian Renaissance through Shelley to Walter Pater, William Morris and other contemporaries; and most prevalently perhaps, his esoteric Platonism--his occult or spiritualist readings and practices, such as his affiliations with theosophy (from 1888 to 1890 he was a member of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in Dublin), with popularized Kabbalah, Hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism (from 1890 until about 1922, he was an active member of the Isis Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was led for years by the magus MacGregor Mathers, taking as his identifying motto "Demon Est Deus Inversus"), and with séances, magic, Tarot, alchemy, automatic writing--in a word, the arcane.[7] Yeats's prose works, especially his Autobiographies, A Vision, and Essays and Introductions, are spiced with references to such names, traditions, and practices. What has not been done, however, despite the labors of Thomas Whitaker and Harold Bloom (and more recently Patrick Keane and

[7] Particular points of information here are taken from Jeffares' new biography, W. B. Yeats (1988) and from Harper's Yeats's Golden Dawn (1974).

Jahan Ramazani), is an appreciation of how Yeats struggles to overcome his Platonic tendency, seeking to transform its orthodoxies, by means of poetic revisionism, into the blessing referred to at the culmination of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul."

The first to take up the issue of Yeatsian gnosis as an explicit theme was the author of Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History (1964). Whitaker so influenced Harold Bloom that Bloom would describe him, with ambivalence, in 1970 as "Yeats's most learned and devoted apologist."[8] Without seeing the problem that I see of a critical tension between Platonism and gnosis, Whitaker at least takes seriously the gnostic impulse in Yeats's writings, the premise of his book being that the poet must somehow negate all materiality in order to redeem himself.

> Man, who is made in God's image, is also a source of light; and in moments of creative intensity he must see all else as but an image in a looking glass. . . . [H]istory is his dark reflection, his adversary. . . . Yet in a world fallen into division, that adversary, Dragon, Serpent, or shadow can itself be a gnostic means of redemption. Man darkly discerns all that is "evil," all that is "other," his antithetical daimon, a hidden manifestation of God or of his deeper self. If he makes the heroic effort to open himself to the fullness of experience, he may be led by that anti-self toward an understanding of both microcosm and macrocosm. [6-7]

Although I find the trope of understanding "both microcosm and macrocosm" a little wayward, hardly apposite to the acosmic and fiery moment of poetic gnosis, I find Whitaker's thesis compelling in general, and I will return to his idea of the

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[8] Yeats, p. 377--"learned" because he surpassed even Ellmann in revealing the subtlety and intensity of Yeats's career project; and "devoted" because, unlike the Bloom of 1970, he saw no necessity to score the politics of the man or the poems.

poet's "heroic effort to open himself to the fullness of experience" in the fifth chapter when I again take up my topic of chapter three, revising the negative dialectics of Yeatsian history.

Following Whitaker, Harold Bloom published his tome entitled Yeats in 1970. At this time, Bloom was deeply ambivalent about gnosticism and poetry, even though his work since then was to become the most insistently and persuasively gnostic work in contemporary critical and literary theory. In 1979 he would even publish his own gnostic novel, The Flight to Lucifer. But in the late 1960s Bloom had yet to work through and fully commit himself to his theory of poetic influence, with all its gnostic implications. Instead, he remained defensively committed to such views as he had published earlier in the decade, on Blake and Shelley as optimists and humanists. As a result, he saw Yeats as deviant from his perception of Romantic orthodoxy, and attacked Yeats's gnostic impulse.

> But Yeats, even before he read arcane literature and became a Rosicrucian adept, was a natural Gnostic. He shared always the Gnostic sense of longing acutely for the soul's fortunate destiny after the body's death, a longing that is the negation of Blake's apocalyptic desires. And he shared also the Gnostics' obsession to learn the names of the demons [the Archons][9] through whose realms the soul must ascend. From the Gnostics ultimately, Yeats took his deep belief that evil ruled in his own epoch, but that something more congenial would come in the next. For Yeats, like the Gnostics, is profoundly pessimistic, even as Blake, despite all horrors, is humanly hopeful, as Shelley is until his last phase. [74]

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[9] Writing of the Gnostic myth in general in the Gnostic Religion (1958), Hans Jonas says, "The universe, the domain of the Archons, is like a vast prison whose innermost dungeon is the earth, . . . [and] each Archon bars the passage to the souls that seek to ascend after death, in order to prevent their escape from the world and their return to God" [43].

Though there is much to disagree with in this passage, such as its overstated attempt to divide Yeats from his precursors on the basis of their humanistic optimism as against his Gnostic pessimism, the passage illustrates my point that criticism has failed to distinguish Yeats's movement beyond Platonism into gnostic vision. In other words, the esoterica that I would consider as modern permutations of Platonism, Bloom here considers as "Gnostic." Bloom's Yeats, therefore, develops Whitaker's earlier insight, opening Yeats's work to the analogue of gnosis, even as it confuses his gnosticism with the arcane and denounces it.[10]

By the time he published Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens in 1976, with its chapter called "Yeats, Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void," Bloom had subjected his views on gnosticism to a severe revision. This chapter indeed functions as a palinode for much that Bloom had said "light years" earlier in Yeats, for it recants much in the earlier work about Yeats's Gnosticism, even as it still expresses "reservations" about Yeats's political tendencies. Now in 1976 Bloom sees Gnosticism not as a deviation from Romantic orthodoxy, but quite the opposite. "Indeed, it could be argued," he writes, "that a form of Gnosticism is endemic in Romantic tradition

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[10] The reader will note that I appear to be inconsistent about applying lower case or upper case to "gnosticism." Whereas Bloom almost always uses upper case, I wish to discriminate between historical Gnosticism, which was a religious movement that competed with Judaism and Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first two centuries of the Common Era, and the intuitive gnosticism of poets and artists seeking their own personal visions. Nevertheless, I must use upper case when alluding to Bloom's use, even when this coincides with the latter sense of the term. Like Bloom, I follow the descriptions of historical Gnosticism put forward by Jonas in The Gnostic Religion; moreover, I follow the analogy between historical Gnosticism and intuitive artistic gnosticism put forward by Bloom in Agon and The Breaking of the Vessels.

without, however, dominating that tradition, or even that Gnosticism is the implicit, inevitable religion that frequently informs aspects of post-Enlightenment poetry" [212]. Yeats remains "a Gnostic adept," and "his Gnosticism seems to [Bloom] his natural religion: sincere, consistent, thoroughgoing, and finally a considerable aid to his poetry." This severe revision in Bloom's theory comes not so much from his realization that Blake, Shelley and Romanticism are linked closer to Gnosticism than to "humanism," but rather more from his intuition that creativity of any sort, perhaps especially his own creativity, is a sublimely individual activity--verging on solipsism--for which the best available model or image is the revisionist stance of ancient Gnosticism towards Platonic or religious orthodoxy, and in which an act of gnosis attempts to achieve divination.

The curious point about this narrative of Bloom's quest for his own gnostic criticism is the role that Yeats plays in it. For it is my view, and I shall have more to say about this later, that Bloom does not give Yeats the credit that his Irish precursor deserves. In 1970 Yeats is attacked and gnosticism eschewed as a deviation from the Romanticism of Blake and Shelley. In 1973 Bloom's most famous book, The Anxiety of Influence, is published, shocking his critical readership by its visionary quality--its endorsement of gnostic metaphors, but also its assertively gnostic posture. Since then, in book after book Bloom has continued with great energy to press his personal gnosticism into his criticism. I believe that Yeats was the key figure in Bloom's self-transformation, yet Yeats has remained virtually absent from his writings. Except for the chapter in

Poetry and Repression, and a very few comments scattered in other works, since 1970 Yeats has remained alien to Bloom's brilliant work. Though absent from it, the figure of Yeats haunts Bloom's work, and this claim I will explore in greater detail as this dissertation unfolds, performing on Bloom's theory, by way of Yeats's poetry, the very misreading that his theory, his gift to the world, describes. As the Valentinian author of the Gnostic Gospel of Truth writes--in a gnomic remark taken by Bloom as his epigraph of the Prologue to Anxiety of Influence--"It was a great marvel that they were in the Father without knowing Him" [3, 13; Jonas 181].

4.3 Keane, Ramazani, and the Light of Gnosis

> Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
> We are but critics, or but half create,
> Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,
> Lacking the countenance of our friends.
> "Ego Dominus Tuus"

Patrick Keane and Jahan Ramazani have recently published works that tempt us toward a vision of Yeats's gnosis, but that finally evade the necessary extravagance of such a criticism. In his closely argued account called Yeats's Interactions with Tradition (1987), Keane articulately brings forward an array of literary, philosophical, and occult citations, echoes, and allusions that he finds in Yeats's poetry in draft and final copy. If nothing else, Keane's work demonstrates the breadth and depth of Yeats's readings and the labyrinthine nature of the poet's unveiling of his readings in poems.

Without any doubt, the crucial text in Keane's account is the text of Nietzsche, as Keane ferrets out every possible

allusion in the poems to the writings of the German. In taking the approach of literary echo, Keane sets himself apart from Bloom whose work he clearly respects.[11] Bloom considers the tracing out of literary echoes an academic parlour game--in Anxiety Bloom speaks of "the wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting, an industry that will soon touch apocalypse anyway when it passes from scholars to computers" [31]--in contrast to his own effort to interpret tradition as an "unconscious" warping of anteriority, tradition breaking and re-making itself. Keane on the other hand hunts for the way in which Yeats's readings reappear in his poems. This contrast can be clearly seen in how Bloom and Keane deal differently with the link between Nietzsche and Yeats. Nietzsche never fails to play an important, if ambivalent, role in Bloom's own theory and practice, and in Poetry and Repression Bloom clarifies his view of the influence of Nietzsche on Yeats.

> From 1902 on, Yeats was a steady reader of Nietzsche. I suggest that the crucial influences upon a poet must come early in his development, even as Shelley, Blake, and Pater affected Yeats early on. That Nietzsche, whom he read after he turned thirty-seven, influenced Yeats so strongly is due to Nietzsche's reinforcement of the earlier influences. [206]

In contrast, Keane's narrative of interactions, which overwhelms his reader with references to the German, suggests very strongly that Nietzsche is the central figure of concern in Yeats's perspective on tradition.

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[11] Keane is fond of quoting, for example, the shibboleth that peppers Bloom's books, the so-called Emersonian law of compensation--"Nothing is got for nothing." And despite my comments critical of Keane, he does display at times a Bloomian influence on his work, an intuition of poetic revisionism at a deeper-than-conscious level.

While I cannot "prove" that Bloom rather than Keane is right on this issue, I can nevertheless argue that Bloom's sense of "revisionism," with its dynamic vision of the breaking and remaking of the canon, is a more appropriate allegory of interpretation of poetry than is Keane's sense of "interactions." The reason for this judgment must surely be that Bloom's "revisionism" enacts the stance of the gnostic towards tradition, and this stance more than any other represents the stance of the strong poet, like Yeats, towards tradition; whereas Keane's textual "interaction," with its sense of conscious borrowing, fails as a metaphor to suggest adequately the gnostic agon that generates a great poem.

Even so, my quarrel with Keane would take on less importance if his own representation of the Nietzsche-Yeats relation were in tune with the implications of his own suggestions. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," and especially Nietzsche's "influence" on it, form the main emphasis of Keane's argument. Yet oddly enough, even as his argument would seem to lead him inexorably to a recognition of Yeats's Nietzschean gnosis in the poem, Keane dismisses its possibility. After citing the Nietzsche from phase twelve of A Vision as Yeats's model for the hero, the man able to overcome himself, "thus attaining the antithetical 'perfection that is from a man's combat with himself'" [146], Keane continues to the precipice, then averts his gaze:

> Self's victory, . . . is over the severe moralism, the "bad conscience," that would reduce the body to an object of defilement and degradation ["That defiling and disfigured shape . . . "]. In Yeats's case it seems, above all, a triumph over his own Neoplatonism, even Gnosticism. This is creative self-overcoming. . . . [146]

Well, triumph over his Platonism it certainly is, but only by way of gnostic self-blessing. Is it too much to expect in 1987 that a writer as sharp as Keane, one clearly familiar with Bloom's gnostic criticism, should recognize a gnostic impulse when he virtually describes it himself?--as here, in his depiction of the poem's heretical redemption:

> The Yeatsian infusion of sweetness into a self-forgiving breast is thus both redemptive and heretical: a confirmation of man's claimed autonomy, a prideful non-serviam, and a stubborn clinging to sensuous beauty, however painful. [149]

As with the Bloom of 1970 who was deeply uneasy about his own nascent gnosticism, Keane confuses Yeatsian gnosis with Platonism:

> As already noted in the discussion of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," Nietzsche provided an impressive antithetical counterweight to the primary world of Plato, Plotinus, Macrobius, Gnosticism, and the "life-denying" aspects of Christianity. [157]

In his confusion, his critical "ignosis," Keane blunts the edge of his argument; he tames the potential extravagance of his own criticism and denies himself and his readers the light of the antithetical power of poetic gnosis.

Jahan Ramazani's book on Yeats and the Poetry of Death (1990), like Keane's before it, offers much that is useful argument and insightful criticism. How could it be otherwise, when his topos is the voice of the Yeatsian elegiac Sublime, and when his argument is informed, subtly not ostentatiously, by our most controversial and brilliant critics and theorists from Nietzsche and Freud to Paul de Man. He bears out this observation in his comments on the final five lines of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and its amor fati:

> [T]he poet frees himself from self-pity by affirming his fate. . . . The replacement of the self-mourning "I" by the laughing "We" represents the unbinding of object-directed pathos and its sudden transformation into Dionysian catharsis--an unfocused libido that drowns the dikes in a moment of blessedness. [102]

Such comments, it seems to me, imply the sense of visionary gnosis that I have been suggesting is crucial to Yeats and ought to be crucial to Yeats studies. Even so, there is a dismissive slant to Ramazani's thesis by which he denigrates the very voice that enchants him, a slant which ultimately links him to the temporal irony, the linguistic abyss, of Paul de Man rather than to the Abyss in its Gnostic sense, "the Sacred Void" of Yeats's gnosticism.

In Bloom's hands, the Nietzschean trope of art as a "lie against time" is seen as a source of the glory of strong poetry. But in Ramazani's hands, the trope induces an ironic deflation of the very poetry that he otherwise suggests is "sublime." Again with reference to the latter section of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and its Nietzschean origins, he writes:

> The poet wills his endless return to the blindness of inorganic matter. But this affirmation of the eternal, autochthonous return is also compensatory. The kinship between eternal recurrence and the sublime should help us see that even though Yeats and Nietzsche think that their belief in recurrence indicates their release from the spirit of revenge, or ill will toward time, it is in fact an illusion that allows them to think they have transcended time, that they can live an infinite number of lives, and that they have therefore escaped the threatening scythe of the father beyond all fathers. [117-118]

Taking an ironic stance toward the poem's quest for a negative transcendence, Ramazani reminds us, as if we need reminding, that Yeats was "in fact" not an immortal god. In this perspective the poem's vision is "an illusion" allowing the poet "to think" he

has transcended time. "Yeats triumphs," he says, "by making us believe [now it is the reader who is deluded, rather than the poet] that in choosing to live again, he has accepted death; and that in choosing the Self over the Soul, he has embraced his finitude" [180]. Or again, "the poet succeeds in making us believe that he has courageously resigned himself to death, when he has instead erased the whole question of death" [187].

Ramazani thus takes an ironic stance toward the troping of death in this poem, indeed throughout the Yeatsian canon. In doing so, he re-focuses attention on death in all its literality, but he also exposes his own weakness, for even the irony of irony can be ironized, and it may be that his ironic perspectivizing originates in his own anxious will-to-power over Yeats's tropes, in his own desire <u>to live</u> through the turning or troping of Yeats's lively gnosis, making it appear as "an illusion." He would thus live off of another's death, a figurative death which he must call literal in order to gain power over it. I find Bloom's comments in <u>The Breaking of the Vessels</u> (1982) to be helpful.

> To read all poetry as the irony of irony indeed nobly refuses self-deception, but the irony of irony has both its immediate strength and its ultimate weakness when we realize that its only quest is for the text of death, or the reading of all strong text as the study of death, rather than of birth or rebirth. [17]

The challenge to Yeats studies was laid down more than twenty years ago by Bloom in his <u>Yeats</u>: "The Higher Criticism of Yeats, when it is more fully developed, will have to engage the radical issue of his subjectivity, particularly as it is expressed in his myth of the antithetical man" [372]. Both Keane and Ramazani approach this myth, the light of Yeatsian gnosis,

each with his own hopes and trepidations. Whereas Keane was able to see the light but unable to know the light, Ramazani was able only to turn his gaze away from the light. Maybe he fears that it would blind him, making him "A blind man battering blind men," as Yeats puts it. To defend against blindness is no shame, but Yeats criticism and the sons of Yeats must run the risk of exposure to blindness if they are to be adequate to the strength of their gnostic father. As Bloom has said, concerning "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" in his Yeats, "Yeats is never stronger than when he is totally exposed" [373]. I would argue that this mythical moment of total exposure to the light arrives, if at all, when 1 = 1+/-, when the knower becomes the known in a triumph that must pass down through an inferno of defeat, when "the antithetical man" can remain antithetical even to "Self," not just to the self-denying visions of "Soul."

4.4 Anti-Platonism and Critical Confusion

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

In A Vision (1937) Yeats describes the fervor with which he read Plotinus and other Platonists in his effort to deduce a source of "inspiration" for the "geometrical symbolism" that his "Instructors" gave him through the mediumship of his wife's automatic writing: "I read all MacKenna's incomparable translation of Plotinus, some of it several times, and went from Plotinus to his predecessors and successors . . ." [20]. We truly enter the labyrinth of his word and thought when we quest

after a knowledge of Yeats's Platonism. So much ink has been spilt over it, blotting it out, so much confusion and contradiction blocking the way. "Those who say that Yeats was a Platonist are right," states Denis Donoghue in his own Yeats (1971), "subject to the qualification that he was the opposite, empiricist or realist, even on the same occasions" [16].[12] Already lost in the maze, Donoghue, to his credit, at least keeps searching for the true path, but to little avail. Yeats was a Platonist and an empiricist, he says, but his crucial "kinship [was] with Nietzsche: it seems to me a more telling relationship," he remarks, "than between Yeats and Plato, Plotinus, or Blake" [19]. He now gives us Yeats as a Nietzschean empirical Platonist, with Blake awkwardly linked to Platonism, the same Blake who denounced Swedenborg in "A Marriage of Heaven and Hell" as well as the distinction between Body and Soul. Again turning to Yeats, Donoghue says,

> What he received as neo-Platonism is a loose anthology of occult images and figures available to a poet who is avid for symbols. More accurately, his anthology is largely Hermetic and Gnostic, it has more to do with alchemical lore than with Plato and Plotinus. [48]

As a description of a poet who strove long and hard for "Unity of Being"--can there be a more tellingly Platonic concept?--Donoghue's remarks must appear suspect. "Occult images and figures" are rightly associated with Neoplatonism, yet Hermeticism, here falsely linked to Gnosticism, is also falsely dissociated from Plato and Plotinus. And all this from a critic

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[12] Donoghue's Yeats was published in America as William Butler Yeats (1971). The British version differs from the American version only in the style of typesetting and pagination of its text, and in a slightly different wording of the pre-text called "Chronology" and the post-text called "Bibliographical Notes."

who, a decade later in Ferocious Alphabets (1981) will claim that Bloom's Yeats is wrongly focused "mainly because its emphasis on Gnosticism is marginal to Yeats" [132]. Decidedly, clarification is needed; but where can we turn?

If we turn to High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W. B. Yeats (1973) by Robert Snukal (discussed in relation to "Among School Children" in chapter two), we will find a more internally coherent view than Donoghue's, but not a view I believe we can accept. For Snukal's programmatic neo-Kantian posture, his anti-Platonic rhetoric, his insistence on immanence, and his use of Yeatsian sensuality as an antidote to the contagion of Platonic and Christian orthodoxy, all combine to blind him to the gnosis of negative transcendence. He claims that "the ideas which were current among philosophers of the nineteenth century" were more important for Yeats than was "his dabbling in spiritualism" [13]. In so many words, he minimizes the importance for Yeats of the doctrine of "the antithetical self," the years of "automatic writing" that eventuated in two editions of A Vision (1925, 1937), and the Kabbalah--even in its decadent Golden Dawn form, not to mention its more authentic form as Renaissance speculative philosophy and theology--in favor of Kantian thought. Can such devotion be persuasively set aside as "dabbling in spiritualism"?

Commenting on the final four poems of Words for Music Perhaps (1932) ("Tom the Lunatic," "Tom at Cruachan," "Old Tom Again," and "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus"), Snukal argues that

> This group of poems reflects the anti-Platonic direction of Yeats's poetry; that is, they reflect Yeats's dislike for popular Platonism and Christian spirituality and other-worldliness. Although these poems utilise ideas and images from Plato, the neo-Platonists, Berkeley and Henry More, the poems which result are primarily concerned with the vigour and energy of the phenomenal world. [27]

The problem with such a view is that it is only half right about each half of its equation. Yes, Yeats opposed other-worldliness, and yes, he was vigorous and energetic about this world; but his opposition to spirituality derives from his revision of his profound attraction to it, an attraction that never dies. Inversely, the embrace of worldly vigor that he strove for was certainly not for the sake of that world--"That is no country for old men, the young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees / --Those dying generations . . . " he writes in "Sailing to Byzantium" [301]--but for the sake of the possibility of the poetic knowledge, the gnosis, that may come through the vigorous negation of that world in poetic tropes: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is. . . ." "Poetic knowledge," as Bloom says, "may be an oxymoron" [Agon 56], but for the poet of gnosis it may also be an tautology, poetry of the Sublime being necessarily the deepest form of knowing, and knowledge in its highest form being poetic. Snukal misses the subtlety of these negative dialectics.

> According to both Plato and Plotinus, one could escape from the wheel, could achieve a unity with the one, and thus lose personality and escape re-birth. In Yeats's cosmology, however, there is nothing beyond the human mind. The supra-sensual world is simply mind, and this cannot be confused with another greater being. [29]

This reading of Yeats balks at grappling with his insistently dualistic sense of things, and turns him instead into a monist.

But Yeats's protest against Platonism, like the protest of the Gnostics of Alexandria in the second century, was a protest against the weakness of Plato's dualism, not against the dualism. Yeats and the Gnostics would push that dualism further, to the point where the divine ember within will re-kindle and re-join us to the Abyss, in its Gnostic sense of course, not its linguistic deconstructive sense of aporia. In introducing his comments on "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," Snukal observes that "Yeats's cosmology disdains the opportunity of release. . . . Yeats insists that if you simply forget about heaven you are able to achieve a secular blessedness" [30, 32]. Well, no Romantic poet, certainly not Yeats, can "simply forget about heaven," and "secular blessedness," a trope that seeks to turn away from the religious, is embarrassingly weak in the context of the Sublime, where poetic divination is equally both secular and religious, and neither secular nor religious. Being "beyond good and evil," gnosis transcends the politics of secular versus religious. Some would no doubt protest that my "gnosis" cannot escape reinscribing the poetic within a new binarism of gnosis against politics, privileging the former; to which I would reply that what is at stake here cannot be comprehended within a rhetoric of linguistic immanence or cognitive epistemology, but only within a rhetoric of desire, power, and transcendence despite "the linguistic facts," whatever they may logically seem to be.

Snukal would have us dismiss Yeats's Platonism, but it is not so blithely dismissed. He himself includes as appendices "Thomas Taylor's edition of Porphyry's essay 'On the Cave of the Nymphs, in the thirteenth book of the Odyssey'" [240-262] and

Henry More's Platonic poem, "The Oracle" [263-265] because they are germane to his discussions of "Among School Children," "The Delphic Oracle Upon Plotinus," and "News for the Delphic Oracle." Even in these three poems, there is a desperate struggle with and against Platonism, a struggle lost and won and lost again throughout the poet's career. At times, Yeats will express clearly his inclination toward Platonism, as in "Book II: The Completed Symbol" of A Vision, where he writes that "all the symbolism of this book applies to begetting and birth, for all things are a single form which has divided and multiplied in time and space" [212]. But such Platonic faith is plainly overturned, still in A Vision, when he gives voice to the antithetical gnosis, not faith, that 1 = 1+/-:

> Exhausted by the cry that it can never end, my love ends; without that cry it were not love but desire, desire does not end. The anguish of birth and that of death cry out in the same instant. Life is no series of emanations from divine reason such as the Cabalists imagine, but an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall but a whirlpool, a gyre. [40]

Certainly much of the early poetry is virtually in thrall to the Platonic tradition as Allen Grossman's work demonstrates (see below), but even in the late poetry the agon continues, as Yeats battles then not only with the spectre of Platonism but also with the ghost of his own past achievements.[13] The central poetic figure in this agon is, inevitably, Shelley, for whom Yeats's youthful passion is well known, just as Shelley's passion for

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[13] Here and throughout this chapter I seek to undermine the Modernist commonplace, deriving from MacNeice, Ellmann, and the New Critics, that only Yeats's early poetry is Platonic, that (his) Modernism is born with the hardening of his verse in Responsibilities (1914). "From now on," writes MacNeice in 1941, "Yeats began to give the reins to his intellect, was no longer content to write in a half-sleep where distinctions are lost in a perpetual chiaroscuro" [99].

Platonism is well known. Among the works that deal with Yeats's Platonism, and in some measure through Shelley, are F. A. C. Wilson's W. B. Yeats and Tradition (1958), Allen Grossman's Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats: A Study of The Wind among the Reeds (1969), James Olney's The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy--Yeats and Jung (1980), and George Bornstein's Yeats and Shelley (1970).

4.5 The Image of Yeats as Platonist

> There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
> There all the serpent-tails are bit,
> There all the gyres converge in one,
> There all the planets drop in the Sun.
> "There"

When Donoghue complained (just as Snukal might well have done) that "the influence of the entire neo-Platonic tradition upon Yeats, if we are thinking of genuine kinship, has been exaggerated" [Yeats 47], he may have had Wilson's study in mind. For Wilson's book is devoted to placing Yeats clearly and emphatically within that tradition. Wilson's quarrel being with New Criticism and its narrow focus on discrete poems to the exclusion of literary historical contexts, he sought and achieved a scholarly description of "an ulterior body of knowledge, . . . the tradition of 'heterodox mysticism'" [15] from which Yeats's work is drawn and to which it refers. Donoghue's "genuine kinship" is of course only a trope; as such, it might refer to all or to none of the writers that Yeats studied, and by itself can neither include Nietzsche, as Donoghue would have it, nor exclude him as others might, unless, like Bloom, we trace and "measure" the revisionary distortions that

occur genealogically from poet to poet, evoking genuine kinship. But Wilson's interest is to assume Yeats's inclusion in a kinship of Platonic mysticism and to draw out the implications of that inclusion mainly for some plays but also for a few major poems.

The image of Yeats that Wilson presents, therefore--and in this respect he is clearly the precursor of Olney's work--is of a Platonic adept from youth to age, and of increasing sophistication. This adept I would see as the "Soul" of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," or the voice of "All Souls' Night" (1920), emphatically not the antithetical self that Bloom alludes to. Wilson describes how the youthful Yeats's interest in the occult led "to alchemy, to Kabbalism and to ceremonial magic" [26] as well as to Madame Blavatsky's theosophy; how (using Thomas Taylor's translation which is the same text that Shelley had used),[14] he "knew Porphyry as early as 1895" [33], Porphyry being "a mine of information on the Platonic symbolic system" [27]; and how in later life "he returned to Porphyry in the 'twenties . . . to use him copiously" [33], along with others such as Plotinus. What is significant in Wilson's discussion, and what he "must insist on," concerns

> [t]he precise relation between Yeats's symbolism and the Platonic, . . . [and] the importance of the system to his work. The Platonists were not only Yeats's most informative source, but they informed most of the other branches he knew of the tradition, [33-34]

that is to say, occult philosophies and practices. Despite its shortcomings regarding Yeats's stance towards Platonic orthodoxy,

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[14] "Both poets were acquainted with the European tradition of interpreting Plato according to the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus. They each found that merging of philosophical tradition in the works of Thomas Taylor, the influential translator of the Greek philosophers into English during the romantic period." Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley, p. 68.

Wilson's work has at least the merit of linking Platonism to "the other branches [that Yeats] knew of [that] tradition," which he broadly terms "heterodox mysticism" and which I call esoteric Platonism.[15]

As his title implies, esoteric Platonism is the focus of concern in Grossman's Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats, especially in the case of the fin de siècle book of poems, The Wind among the Reeds (1899). As I speculated above, "poetic knowledge" may be a tautology as well as an oxymoron. In Grossman's case the term seems to suggest not so much the revisionary stance of the gnostic poet towards tradition, as much as the visionary stance of the alchemist towards the detritus of earthly life. Analogous from some perspectives, these two stances can seem to shade into one another, which is why Donoghue mentions them in the same breath in describing Yeats's anthology as linked to "alchemical lore," and as "largely Hermetic and Gnostic" [Yeats 48]. Without mentioning Whitaker at all, in pressing this alchemical view of poetic knowledge, Grossman follows hard upon Whitaker who likewise associated Yeats's poems with alchemy, even as he began to open up Yeats studies to gnostic interpretations. Presently, I shall discuss exactly how the artist's gnosis must be seen as antithetical to the Hermetic, but for the moment I quote Grossman in order to note how Yeats's antithetical aesthetics, his "antithetics," should be seen, broadly, as a Platonism.

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[15] Esoteric Platonism will become more explicitly my theme in (4.6) below, as I discuss the Yeatsian crossing from Hermeticism to gnosis.

> Yeats's theory of symbolism . . . derives from a once almost universal sense of the world . . . common to figures as diverse as Porphyry, Aquinas, [the occultist, Cornelius] Agrippa, and the authors of the Upanishads, which regards reality merely as the evidence of its own transcendent origins. Its roots are deep in the religious sense of the real which understands the process of knowing as the reversal of the order of creation whereby man was separated from the Divine Essence. [23-24]

While Grossman emphasizes with detail and acumen how just one book of Yeats's poems intersects with the alchemical, the magical, and the Kabbalistic tradition of esoteric Platonism (much as Keane explores how the body of poems interacts mainly with the works of Nietzsche), James Olney stands out as the scholar devoted to explaining how Yeats's vision is embedded in a more conventionally Platonic tradition which, in his argument, links Yeats to Carl Jung:

> There is no lateral or temporal line that connects Yeats with Jung, but there are parallel lines which one could demonstrate and retrace, stretching back . . . [to] such primal figures as Plato first, and then, beyond Plato . . . , [to] Empedocles, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras. Seen in this light, the works of Yeats and Jung are present moments of a long past, a creative surfacing . . . of a continuous and unbroken, though sometimes chthonic and subterranean, body of slowly developed and developing human thought and performance. Thus a great tradition is discoverable behind [them] . . . : the Platonic system, shaped by Plato himself out of his four great predecessors and issuing in that immense tradition called Platonism. [9]

In a footnote, Olney distinguishes his effort from Wilson's as less concerned with "Yeats's debt to Neoplatonism," and more concerned with "Plato [and] his predecessors" [15]. Nevertheless, and despite his equal emphasis on Yeats and Jung, it is clear that Olney's project fulfills the promise of Wilson's work by transcending its limits--going beyond Wilson's emphasis,

especially on Porphyry, to Plato and his appropriation of pre-Socratic philosophers.

But the limits of Olney's own critical ethos are soon reached. Although the vast detail of his argument articulating Yeats with Platonism utterly overwhelms those like Donoghue and Snukal who, as we saw, would like to sever the tie between Yeats and Platonism, Olney's sense of a "continuous and unbroken" tradition from Pythagoras to Plato and then to Yeats does a disservice to Yeats and to the tradition. For it seems to me that our poet finds his most quintessentially Yeatsian lyricism when he sings in his most dynamic, self-transformative voice--the voices of wind and more so of fire, rather less in the voices of earth and water. That is to say, Yeats links himself to the pre-Socratics not to endorse, but to undo his Platonism.[16] He uses especially Heraclitus and Empedocles in his quarrel with himself, the self that is his Platonic "Soul." For Olney to miss this is to miss the mark of Yeatsian genius, which is also the mark of his gnostic stance towards Platonism. There is no "continuous and unbroken" poetic or philosophical tradition. There is only the breaking and the re-making of tradition. And those visionaries with genius enough to break the back of tradition become a new backbone of that tradition, broken yet strengthened. "Everything that can be broken should be broken"--another Emersonian shibboleth that Bloom has quoted [Agon 161]--is a gnomic slogan put into practice as well by Yeats as by any other poet in his tradition. "Marbles of the dancing floor / Break

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[16] In chapter six I will look more closely as Yeats's use of Heraclitus and Empedocles.

bitter furies of complexity, / Those images that yet / Fresh images beget . . . ," [364] writes Yeats in "Byzantium," suggesting the visionary violence with which the gnostic poet breaks the image-voice of the internalized precursor, begetting images afresh.[17] The pity concerning Olney's criticism, despite his sound erudition in Platonism, is his deafness to the trope of "breaking" as inalienable to tradition-making.

Bornstein's Yeats and Shelley I find more congenial than Olney's, Wilson's, or even Grossman's work on Yeats's Platonism, but he surpasses himself in his later book, Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens (1976). Whereas Olney and Wilson situate the poet within the philosophical, symbolic systems of Platonism and Neoplatonism, and Grossman does likewise (but more radically) within the arcane systems of Hermetic theurgy, Bornstein searches--more successfully in the second than in the first book--for the poetic tropes that will persuade us of Yeats's Shelleyan and Romantic Platonism. The condition of both poetry and philosophy may be to wander endlessly between truth and meaning, as Bloom has said,[18] but when criticism sees to it that poetry wanders into philosophy, indeed is reified into merely an example of philo-theo-sophical symbolic history, then it is criticism that wanders, erring into an unnecessary weakness. To the degree that Bornstein evades this weakness,

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[17] Bloom also comments on this passage and "the powerful trope that [Yeats] calls 'breaks'" in Agon. Interpreting "Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood" and the lines that follow, Bloom says, " . . . the spirits who are that flood are primarily the precursors: Blake, Shelley, Keats, Pater and Nietzsche, the antithetical fivefold who from their ephebe's perspective most truly represent 'bitter furies of complexity'" [46].

[18] This is a crucial theme of his recent book, Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present (1989).

sustaining his emphasis on the poetic qualities of the Platonism that he finds in the Yeats-Shelley dyad and later (implicitly) in Yeats's Romanticism generally, he deserves critical appreciation.

Yeats and Shelley is never quite sure if it is a book about philosophy or about poetry, so it ends up wavering between the two. At times, the importance for Yeats of Shelley's poetry-as-poetry receives due emphasis, as when Shelley's Alastor, his Prometheus Unbound, and the description of Ahasuerus in his Hellas are juxtaposed to various Yeats poems. Nevertheless, Bornstein can also fall back into the weaker posture of emphasizing the importance of essay positions, philosophies, and ideas, while remaining in touch with artistry and poetic technique:

> Shelley's thought and symbols had extensive parallels [as we saw above, a decade later Olney still speaks in terms of such "parallels"] in earlier writers, particularly in Plato and the Neoplatonists. Yeats did not trace Shelley's thought back to his predecessors so much to identify sources as to indicate Shelley's place in the great tradition of anti-materialist artists. Above all, Yeats sought in such poets as Shelley confirmation of his own philosophy and his own poetic technique. [109]

This sort of literary theory and criticism begins to fail its poetry precisely at the point where discovering one's place in a tradition and confirming one's ideas and technique no longer suffice, the point where a great poem crosses out of its place. We might say that "half" of a poem truly is its ethos, but its other "half," its sublime half, if it is to come at all, must come in a crossing out of ethos to the pathos or power that is the breaking of ethos. Such a moment will transform a tradition just as it thereby transforms also the poet in breaking his relation to a tradition.

The truly memorable moments of poetry arrive with such crossings, less often in moments that are mere examples of a prior ethos. Harold Bloom's revisionary criticism--beginning a little tentatively and ambivalently with his Yeats, but explosively with his Anxiety of Influence three years later--is the only work I know of to be dedicated to the mapping of these breaks or transformations, these "breakings of the vessels." But the beauty of his work is that, while mapping, it also transforms the tradition and breaks its own map in vigorous self-revision, transforming its own ethos with a pathos or power over its own past.

Bornstein seems to have caught an intuition of the critical importance of such Bloomian moments of crossing, for his Transformations of Romanticism enacts a revision of Yeats and Shelley, especially in that it relies more on the theory of "drive" (which in Bloom means a deeper-than-conscious, antithetical poetic will) and less on a theory of cognition which amounts to a naturalistic mimesis: "The point is not that [Yeats] borrowed terms from, say, Wordsworth [here, he is discussing the trope of "the mind's eye"], but that a drive to render similar mental action causes related phraseology" among lyric poets [52]. This sense of "mind" tends to fall short of the divine spark or pneuma of the Gnostic, "mind" being roughly equivalent to the "psyche"--which for the Gnostic is cosmic, fallen, and irredeemable--or even to the Platonic "Soul" as opposed to the antithetical "Self" in Yeats's poem. Nevertheless, Bornstein's later book moves towards a Bloomian trajectory. He endorses [11] the Romantic theory that Bloom called

"internalization of quest romance," and he enacts Bloom's sense of poems as "dyads," a poem's identity or substance being found only in the ratio of its internalization of the precursor.[19]

Although Yeatsian Platonism plays no explicit role in this book, it is clear from Bornstein's nascent Bloomian stance, from his sense of Yeats as a poet who transforms Romanticism, that he would no longer find it satisfactory to view Yeats as a mere example of the Platonic ethos. The agon of transformation (of both self and tradition) is too insistent in Yeats to be ignored or avoided. "The unpurged images of day recede; / . . . / Night resonance recedes" [363]. As Yeats here in "Byzantium" approaches a new gnosis, he finds again that both the day of the natural Self and the night of the Platonic Soul, "All that man is, / All mere complexities," must undergo the negative transcendence of antithetical vision. Being anti-natural, the Platonic Soul may be said to approach that vision in its ascent up the winding stair to ancestral night, but at his strongest moments Yeats seeks to cross over into renewed poetic divination by negating even his own ethos of the Platonic Sublime.

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[19] "The Internalization of Quest Romance," first published in 1969, was reprinted in Bloom's Romanticism and Consciousness (1970) and again in his Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition (1971). It is in The Anxiety of Influence, which Bornstein describes as "one of the major works of critical mythography in our century" [23], that Bloom deals with poems as interpoems or dyads: "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem" [95]. He later revises even this radical position to include the reader, thus turning poetry and criticism into a self-antithetical dialectic, implying in my terms that 1 = 1+/-.

4.6 From Ethos to Pathos, from the Hermetic to the Gnostic

> When the flaming lute-thronged angelic door is wide;
> When an immortal passion breathes in mortal clay;
> Our hearts endure the scourge . . .
> "The Travail of Passion"

This thesis began with a consideration of the Keatsian dictum, "Load every rift with ore," a rift which in de Man became an inescapable anti-mimetic abyss. It is my argument, however, that only in the leaping of the rift, the shooting of the gap from a mimetic and self-contained 1 to a self-antithetical 1+/-, can a poet move beyond an ethos, even though this new beyond then becomes itself another ethos or limit which the revisionary poet will seek to assail and breach. Bloom's most sustained and detailed work on this theory of poetic crossing comes in his Wallace Stevens (1977), especially in its final chapter, "Coda: Poetic Crossing," but in Agon he quotes Emerson in whom he says that he found his "critical idea of poetic crossings, those meaningful disjunctions that are the black holes of rhetoric:

> Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim." [24]

For Emerson, life only avails, but this certainly must be a uniquely strong sense of "life." In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud offers the horrifying--because circular--vision that "the aim of all life is death," as he links his two drives of Eros and Thanatos [Agon 107].[20] But Emerson's "life" is a trope for the negation of what in our lazy moments we simply accept as life; it is an Eros that evades unbreakable linkage to

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[20] Discussed in detail in "Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory of Creativity," Agon, pp. 91-118.

any death drive. Emerson's "life" is closer to Yeats's formula in A Vision for the object of poetic will, "simplification through intensity." Gnostics such as Valentinus, and Platonists such as Plotinus certainly share a profound hatred of life, in its lazy mundane sense, in that they all desire release from the prison of the body. But Gnostics would embrace the Emersonian trope of "life" when they also seek pneumatic release from the prison that is the psyche or the soul, from Platonic orthodoxy itself, and also from Christian and Jewish orthodoxy.[21] For the Gnostics there is a mythological negation, a crossing-beyond-the-limits of orthodoxy which divides them from their Platonizing contemporaries, and which Emerson tropes as "life"--the moment of transition out of a past state.

In this matter, the difficulty for the critics of Yeats's poems arrives in the stereophonic voices that the poems project. There is a dualism in his lyrical voice but it is not the dualism usually described, of mysticism or anti-naturalism on the one hand and hard-headed realism on the other, with a characteristic vacillation between the two. As we saw above (4.4), Donoghue wants us to see Yeats as a Platonist who was also an empiricist, "even on the same occasions" [Yeats 16]. Even J. Hillis Miller approximates Donoghue's view, though with infinitely greater subtlety, when, as we saw in the second chapter (2.5), he absorbs the approach and terms of Paul de Man's doctoral thesis, seeing

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[21] The main agon of historical Gnosticism was with Christianity, but Judaism was also contested in the sense that the Gnostics transgressed Judaic and Christian tropes for God by seeing these Gods as the Demiurge, himself a mere creature of the Abyss or True Divinity. Nevertheless I am mindful, as Susan Handelman has persuasively shown, that Judaism and Christianity differ greatly in their stances towards textuality--Christianity seeing only fulfillment, Incarnation, rejection of word in favor of the Word, Judaism embracing absence, deferral, and infinite interpretation.

Yeats as vacillating between naturalistic image and anti-naturalistic emblem. Curiously enough, I quite agree with the oxymoronic dualism of Yeats as an empirical Platonist or a natural anti-naturalist, and say that the voice of Yeats's gnosis is heard in the breaching of this weaker dualism by one that wagers more and is therefore more severe. In other words, the Yeats of "All those antinomies / Of day and night" [365], of male and female, of "All-destroying sword-blade still / Carried by the wandering fool. / Gold-sewn silk on the sword-blade, / Beauty and fool together laid" [354]; the familiar homely dualistic Yeats of natural self and ideal soul, of life and death, yin and yang is profoundly and soundly transgressed by the Yeats of "the thirteenth cone" in A Vision, the voice of the daemonic Yeats of gnostic vision in Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1917), the Yeats who is willing and "content to live it all again / And yet again, if it be life to pitch / Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch" [350], if this be the cost of the blessing which may transcend mere life and mere death, Freud's "life" whose aim is death, the life of the realists and the death of the Platonists.

Yeats virtually suggests as much, in his comments on the terrestrial condition and the condition of fire in Per Amica Silentia Lunae:

> There are two realities, the terrestrial and the condition of fire. All power is from the terrestrial condition, for there all opposites meet and there only is the extreme of choice possible, full freedom. And there the heterogeneous is, and evil, for evil is the strain one upon another of opposites; but in the condition of fire all is music and all rest. Between is the condition of air where images have but a borrowed life, that of memory or that reflected upon them when they symbolise colours and intensities of fire. [Mythologies 356-357, my emphasis]

It would be merely an academic exercise to trace to Platonic origins the use of certain symbols in this passage, but the only remnant of those origins in the stance of the passage towards those symbols is in his suggestion that in the condition of fire "all [is] rest," a view that the Emersonian gnosis of "life" and "power" would find suspect. Otherwise, the passage strongly suggests a crossing out of the stasis of the balance of cosmic opposites, the balance of life and death. The terrestrial condition suggests earth and water alike, earth associated with the life that aims towards death in Freud, and water suggesting the Platonic version of release from that round--"What's water but the generated soul?" [359] writes Yeats in one of his poems. But as Yeats came to know, Platonic release into "ancestral night" only leads into a new round of life and death, the Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls. This terrestrial condition, in its Freudian aspect that dovetails Eros and Thanatos, receives beautiful expression in "The Wheel" (1921):

> Through winter-time we call on spring,
> And through the spring on summer call,
> And when abounding hedges ring
> Declare that winter's best of all;
> And after that there's nothing good
> Because the spring-time has not come--
> Nor know that what disturbs our blood
> Is but its longing for the tomb. [318]

Similarly, "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1916) elegiacally suggests the watery nature of the Platonic Soul and the eternal return of the swans to the lake:

> 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? [233]

Other examples of the Yeatsian voice of the watery Soul, such as in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), could be put forward, but I must press on. The voice of the condition of air, as in "the haystack- and roof-levelling wind" [295] that howls through "A Prayer for My Daughter" (1919), is still associated with the terrestrial condition and its round of opposites, having a "borrowed life" through memory of the terrestrial, while being but a mirror upon which the images of fire may be reflected. But in the condition of fire itself, "all is music," lyricism, the image of voice--deepest of mysteries of the human divine. Time, even in the form of the eternal return--ouroboros, the tail-biting serpent of esoteric Platonism--time is defeated, and even the soul becomes a body, transformed by the pneumatic energy of the antithetical self into a god:

> When all sequence comes to an end, time comes to an end, and the soul puts on the rhythmic or spiritual body or luminous body and contemplates all the events of its memory and every possible impulse in an eternal possession of itself in a single moment.
> [Mythologies 357]

In such passages which recall the Blakean-Yeatsian vortex that, as we saw in (4.1), so intrigued Hazard Adams, Yeats enacts the gnostic "lie against time" that Bloom speaks of. He re-imagines his own origins, and in driving for immortality he tropes and transforms even his own beloved ethos of Platonism.

The utter difficulty of breaking out of the huge and parental trope of Platonism can be imagined if we figure the

historically problematic relation between Hermeticism and Gnosticism. "Hermeticism" derives from the mysterious authorial name of Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice-Greatest Hermes). In A Vision (1937) Yeats refers to Hermes or to Hermetic Fragments on no fewer than five occasions.[22] As G. R. S. Mead has shown in his source study and translation of the works attributed to this mythical divine author, the term "Hermetic" carries a special ambiguity. He says that he "adopted the term Trismegistic literature in place of the usual designation Hermetic" in order to distinguish it from, among other things, "the later Hermetic Alchemical literature" [2]. He therefore speaks of "the so-called Hermetic works" [3], concerned with medicine, mathematics, astrology, and alchemy. Perhaps most famous among the Hermetic works falsely attributed to Hermes Trismegistus is the Tabula Smaragdina, the Emerald Tablet, a work of alchemical mysticism published in 1541 that Yeats was familiar with.[23]

The problem for a Yeats critic attuned to his gnosticism is that the "Hermetic" work that he knew was largely from this category of "so-called Hermetic works," the Blavatsky theosophy, the Mathers alchemy, magic, decadent Kabbalah, and so on. "For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said" [403] writes Yeats, alluding to his Hermetic reading. Yet the Trismegistic literature itself Yeats also knew. Indeed, he quotes from the Asclepius dialogue in A Vision [211]. Versions of the "Poimandres" (the Shepherd of Men), which is the first

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[22] Pp. 190, 211, 253, 254, 259.

[23] Wayne Shumaker, The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance (1972), p. 178; Jeffares, Commentary (1968), p. 428.

treatise of the Corpus Hermeticum and also belongs, with the Asclepius, to the Trismegistic literature proper, had long been in circulation, since Marcilio Ficino in 1471 published his Latin translation of the Greek manuscript of the Hermetica. (He would later publish also his translations of Plato and Plotinus.) Furthermore, according to the catalogue of the (William Wynn) Wescott Hermetic Library, an English language edition was available to members like Yeats of the Golden Dawn.[24] Adding to the difficulty is that the Trismegistic literature is, rightly considered, proto-Gnostic. In his highly authoritative study, The Gnostic Religion, Hans Jonas says of the Corpus Hermeticum, "This literature, not as a whole but in certain portions, reflects gnostic spirit," and of the first treatise he adds, "The Hermetic Poimandres treatise itself, in spite of some signs of Jewish influence, is to be regarded as a prime document of independent pagan Gnosticism" [41].

However, despite the fact that they bear some analogies to Gnosticism or have Gnostic tendencies, being, like Gnosticism, heretical from the perspectives of orthodox Christianity, Judaism, and even Platonism and Neoplatonism, the "so-called Hermetic Works" in my view are not works of Gnosticism, but rather of esoteric Platonism. In The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance, Wayne Shumaker gives a similar distinction, dividing "Hermetism . . . [which is a] contemplative doctrine" from "hermeticism [i.e.,] esoteric systems generally" [206]. In commenting on Agrippa's famous treatise De occulta philosophia (first published in 1533 and quoted by Yeats in A Vision {1925},

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[24] Appendix S of Harper's Yeats's Golden Dawn, pp. 290-305.

p. 220), Shumaker also points out that "the distinguishing of the theological and philosophical Hermes from the alchemical, astrological, and magical one becomes increasingly difficult" [234]. If we ask, therefore, what it might be that distinguishes Hermeticism from Gnosticism and qualifies it as esoteric Platonism, the answer must be that Gnosticism will always take an extreme stance in favor of what Yeats calls the "self-delighting / Self-appeasing, self-affrighting" [297] divination of the individual and the severe revision of received orthodoxy; whereas Hermeticism will always be itself an esoteric orthodoxy, decadent, occult, and void of the self-revisionary impulse of the gnostic artist. In a word, the dualism of the gnostic is more severe than the dualism of the Platonist, even of the esoteric mystic, and it is the "more severe, more harassing" dualism that commits the gnostic to an agon of revisionism within and against the tradition, and within and against the self.[25]

4.7 The Condition of Fire

> What if I bade you leave
> The cavern of the mind?
> There's better exercise
> In the sunlight and wind.
> "Those Images"

Just as Yeats moves against and out of the tradition that he inherits and has internalized, he performs the crossing from his Platonism to gnosis throughout his career, within individual poems, between poems, between phases or periods, and within

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[25] The quotation alludes to canto XXVIII of Wallace Stevens' poem, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a canto which, like Yeats, moves from the Platonizing of "the endlessly elaborating poem" to the gnostic crisis or crossing point of "subtler, more urgent proof . . . in the intricate evasions of as" [486].

groups or collections of poems. I will not pause to detail the revision that Yeats enacts poetically upon his Platonic tradition, both Bornstein and Bloom having already done this superbly in 1970. The second half of Bornstein's Yeats and Shelley, which he titles "Antinomial Vision: Yeats's Alternative to Shelley," develops the issue of Yeats's confrontation of his Platonism through his rejection and revision of his earlier Shelleyan vision. Bornstein patiently argues what I would word more pragmatically and urgently--that Yeats's many poems and stories on the theme of the Celestial Rose embody his changing agon with Shelley's Platonic (and Dantean) trope of Intellectual Beauty. And since Yeats's misreading of his precursor Blake was to turn him into an esoteric Platonist like himself, Bloom's Yeats develops the agon that Yeats internalized between himself and a Platonized Blake. I therefore pass on first to consider poetic crossing within individual poems.

We have already seen how this crossing happens as negative transcendence in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," whereas "Among School Children" sublimely shies away from just this crossing, preferring instead to deny "beauty born out of its own despair, / [And] blear-eyed widsom out of midnight oil" [325]. But in "The Tower" (1925) there is no shying away:

> And I declare my faith
> I mock Plotinus' thought
> And cry in Plato's teeth,
> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul,
> Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
> And further add to that
> That, being dead, we rise,
> Dream and so create
> Translunar Paradise. [306]

Falling back into ethos again, Yeats's note to the poem and these lines retracts his vigorous and vitally self-divinating negation of their transcendence: "When I wrote the lines about Plato and Plotinus I forgot that it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence" [577]. He then quotes Plotinus describing soul as "author of all living things," but his retraction cannot nullify the force of his poetic crossing, "Out of his bitter soul" and into his own "Translunar Paradise," his own gnostic vision. Merely to repeat the tropes of Plato and Plotinus would be a form of poetic death. As Bloom has observed on Eros and Thanatos, turning Freud to his own purposes, poetic rather than psychoanalytic, "literal meaning equals anteriority equals an earlier state of meaning equals an earlier state of things equals death equals literal meaning. Only one escape is possible from such a formula, and it is a simpler formula: Eros equals figurative meaning."[26] In order to live poetically, Yeats must "mock Plotinus' thought / And cry in Plato's teeth," re-imagining his own origins, begetting himself.

Medieval or Renaissance alchemy may be a form of esoteric Platonism, but Yeats demonstrates its utter suitability as a metaphor of the poetic process of self-recreation in "Sailing to Byzantium," just as in writing "Byzantium" he demonstrates the limits of that metaphor, surely making his most famous of crossings between poems. The voice of the earlier poem, despite its resplendent troping of old age as a singing soul--

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[26] Agon, p. 107; italics removed.

> An aged man is but a paltry thing,
> A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
> Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
> For every tatter in its mortal dress . . . [301]

--and despite its exquisite longing to join the holy precursors in the daemonic fire of self-creation--

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
> And be the singing-masters of my soul . . . [301]

--the voice of "Sailing to Byzantium" remains on this side, the near side of a crossing yet to be made into the holy fire. But the voice of "Byzantium" <u>is</u> that holy fire, as the poet in agon with his precursors finds himself a flame among "flames begotten of flame." He finds himself and begets himself

> Where blood-begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,
> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. [364]

Where "Among School Children" had brilliantly evaded the agon/y of "Dying into a dance," preferring instead "the blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul" [325]; where "Sailing to Byzantium" had offered the alchemical promise to turn the self into a golden bird, an eternal artifice "Of hammered gold and gold enamelling" [302]; the fiery voice of "Byzantium" becomes the agonic dance of flame. Here, the promise of transfiguration will not suffice, as the voice of the poem cannot abide being mere vessel of transmutation. Yeats shatters the alchemical trope of poem-as-crucible, in a new breaking of the vessels, becoming instead "More miracle than bird or handiwork." Even the pneuma of the Gnostic, often taken as

"breath," will not suffice and requires further purification into the breathless:

> A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
> Breathless mouths may summon;
> I hail the superhuman . . . . [363]

And the superhuman that Yeats summons and that summons him to the fire, his Heraclitean-Coleridgean trope, "I call it death-in-life and life-in-death," becomes the very image of the antithetical that is antithetical even to itself, the "thirteenth cone" of A Vision that transcends the antinomies of death and life by way of the gnostic negation that is both and neither life and death. Appallingly neither human nor anti-human, Yeats's "superhuman" trope performs the supermimesis of Bloom's theory that evades both the natural mimesis of the historicizers and the anti-mimesis of the deconstructors. I hyperbolize, of course, but is there another way for poet or critic to suggest the daemonic Sublime?

As Emerson says, "life only avails," and Yeats begets new life upon himself whenever he enacts "the shooting of the gulf, . . . the darting to a new aim," the refusal to settle for merely sailing to Byzantium when not only being in Byzantium but becoming Byzantium is within his reach. Similarly, the maturing Yeats could not survive poetically within his youthful Platonism. As Grossman's work suggests, The Wind among the Reeds is a book of poems imbued entirely with the ethos of esoteric Platonism, and in a poem such as "The Valley of the Black Pig" (1986)[27] this ethos takes the form of a desire for transcendence through apocalypse: " . . . unknown spears / Suddenly hurtle before my

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[27] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 516.

dream-awakened eyes, / And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries / Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears" [100]. But even this apocalypse appears "flaccid," as Whitaker has said [42], when it is seen through the stance of Yeats's stronger, more transgressive tropes, in a later apocalyptic poem such as "The Cold Heaven" (1912).[28] For in "Black Pig" the apocalypse is invited down upon a voice that, "Being weary of the world's empires," seeks to "bow down to" the precursor-as-Demiurge, "Master of the still stars and of the flaming door" [100]. In "The Cold Heaven," however, the voice of apocalyptic obeisance to the precursor is transformed by a stronger posture, one that wagers more intensely, thereby stealing more of the precursor's fire.

> Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
> That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
> And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
> So wild that every casual thought of that and this
> Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out
> of season
> With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
> And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
> Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
> Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
> Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
> Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
> By the injustice of the skies for punishment? [227]

The voice of the later poem shows that the voice of the earlier poem--waiting on the earthly side of death and heaven, bowing down to the master, and pleading for transfiguration--will no longer suffice. Instead, already "riddled with light" and beginning "to quicken," the voice enacts its own catastrophe creation. The "hot blood of youth" returns and pulses through the poem's voice, though it "should be out of season." "Naked

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[28] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 549.

on the roads," under a cold heaven of burning ice, wagering total exposure--and as we saw above (4.3) in Bloom's words, "Yeats is never stronger than when he is totally exposed"--the voice of the poem may await being "stricken / By the injustice of the skies," but a reader may sense that the precursor's lightning does not destroy the voice; rather it deifies the voice. Punishment becomes a question rather than a certainty; lightning strikes the poet, but having gained the poetic strength to seize it, he in some measure transfigures himself as well as the earlier "flaccid" poem.

4.8 Supernatural Crossings, Supermimetic Songs

> . . . when such bodies join
> There is no touching here, nor touching there
> Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole.
> "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn"

Concerning "the natural union of man and woman," in A Vision Yeats says, "I see in it a symbol of that eternal instant where the antinomy is resolved. It is not the resolution itself" [214]. Earlier in the same work, Yeats writes, putting the words into the mouth of one of his characters, Michael Robartes, as reported in a letter by another character, John Duddon, "Death cannot solve the antinomy: death and life are its expression" [52]. And he continues:

> The marriage bed is the symbol of the solved antinomy, and were more than symbol could a man there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the same as the sleep of death. [52]

Being a good Yeatsian, if an anxiety-ridden one, Bloom turns such remarks to a different context, a discussion of Freud, Eros, and Thanatos: "Sexual 'union' is after all nothing but figurative,

since the joining involved is merely a yoking in act and not in essence. The act, in what we want to call normal sexuality, is a figuration for the unattainable essence" [Agon 139-140]. Yeats's "symbol of the solved antinomy" and Bloom's "figuration for the unattainable essence" begin to suggest the trajectory of the gnosis sought, and then itself transcended, in "Supernatural Songs," a collection of just twelve poems in A Full Moon in March (1935).[29] Eight of the twelve explicitly seek the light of the unattainable essence, the negation of life and death, in sexual union; and of the other four, only "The Four Ages of Man" and "Meru" may be said to forego this symbol in their quest for the light, while "There" and "A Needle's Eye" (both previously quoted) implicitly seek the light of sexual union. Here I wish to conclude this chapter by showing how "Supernatural Songs," first in the symbol of sexual union and then in the revision of that symbol, re-engages Yeats with his Platonism and with his gnostic agon to cross beyond it.

In 1955, as I noted above (4.2), Hazard Adams' work on Blake and Yeats, The Contrary Vision, began to open Yeats studies to Gnostic concerns. Now thirty-five years on, his Book of Yeats's Poems (1990) continues to make such suggestions, but to go no further. Yet his comments on "Supernatural Songs" [215-220], if less than inspirational, are useful. With reference to Ribh (rhymes with Steve), the character who utters most if not all of the poems in the group, Adams notes that "Ribh takes up the Platonic notion of a hierarchy of imitations, but he rejects the

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[29] Except for "A Needle's Eye," all of the poems are dated by Jeffares, Yeats's Poems, as late 1933 to early 1935.

Platonic idea and insists on the image" [216]. Citing what he calls Ribh's "antithetical theology" with its mix of "elderly irascibility [and] ecstatic vision," Adams describes Ribh's heresy: "The Christian trinity is false because it is entirely masculine; the true trinity is formed by father, mother, and child, allowing for procreation" [216]. While properly suggestive of the themes of these poems, such comments do little to advance any notion of the poetic crossings or agons happening in the poems and betraying their origins. Adams thus presents a precisely detailed portrait of the poems, but cannot help us at all to see how their meaning gets started, how they re-imagine their origins by confronting orthodoxy.

The voice in the poems seems to desire a vision of gnostic heresy (Adams' "antithetical theology"), yet falls at times into merely Platonic thought. But it is the crossing between the two that energizes the voice. In a general comment on these poems, Yeats says that the "old hermit Ribh, . . . were it not for his ideas about the Trinity, [would be] an orthodox man."[30] The playful irony of Yeats must not be underestimated, yet it seems to me that here he so far underplays the measure of his gnostic deviation that he takes it for orthodoxy. Jeffares' Commentary on the Collected Poems reports that in his preface to A Full Moon in March Yeats says, Ribh's Christianity "come[s] perhaps from Egypt" [425]. If Yeats is right, then this would make Ribh a sort of Irish Valentinus.

In the first poem, "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn," we find Ribh addressing us "in the pitch-dark night" [402]. This

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[30] Jeffares, Commentary, p. 425.

darkness may not quite be the same ancestral night of the Platonic Soul with its blandishments to the Self in "A Dialogue," but it is just as deathly, for Ribh sits in a graveyard, reading by the light of a miracle. The miraculous light that penetrates the darkness of his soul is a momentary heretical light, just the other side of orthodoxy. He speaks here of Baile and Aillinn:

> The miracle that gave them such a death
> Transfigured to pure substance what had once
> Been bone and sinew; when such bodies join
> There is no touching here, nor touching there,
> Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole;
> For the intercourse of angels is a light
> Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed. [402]

Ribh's speech breaks through Christian and Platonic orthodoxy precisely at the point where it insists on the simultaneity of the spiritual and sensual coitus of the angel-lovers--"Those lovers, purified by tragedy, / Hurry into each others' arms"--thus evading and crossing beyond the disembodied spiritualism of the orthodox.

But in the second poem, "Ribh Denounces Patrick," there is only the appearance of heresy. For what seems to be a heresy, the denunciation of Saint Patrick and of the masculine Christian Trinity, turns out to be, as far as Yeats is concerned, the quite orthodox position of esoteric Platonism with its mimetic relation between spirit and matter, god and human, soul and body. "For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said," notes Ribh, anachronistically alluding to the medieval Hermetic text. Here, the coitus of humans ("the conflagration of their passion"), despite potential, fails to do any more than reproduce multiplicity:

The mirror-scalèd serpent is multiplicity,
But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air,
share God that is but three,
And could beget or bear themselves could they but
love as He. [403]

The third poem, "Ribh in Ecstasy," performs a double movement, first crossing into a self-divination, and then falling back. What begins in a memory of gnostic vision ends in a naturalistic allusion to Wordsworth's asexual vision in the "Intimations" Ode, and its brilliant canto V. In Wordsworth,

The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

In Yeats's poem, though old and decrepit, the hermit has had a vision splendid, an intensely sexual vision in his case, yet he too falls and fades back into the ethos of common light:

. . . My soul had found
All happiness in its own cause or ground.
Godhead on Godhead in sexual spasm begot
Godhead. Some shadow fell. My soul forgot
Those amorous cries that out of quiet come
And must the common round of day resume. [403]

Yeats here achieves a vision which requires that we link him to the Valentinian Speculation. The Aeons of the Pleroma beget themselves in sexual spasm, thereby also creating a veil or a shadow limiting the Pleroma and dividing it from "Error [which] elaborate[s] its own Matter in the Void" of the Archons led by the Demiurge of the Cosmos. As <u>The Gospel of Truth</u> says, "Oblivion did not come into existence close to the Father, although it came into existence because of Him." For the soul to forget the amorous cries of the Aeons is to repeat the fall from what Wordsworth in the Great Ode calls "The glory and the

freshness of a dream," the result being to "fade into the light of common day."[31]

In the fourth poem, the little quatrain called "There" which I have set as the epigraph for (4.5), fails, it seems to me, to do other than come to rest within the ethos of Platonism, its vision of Solar unity being somewhere out "There" rather than "Here." But surely the fifth poem, "Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient," must become known as a masterpiece of negative transcendence and Yeatsian gnosis.

> Why should I seek for love or study it?
> It is of God and passes human wit.
> I study hatred with great diligence,
> For that's a passion in my own control,
> A sort of besom that can clear the soul
> Of everything that is not mind or sense. [404]

Yeats names Christian Love in the title, but the poem's target is in fact broader than this. Plato's Symposium and Shelley's Epipsychidion are two major imaginative efforts "that seek for love and study it," and that influenced, flowed into, some of Yeats's best poems, including "Adam's Curse" (1902) and the great later poem it begat, "Among School Children." But my word "target" is misleading, for the poem seeks to evade the study of love rather than confront it. The intense desire to "clear the soul" by way of hatred rather than love results in the anxious and pleonastic use of "not" in the final line above, for the pneumatic purity that is the purpose of the Gnostic requires the negation of mind and sense.

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[31] The Valentinian Speculation is summarized by Jonas, The Gnostic Religion, pp. 174-205. The quotation from The Gospel of Truth is from p. 182. The full text of The Gospel of Truth was discovered along with many other Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945-46.

> Why do I hate man, woman or event?
> That is a light my jealous soul has sent.
> From terror and deception freed it can
> Discover impurities, can show at last
> How soul may walk when all such things are past,
> How soul could walk before such things began.

Hatred becomes a purgative light from a "jealous soul," a force of liberation "from terror and deception." Freedom for the Gnostic arrives by way of the evasion of the terror of anteriority which attempts to deceive the pneumatic soul into a vision that is alien to the individual gnosis of that soul.[32] As Bloom says in Agon, alluding to the poem by Wallace Stevens with which I began this chapter,

> How can evasion be an idea of order? Only by identifying itself with an elitism, is probably the only answer, whether one thinks of evasion in erotic, religious or literary terms. Evasion is in flight from or represses fate [or ethos], and again, whether erotic, religious or literary, the principle of evasion denies that existence is historical. [67]

The pneumatic soul quests after a way of walking that is beyond time, and in so doing, it denies that its existence is historical; it lies against time; it delivers itself from terror and deception, into a new self-chosen (elite) freedom, and a knowledge that is darker than the knowledge of orthodox anteriority.

> Then my delivered soul herself shall learn
> A darker knowledge and in hatred turn
> From every thought of God mankind has had.
> Thought is a garment and the soul's a bride
> That cannot in that trash and tinsel hide:
> Hatred of God may bring the soul to God.

---

[32] I follow Bloom's sense of "anteriority," meaning the burden of tradition felt by the belated imagination. I also here follow his sense of "evasion," not meaning (as it sometimes can) a weak turning away from the precursor, but meaning a strong turning of poetic desire for priority despite the inevitability of belatedness. In Bloom, evasive freedom is a fulcrum in a dialectical triad--"negation, evasion, and extravagance" [Agon 59].

Like the antithetical self of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," the Yeatsian voice of the old hermit seeks a blessing that may come only by a movement that is downward and inward, rather than upward and outward as in the Platonic and Christian ascents via love. In this poem, downward and inward movement purifies the soul of its "trash and tinsel"--a sublimely evasive negation of "every thought of God [that] mankind has had." And the bold extravagance of the line, "Hatred of God may bring the soul to God," is surpassed only by the fourth stanza itself, which portrays the coital coming of the soul as a bride to God by way of the evasive hatred of anteriority.

> At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure
> A bodily or mental furniture.
> What can she take until her Master give!
> Where can she look until He make the show!
> What can she know until He bid her know!
> How can she live till in her blood He live! [404]

The coitus of the soul and God becomes the act of knowing in which the knower becomes the known. Christian faith and love are irrelevant, insufficient, for the soul of Ribh's voice, "at stroke of midnight," has, in an act of solipsistic negation, purged itself of all "bodily or mental furniture." "At stroke of midnight," the moment of possible release from the antinomies of death and birth, the wheel of eternal return, the pneuma of the Gnostic poet may re-unite itself with the Abyss.

The sixth poem of the group, "He and She," seems to be the voice of Ribh's soul singing of her being known: "'His light had struck me blind / Dared I stop.'/ . . . / All creation shivers / With that sweet cry" [405]. "What Magic Drum?" breaks off the intuition that coitus may be a gnosis, as Yeats turns to feel and

see the perversely beautiful, darkly postnatal rhythms and images of androgynous Godhead and its young:

> He holds him from desire, all but stops his breath lest
> Primordial Motherhood forsake his limbs, the child no
> longer rest,
> Drinking joy as it were milk upon his breast.
>
> Through light-obliterating garden foliage what magic drum?
> Down limb and breast or down that glimmering belly move his
> mouth and sinewy tongue.
> What from the forest came? What beast has licked its young?
> [405]

The eighth poem, however, "Whence Had They Come," returns to see again the notion that "Eternity is passion," but here the poet turns against even this gnostic insight of his, attacking it with a pessimistic historical bitterness that is equally gnostic.

> Eternity is passion, girl or boy
> Cry at the onset of their sexual joy
> 'For ever and for ever'; then awake
> Ignorant what Dramatis Personae spake; [405]

"Ignorant" reveals the utter bitterness of the speaker--is it still Ribh? we know not--at the fall away not only from gnostic knowledge but from "sexual joy." Bitterly attacking his own poetic stances, he cries, "A passion-driven exultant man sings out / Sentences that he has never thought." Typically, Yeats would seek the voice of exultant passionate singing as a lie of release, but these lines are a bitter self-attack in that he associates such "Sentences" with the self-mortifying actions of an ascetic: "The Flagellant lashes those submissive loins / Ignorant what that dramatist enjoins, / What master made the lash" [405-406]. Yeats's gnosticism has at this point come to torture him, its severe dualism that denies faith and love being a source of acute pain, a form of self-induced terror. There is

no release from the wheel, he seems to say, only the illusion of it, as in the ninth poem, "The Four Ages of Man":

> He with body waged a fight,
> But body won; he walks upright.
>
> Then he struggled with the heart;
> Innocence and peace depart.
>
> Then he struggled with the mind;
> His proud heart he left behind.
>
> Now his wars on God begin;
> At stroke of midnight God shall win. [406]

The trope of the "stroke of midnight" returns, but unlike in the poem on "Christian Love" which took the most exquisite pleasure in transmuting negation into transcendence, here we find only more turnings of the wheel of fate as defeat is heaped upon defeat.

"Conjunctions" is poem ten, and like "A Needle's Eye" which follows it, "Conjunctions" manages to rediscover a voice that finds joy in speaking of the fusion of things contrary:

> If Jupiter and Saturn meet,
> What a crop of mummy wheat!
>
> The sword's a cross; thereon He died:
> On breast of Mars the goddess sighed. [406]

But nearly as miraculous as Ribh on "Christian Love" is the final poem of the group, "Meru." The poem, a Shakespearean sonnet, recapitulates Yeats's vision of the wheel of civilization and reiterates his horror at its meaning for humankind, the utter depravity of our race. And then he finds something glorious.

> Civilisation is hooped together, brought
> Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
> By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
> And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
> Ravening through century after century,
> Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
> Into the desolation of reality:
> Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!

> Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
> Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
> Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
> Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
> That day brings round the night, that before dawn
> His glory and his monuments are gone. [407]

The glory of this poem is in its crossing, its shooting of the gap and darting to a new aim; the crossing from ignorance to knowing, from "ignosis" to gnosis. The speaker of "Whence Had They Come" bewailed twice the "Ignorant" state of "girl or boy," "exultant" poet, and ascetic "Flagellant," indeed of all humankind. This ignorance, if anything, is only intensified in "Meru"; "manifold illusion" dominates our sight, "terror" our emotions, and destruction our actions, as we "cannot cease / Ravening through century after century, / Ravening, raging, and uprooting that we may come / Into the desolation of reality." This desolation is a trope of the zero-point of human depravity. And yet there is a knowing that transcends our depraved negations. Like a gazelle leaping a ravine, the voice of the poet leaps across the divide between ignorance and knowing, and once again his repressed or forgotten precursor, now here daemonically remembered, is the Wordsworth of the "Intimations" Ode.

In Wordsworth, the crossing to the voice of the Sublime happens between cantos VIII and IX. As if speaking to the "little Child" but more precisely to his own pneumatic soul, his crushed, aging, and straining poetic voice, Wordsworth crosses from a severe contraction to a glorious expansion:

> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
> Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,

And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

In Yeats, the pressure of the "inevitable yoke . . . [of] earthly freight" is re-seen as the horrifying trope, "the desolation of reality," even as the pneumatic voice of each poem is close to death-by-exposure to frost and snow. Yet like Wordsworth, Yeats manages to cross over to the feeling that his ember, his divine spark, still lives, as he introjects the gnosis of the hermits on the mountain who see and know the meaning of desolate reality: although "Caverned in night under the drifted snow, / . . . / [they] know / That day brings round the night, that before dawn / [Man's] glory and his monuments are gone." Catastrophe creation--can there be a trope more pragmatic for this crossing than Bloom's?

It has been my argument through this chapter not that Yeats was not a Platonist or Neoplatonist, but rather that his sense of belatedness in the context of his tradition and his powerful impulse to the revision of that tradition and to self-revision compells us to regard his native and beloved Platonism as the very ethos which he had to transcend if he would remain a living imagination--this stance being precisely the stance of the ancient Gnostics towards Platonic and religious orthodoxy. In much of <u>The Gnostic Religion</u> Hans Jonas clearly contrasts Gnostic dualism to the pious Hellenic view of the cosmos that prevailed at the beginning of the Common Era when Gnostic religions sprang up in the Eastern Mediterranean area. He notes that

> cosmic law, once regarded as the expression of a reason with which man's reason can communicate in the act of cognition and which it can make its own in the shaping of conduct, is now seen only in its aspect of compulsion which thwarts man's freedom. The cosmic logos of the Stoics is replaced by heimarmene, oppressive cosmic fate. [253]

A little further on, he continues,

> The only thing the pneumatic is committed to is the realm of the transmundane deity, a transcendence of the most radical kind. This transcendence, unlike the "intelligible world" of Platonism or the world-Lord of Judaism, does not stand in any positive relation to the sensible world. It is not the essence of that world, but its negation and cancellation. . . . [T]he acosmic Self or pneuma, otherwise hidden, reveals itself in the negative experience of otherness, of non-identification, and of protested indefinable freedom. [271]

Turning Jonas's comments to his own purposes of describing poetic tradition as an ongoing dialectic of misreading and revisionism, Bloom says that

> Every Gnostic version of the Demiurge is an instance of what I would call "revisionary counterpoint," in which the Hebraic Genesis, the Gospel of John, and Plato's Timaeus are intricately "misread" so as to produce a "corrective" new amalgam, which is always a catastrophe. [Agon 77]

No wonder, then, that the Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry, as well as the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, mounted such attacks on the Gnostics, attempting to defend their weaker cosmic dualisms and positive mythologies against the transgressive dualisms and acosmic mythologies of the Gnostic sects. And no wonder that Yeats's poems have been so weakly misunderstood or attacked by his critics, even by the early Bloom. For Yeats's poetic gnosis can be a bitter vision. His fame suffers under the weight of critical ideologies of cosmic positivity, weak misreadings all, which seek to tame the spirit of absolute self-recreative freedom that is the sign of

the dialectics of his poetic career. The spirit that rages in Yeats's veins is the spirit of Pico della Mirandolla, friend of Ficino, Renaissance Hermeticist, and Christian heretic, who, discoursing "On the Dignity of Man," said:

> And if he is not contented with the lot of any creature but takes himself up into the center of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things. [5]

Nor can we deny the influence into Yeats of his divine precursor, Hamlet:

> What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? [II, ii, 303-308; p. 112]

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
"Leda and the Swan"

Chapter Five
Yeatsian History and the White Noise that Wounds

Since I have extended such praise to Harold Bloom's work in chapter four, will the reader find it bizarre that I now go on to argue the one area of weakness that I find in his work? No critic and certainly no theorist but Bloom can bring me so close to my deepest intuitions concerning poems as events and poetry as tradition. And yet Bloom's failure--if we can name any aspect of such a sublime vision a "failure"--may be that his theory of poetry and his practical criticism fall short of a fully blown negative dialectics, in that he does not emphasize the manner of the negation of history that poetry is. To this juncture I have been implying no more and no less than Bloom, that poetic negation is an event of literary or tropological revisionism. But I now wish to revise my own and Bloom's conjectures by expanding the pragmatics and purpose of poetic negation to encompass what I call the "white noise" of history, the raw event or massive deathly Other that invades and threatens to destroy

us. Could "white noise" as insidious history have been Blake's intuition when he wrote "The Sick Rose"?

> O Rose, thou art sick!
> The invisible worm,
> That flies in the night,
> In the howling storm,
>
> Has found out thy bed
> Of crimson joy;
> And his dark secret love
> Does thy life destroy. [31]

The purpose of this fifth chapter therefore will be to revise, to further negativize Bloom's theory. To fulfill this purpose, I must return to what in the third chapter I called "Yeatsian history," and must elaborate the sense in which "Yeatsian history" is a creative correction of Bloom. To aid me in this process I must have recourse not only to Yeats's poems but also to the greatest of Yeats critics on the question of Yeats and history, Thomas Whitaker. In chapter four I discussed briefly his Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History (1964), as the first book to begin to deal at all adequately with Yeats's gnosticism and therefore as the crucial precursor-work for Bloom's explosive revision of Yeats's gnosticism. In the present chapter, therefore, I will confront the revisionary gnostic trinity of Yeats, Whitaker, and Bloom in order to put forward a transumption that may be criticism's best second chance to approach knowing what happens when poetry and "white noise" meet at the crossroads, when the crimson rose and the invisible worm meet in the imagination of a strong poet like Yeats.

In the first chapter I laid out my appreciation of, as well as my objections to, the anti-mimetic poetics of deconstruction, just as in the third chapter I detailed my reservations con-

cerning the mimetic poetics of historicism. Clearly, therefore, I do not here intend to lapse into a new historicism. My trope of "white noise" is intended to defend against that ever-present possibility, and to defend against the free-fall of anti-mimeticism, while at the same time opening poetry to the ravaging power of history. Just as this ravaging power was pictured by the poet in "Meru"--

> And [man], despite his terror, cannot cease
> Ravening through century after century,
> Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
> Into the desolation of reality . . . [407]

--so, the opening of poetry to that power is suggested by Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence when he discusses the sixth of his six revisionary ratios, "Apophrades," or "the return of the dead":

> The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now held open to the precursor, where once it was open. . . . [15-16]

Bloom here describes the "uncanny effect" that seems to make Yeats, for example, the poet of Shelley's best poems, but I wish to steal away with his trope of the poet "holding himself open," in order to advance my critique of Bloom. For it is my argument that, even in his most recent work, Bloom has not quite enough held himself open to the Yeatsian voice, the voice of his precursor.

The absolute genius of Bloom is to have discovered and elaborated with unceasing ravenous energy "the shame and splendor" of the event of writing a poem:

> For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems--great poems--outside him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever. [Anxiety 26]

Here as nearly everywhere in Bloom, he verges upon the Yeatsian insight that the white noise, the chaos of history engages with the imagination in a negative dialectics that transforms poetry and the poet. He verges upon it, but draws back from the horror of that abyss. Bloom writes of "catastrophe creation," and "the breaking of the vessels," which are tropes of a poet's agon with a tradition that he would dialectically revise and re-create; but this "tradition" is not quite identical to my "white noise," which must remain larger and more menacing than the admittedly awesome trope of "tradition." The burden of the Yeats critic, therefore, will be to transcend the limits of a criticism, even one as strong as Bloom's, that would speculate on Yeats's self-voicing through his agon with tradition. The burden must be to enact such a criticism as Bloom's, but also to seek the self-transformation that Yeats achieves in holding himself open to the white noise of history.

5.1 Whitaker's Dialogue with Yeats's History

> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead;
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.
> "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"

In) am not aware of any work, not even Bloom's Yeats, that approaches the issue of Yeats and history with the acumen and insight of Whitaker's book. The title, Swan and Shadow: Yeats's

Dialogue with History, alludes to two crucial figures in Yeats's career work. The figure of the Swan appears for example in "Leda and the Swan" (1923), in "Dove and Swan" which forms a section of A Vision, in "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1916), and elsewhere, but most ecstatically perhaps in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1919-1922) where the swan becomes a figure of the poet.

> Some moralist or mythological poet
> Compares the solitary soul to a swan;
> I am satisfied with that,
> Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,
> Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,
> An image of its state;
> The wings half spread for flight,
> The breast thrust out in pride
> Whether to play, or to ride
> Those winds that clamour of approaching night.
> . . . . . .
> The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
> That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
> To end all things, to end
> What my laborious life imagined. . . . [316]

In 1970, Bornstein and Bloom both claimed that this passage derives from Asia's song at the end of Act II of Prometheus Unbound:[1] "My soul is an enchanted boat, / Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float / Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing. . . ." But the urgency of the figure of the swan in Alastor Yeats may also have been repressively, that is to say, daemonically, remembering:

> . . . A strong impulse urged
> His steps to the sea-shore. A swan was there,
> Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.
> It rose as he approached, and with strong wings
> Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
> High over the immeasurable main. [lines 274-279]

Why do I say that the Yeats passage "repressively remembers" the passage from Shelley's Alastor? Throughout his work, Bloom turns

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[1] Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley, pp. 104-105; Bloom, Yeats, pp. 359-362.

Freud's term "repression" away from the psychoanalytic unconscious into the field of imaginative activity. Repression becomes a dialectical action, both a driving down of the tropes of the precursor in an aggressive forgetting, and a flying up or flight of these tropes into a new remembering which gives a new voice to the ephebe, now "daemonized" by the voice of the precursor. In A Map of Misreading Bloom says, that "the defense of repression . . . conceal[s] an unconsciously purposeful forgetting. . . . The glory of repression, poetically speaking, is that memory and desire, driven down, have no place to go in language except up onto the heights of sublimity" [73, 100]. Later, in The Breaking of the Vessels, Bloom speaks of "daemonization," with its "spectacular images of height and depth," as "exaltation always . . . in flight from the fathering force of the past" [10]. Following Bloom's antithetical dialectics, therefore, the swan of Alastor with its "strong wings / Scaling the upward sky," daemonizes the swan of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," as Yeats struggles to repress quotation. In flight from the voice of his precursor, Yeats finds his voice only in a forgetting that is also a remembering of that voice.[2]

Whitaker takes for his title the daemonic figure of the Swan-as-poet in flight--"breast thrust out in pride," and "leap[ing] into the desolate heaven." But the figure of the Shadow-as-history must be more elusive, enigmatic, mysterious, for the Shadow in Whitaker's work will be both an internalized unconscious figure and an externalized worldly figure.

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[2] In Poetry and Repression, pp. 66-67, Bloom cites Kiekegaard as the source of his notion that remembering and forgetting are, in poems, one dialectical action.

> The interrogation of [one's double or] shadow may therefore lead the poet toward an understanding, simultaneously, of two areas which seem dangerously "other": one in the world beyond himself, one in his own hidden nature. If the shadow appears in the guise of current history, he may partly discover, in a single act of perception, the evils of his time and his own secret complicity. [6]

While the figure of the Swan may be linked, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" at least, to Yeats's defensive distortion of his self as a Shelleyan poet, the figure of the Shadow gestures towards the spirit world, the world of the dead, that is to say the world of white noise that wounds from beyond the body of literary tradition.

By writing of the figures of Swan and Shadow as constituting Yeats's dialogue or dialectic with history, Whitaker advances Yeats studies beyond the limits imposed by the psychological biography of Ellmann's approach, the dialogue of man and mask discussed in chapter two. Gnostic self-transcendence cannot be reduced to mere psychological dialogue; likewise, Whitaker's trope of History-as-Shadow, internal and external, far outstrips Ellmann's sense of the anti-self as psychological mask. In a passage that effectively summarizes the fine detail of his argument, Whitaker lays out his view of the dialectics permeating "Yeats's panoramic vision of history":

> [Its goal is] the reversal of fall and incarnation, the transmutation of flesh and Word, the correlative deification of the poet, who sees all history in his reflection. However, the progress toward that goal is complicated by the existential movement in Yeats's dialogue with history--as the poet recognizes his human finitude, undergoes the dramatic experience of life in time, and provokes encounters with an anti-self who may teach him all that he does not yet know. In fact, that existential complication is integral to the apocalyptic doctrine itself. For though the early Yeats often wished to evade it and critics of gnosticism often wish to ignore it, the practical

> consequence of that doctrine is clear. If the poet would transcend the world by transmuting all flesh, he must explore and realize in art the full circle of human potentialities. Most immediately, he must pursue that which seems his opposite, adversary, or shadow, but is really unconscious within him. . . . That fuller recognition and understanding of history's dark forces and of the correlated forces within his own being will mean for him both self-annihilation and growth. [36]

This passage demonstrates Whitaker's commitment to a critical vision of "Yeatsian history" that I find, with some revision, practical and genial to my critique of Bloom's more delimiting, if far more enthusiastic, historical poetics. Whereas Bloom excludes all but the literary or tropological from his work, Whitaker excludes nothing; yet the weakness of Whitaker's trope of "dialogue," when compared to Bloom's "revisionism," must be that its powers of persuasive negation are lacking. I suggest that Yeats creatively corrects them both--holding himself open to the white noise of history, he negatively energizes Whitaker's tropes of Swan and Shadow, while performing a negation of Bloom's work that breaks through and beyond the limits of the most sublime criticism that we have.

As implied in the quoted passage, Whitaker envisions Yeats's sense of history as a composite of "panoramic vision" and "dramatic experience"--a god's eye view and a human's eye view, or alternatively, a Pythagorean-Parmenidean divine vision as opposed to a Heraclitean-Empedoclean drama of human passion. This pattern is reflected in the structure of his book, Part One titled "History as Vision" and Part Two titled "History as Dramatic Experience," with the latter part taking two-thirds of the book's development. Yet this structural division only superficially enforces a separation in Whitaker's argument, as

he rightly describes throughout the book how the divine and the human views of history play in continuous dialogue throughout the poet's career. If anything, however, this balancing of the extremes becomes the error of the "Hegelianization" of Yeats, a misreading that evades the greatest difficulty in Yeats and the source of his poetic strength--his performance of the antithetical as antithetical to itself not just to the primary, his performance of the formula 1 = 1+/-.

Whitaker shows the merit of operating comfortably among various Yeatsian antinomies--Paterian, Nietzschean, and occult--in his fine discussion of the early story "Rosa Alchemica" (1896)[3] and the aporia or bewilderment of the story's narrator:

> Wishing to transcend the world, the narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" moves towards Yeats's Byzantium; lacking courage equal to desire, he clings to an effete version of classical order.
>
> He is torn between the historical opposites which Pater had called "centrifugal" and "centripetal" or "Asiatic" and "European," and which Nietzsche, as Yeats would soon learn, had called "Dionysian" and "Apollonian." Yeats clearly knew their occult analogues, the "Transfiguration" and "Incarnation," and he would later sum up all these connotations in his terms <u>primary</u> and <u>antithetical</u>. [42]

To the extent that the story's narrator is caught bewildered between antinomies, he also oscillates between them in a sort of de Manian undecidability <u>avant la lettre</u>, facing (figuring) now one way, now the other. But Whitaker soon moves on to argue that the aporia has become, in Yeats's early and middle phases, a "synthesis of opposites":

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[3] Wade gives April 1896 as date of first publication.

> Although cycle and apocalypse [the topics of Whitaker's second and third chapters] assumed fairly clear form in Yeats's mind during the nineties, from 1889 to 1919 his judgments of history and his hopes for a new era moved through three phases suggestive of a Hegelian dialectic. That was because, as spiritual alchemist, he knew the soul to be a mercurial synthesis of opposites. Restlessly following the spiral path "between two fires," Yeats first sought a Dionysian transcendence of form, then an Apollonian reconstitution of form, and then paradoxical syntheses of both impulses, . . . [all] reflected in his shifting vision of history. [55-56]

Whitaker, it seems to me, settles for less than what ought to suffice. In order to support his conjecture that Yeats follows an Hegelian trajectory that begins in Dionysian transcendence then moves through Apollonian reconstitution to paradoxical synthesis, he must rely almost exclusively on the Dionysian quality in such works as "The Valley of the Black Pig," and the Apollonian revision of this quality in such poems as "The Magi." Such poems indeed may be said to express a desire for a visionary transcendence of history in the first case and a visionary reconstitution of history in the second, but Whitaker must leave aside poems of the same period that do not seem to desire either "Dionysian transfiguration" or "Apollonian incarnation" [70]. Undermining Whitaker's thesis here are the many love poems of the early period, "Adam's Curse" (1902) for example, poems that desire transcendence of the inane mundane, yet poems that desire a perfect Apollonian form.

The problems that come from applying Nietzsche's terms to poems and placing them within an Hegelian dialectic are compounded when we see that Whitaker identifies Yeats's term "primary" with the Dionysian, and his "antithetical" with the Apollonian, as when he says that "[Yeats] was demanding the

freedom of that Apollonian principle which he would later call the subjective or antithetical intellect" [64]. The antithetical is certainly a principle of freedom, but is it Apollonian or Dionysian? The implication of my argument throughout this dissertation, especially in the previous chapter, is that it is Yeats's poetic intuition that the binarism called Dionysian/Apollonian is just another form of the Great Wheel, the round of life and death; whereas the principle of freedom must be an element antithetical to both the Dionysian and Apollonian, to both the primary and the antithetical, if there are to be more poems. The antithetical must also be an irreducible third term, not just part of an endlessly oscillating binary.[4]

In my revision of Whitaker, therefore, I would say that Yeats's early idealizing work is formalist and Apollonian, yet it is Dionysian in its resistance to its own tendency to freeze up, to reify itself and take its metaphors and voices as "true." The later, more passionate "bodily" work intensifies the dialectic of Apollonian and Dionysian, of Platonizing Soul and Heretical Self, by appreciating ever more fully the power of form (as in "Among School Children" or "The Statues" for example) and by negating such formalism through the fire of self-revision (as in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" or "Byzantium" for example). Thus, any synthesis sought or achieved, Hegelian or otherwise, is a negative or antithetical synthesis, one that--like Blake's crimson rose--reveals its negation to be its life. For negation is the beginning step in the freedom of a poet to begin again.

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[4] The figure of Crazy Jane, who sees that "nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent," is illustrative of my view of the antithetical as an irreducible third term, as discussed at the conclusion of (5.2) below.

As Yeats puts it in a comment quoted by Whitaker, "'History is necessity until it takes fire in someone's head and becomes freedom or virtue'" [245].[5] Yeats's trope of history as the inescapable burden of necessity, which is a trope of ethos, suddenly becoming the fire of freedom in someone's head, which is a trope of pathos, exemplifies my thesis of history as white noise breaking, by way of negation--the poet holding himself open--into new poetic form.

Yet the power of history to wound, to ravage poet and poem, appears hardly at all in Whitaker's Hegelianizing discourse. Instead of a poet holding himself open to white noise, Whitaker offers a quiet history, robbed of its power to ravage and enrage.

> Beginning with a direct personal relation to Ireland, moving in widening circles through the re-experienced [i.e., textualized] drama of the past, Yeats could reach a universal history--the Renaissance, Phidian Athens, all the antinomies of primary and antithetical or of blood and the moon. Fleetingly in personal meditation, enduringly in the poems, he merged dramatic experience and panoramic vision in a full-bodied yet comprehensive reality. [215][6]

The urgency of history as the intolerable burden of necessity, which is certainly Yeats's vision of it in A Vision, hardly appears in this passage of history muted and idealized. It is as if Yeats following Hegel had reached Absolute Spirit by merging drama and vision into "a full-bodied yet comprehensive reality." Because history appears here as always already safely troped, its terror is no more; its teeth and its claws have been

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[5] Whitaker quotes Yeats's Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty (Dublin: Cuala, 1944), p. 54; reprinted in Explorations.

[6] In this passage which focuses on the vision of universal history achieved by Yeats in A Vision, especially its final chapter, "Dove or Swan," Whitaker alludes to the poem "Blood and the Moon" which he has just been discussing in detail, as well as the famous first two lines of "The Second Coming."

extracted. But in the matter of history as white noise, it is Blake, not Hegel, who is Yeats's precursor. Haunting A Vision and its gyres is the terror of eternal return as seen in Blake's poem "The Mental Traveller," a poem that, like a Möbius strip, turns back upon itself in a vision of endless incarceration.[7] Moreover, the dreadful symmetry of Blake's "The Tyger"--

> And what shoulder, & what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> . . . . .
> What the hammer? what the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?
> What the anvil? what dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp? [33]

--breathes through the voice of Crazy Jane who sings the stark refrain that "Love is like the lion's tooth,"[8] and terrorizes the voice of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" that sings of the white noise in the human breast:

> We who seven years ago
> Talked of honour and of truth,
> Shriek with pleasure if we show
> The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth. [316]

Whitaker's Swan and Shadow is surely one of the glories of Yeats studies. His attention to the poet's gnosticism precurses Bloom's great achievement; his devotion to the issue of history avoids the pitfalls of the positive mimeticists such as Seamus Deane and Edward Said that I criticized in chapter three, while opening up the critical possibility of a negative dialectics of Yeatsian history; and his intuitions about the historical development of poetic tropes receives its due complement in the Bloomian theory of poetic misprision, the "repressive

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[7] In A Vision Yeats refers to "The Mental Traveller" on no fewer than five occasions, pp. 106, 189, 212, 213, 262.

[8] "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" (1929) [375].

remembering" that turns a Shelleyan into a Yeatsian swan. That is to say, Whitaker's argument regularly relies upon a sense of how Yeats performed a self-revision in poem after poem:

> "The Magi," like "The Valley of the Black Pig," transcends historical theorizing--but with striking differences. The speaker himself is no longer a weakly yearning soul; yet because he need not be specially dream-awakened, his own fate is clearly in question. Yeats has turned from the divine beast of the ancestral darkness to the bestial mystery that begins a new cycle. [66]

We can only surmise how Bloom must have felt in the late 1960s while studying Swan and Shadow in preparation for the writing of Yeats--the shock at recognizing his own vision as a distortion; the intense ambivalence at loving his own rejected thoughts, yet hating his gnostic belatedness. For several years later Bloom would quote his American father Emerson on the "theme of the reader's Sublime," saying, "'in every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty'" [Agon 103].

5.2 Bloom's Agon with Yeats

> Whatever flames upon the night
> Man's own resinous heart has fed.
> "Two Songs from a Play"

Bloom's "alienated majesty" is a loving blow that strikes the ephebe, somewhat like the "sudden blow" that strikes in "Leda and the Swan."

> 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.

It is to Whitaker's great credit that in his discussion of "Leda and the Swan" he does not associate or identify the Swan-god Zeus

with the Shelleyan figure of the Swan-as-poet, for that would lead to the fashionable banality that the Swan is men and Leda is women.[9] The violent eroticism of the poem is not even literally (much less figuratively) an eroticism between man and woman. The erotic storm that suddenly blows through the poem, in my view, is best seen as the ravaging-ravishing of humankind by the white rushing noise of history, the strange yet utterly inalienable heart of history.

> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
> How can body, laid in that white rush,
> But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

Shattering our cosmic vessels as it shudders, history impregnates us all, engendering in man and woman so that we each, broken and burning, must bear the burden of tragedy within us.

> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead.

Like Blake's rose that sickens with the inevitable arrival of the worm to its bed of crimson joy, the city of Troy awaits its devastation, which is also our own.

The deepest allegory here is the allegory of imaginative activity, which is to say the allegory of artistic knowledge or gnosis. This is the allegory of the poetic negation of a brute power beyond our ken. But since negation means "to absorb and resist" simultaneously, a memorable phrase from <u>A Map of Misreading</u>,[10] even this gnosis is viewed with skepticism as the

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[9] In chapter one (1.9) I briefly discussed this view of the poem which was put forward by William Johnsen, who makes a fetish of "gender" and social revolution, and turns the poem into an allegory of his own moral imperative to heap abuse upon the masculine and to separate the sexes.

[10] <u>Map</u>, p. 162; but in this self-antithetical phrase Bloom describes not the poet's agon with history, but with the precursor.

sonnet ends by asking an unanswerable question as to the possibility of Ledaean gnosis in the moment of brutalization by the mastering white noise of an indifferent and alien power that strangely lives and breeds within.

> 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? [322]

The white noise of history is to all humanity as a Swan-god's violation would be to Leda. Bloom's terrible genius is to place himself as a belated Leda, attempting to negate, that is, simultaneously to absorb and to resist his Yeatsian precursor as Swan-god.

If Whitaker opened Yeats studies to an appreciation of gnostic vision and the possibility of a negative dialogue with history, then Bloom further opened Yeats studies to revisionism or antithetical criticism. For when Bloom wrote in 1970 of the "Higher Criticism of Yeats . . . engag[ing] the radical issue of his subjectivity, particularly as expressed in his myth of the <u>antithetical</u> man" [372], he spoke in the first instance of himself--he spoke with the voice of a son, dreaming of ambitions to father something unique. Twenty-two years on, we are aware that something unique indeed was begotten by the Yeatsian ephebe, but the vast dimensions and consequences of that ongoing genesis have so far only been guessed at. For Bloom's critics, with but a few exceptions, hardly measure up to his standard of intuitive

critical excellence, while his influence remains strong, though subterranean, even among those who seek to dismiss him.[11]

By way of parenthesis I would make the following comments on Bloom's detractors. His most dangerous critics are those who attack him from one of two perspectives: the supposed privileges of "history," or the absolute textuality of deconstruction--critiques which chapters three and one are intended to defend against. Frank Lentricchia, Jonathan Arac, and Paul Bové have taken the first perspective, while Paul de Man and Wlad Godzich the second. In his chapter on Bloom in After the New Criticism Lentricchia charges the Bloom of Poetry and Repression with endorsing "interpretive anarchy: a programmatic subjectivism that can only lead to the purest of relativisms" [339]. Noting Bloom's response to this charge in Agon [38-43], I would add that his map of misreading, his dialectic of revisionism, in fact functions as a bulwark against pure relativism which is a charge more appropriately laid against the linguistic anti-mimeticism of deconstruction à la de Man, than against Bloom's over-determined Freudian (i.e., repressive) criticism and negative dialectics. Like Lentricchia, Arac would turn poetry and the critic of poetry into slaves to materiality:

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[11] I have dealt with many of these themes in two published essays, "Mapping Anglo-Irish Poetry: With(out) Harold Bloom," reviewing Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry (1989), edited by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene, and "Harold Bloom in/and History," reviewing Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics (1988) by Peter de Bolla.

> Only precise attention to the place of poetry in society--the opportunities offered to voice, script, and instruction, by whom, to whom and for what purpose--will allow the nuance, detail, and differentiation that make a history, and set proper limits to a theory.[12]

Clearly, Arac is annoyed with Bloom's extravagance, chafing against the view that the glory of poetry is its power "to absorb and resist" materiality. In Destructive Poetics Bové confusedly advances a Heideggerian historicism that entirely misses the mark, based as it is on the weak reading that Bloom endorses "the idea of a continuous tradition, . . . assured by his theory of imitation" [36]. As I have already shown, Bloom's tradition is only continuous in that it is self-broken, i.e., discontinuous, while "imitation" is entirely alien to his sense of poetry. On the other hand, deconstructors like Paul de Man and Wlad Godzich--who takes his cue directly from de Man--seek to save Bloom from himself. "De Man rescues Bloom," says Godzich, "from the naivety of psychological naturalism, and from the Hegelian dialectics of the self implied in the problematics of stance."[13] Although it is most certain that the great fruitfulness of Bloom's career derives, in part, from his agon with Paul de Man, to whom A Map of Misreading is dedicated, I believe that this dissertation has already demonstrated the utter poverty of the trope of "psychological naturalism" in describing Bloom; similarly, a dialectics of the self Bloom unashamedly operates, but a dialectics less Hegelian than Hebraic, Gnostic, and Freudian, a dialectic of negative transcendence as opposed to

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[12] "The Criticism of Harold Bloom: Judgment and History," p. 39; revised and republished as part of chapter one of Arac's Critical Genealogies (1987).

[13] "Harold Bloom as Rhetorician," p. 48.

Hegel's Absolute Spirit. David Fite and Peter de Bolla have produced book-length studies of Bloom that somehow approximate his ideas, but that avoid engaging Bloom in an antithetical agon.

Having completed a parenthesis on his detractors, I would argue that, among Bloom's critics within my purview, only Susan Handelman and Daniel O'Hara begin to practice upon Bloom himself the very "antithetical criticism" that his own work practices and calls for.[14] But at what cost has the Promethean ephebe stolen the fire of the precursor? What he wrote in 1970 about the Yeatsian misprision of Shelley and Blake may redound upon Bloom himself:

> Yeats has read Shelley with great accuracy and insight, but will not abide in that reading, for if Shelley's way as a poet is right, then indeed Yeats's developing way is wrong. In compensation, Yeats has read Blake with great inaccuracy and deliberately befuddled insight, so as to produce an antithetical poetic father to take Shelley's place. [59]

This passage contains in germ Bloom's theory of influence and revisionism. It suggests something strange and insightful about the vagaries, the wanderings, of poetic influence flowing from the young Yeats and into him from Shelley and Blake; but it also implies something aggressive and ambivalent about Bloom's being influenced by all three of them. The passage shows Yeats to be reading, loving, and rejecting Shelley in order to have his own voice, not Shelley's, and then gravely misreading Blake while making him falsely into the true father, the imago. But how should we read Bloom here among his fathers?

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[14] In The Slayers of Moses (1982), Handelman brilliantly reviews "the emergence of Rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory," employing Bloom's theory of misprision to misread Freud, Derrida, and Bloom himself back into Rabbinic tradition. Similarly, in "Yeats and Theory" and "The Genius of Irony: Nietzsche in Bloom," O'Hara antithetically misreads Bloom back into his precursors, Yeats and Nietzsche.

In order to absorb and resist the passage we must turn it on its head, reading its predicate as its subject so to speak. That is, we must read Bloom with the antithetical fire that he steals from Yeats. We must recall that in Shelley's Mythmaking (1959) and in Blake's Apocalypse (1963) Bloom had dreamt of the form of Shelley and Blake, making them into an image of the father several years before he wrote Yeats. In Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision (1985), David Fite takes Blake to be the single crucial influence on Bloom and his theory;[15] I, on the other hand, would press the darker notion that Yeats is Bloom's crucial influence, in that Yeats figures as Bloom's most uncanny and most dangerous image of his gnostic, extravagant self. The naming of the poetic father is crucial to the imaginative life of the son who must undergo various ratios of revision in the naming of himself in relation to the name that he gives to the father. Yeats has interfered in the naming process, the dialectic between Bloom and his Blakean-Shelleyan composite precursor. In fact, the interference has been so powerfully disruptive that Yeats threatens to usurp the place of Blake and Shelley in Bloom's dialectic. The wonder of Bloom is that he has the antithetical strength to imply as much himself, as here in the final pages of Kabbalah and Criticism (1975):

> A poem is either weak and forgettable, or else strong and so memorable. Strength here means the strength of imposition. A poet is strong because poets after him must work to evade him. A critic is strong if his readings similarly provoke other readings. What allies the strong poet and the strong critic is that

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[15] Fite argues that to find "the source of the later Bloom's theories [i.e., post-Yeats] we need only look to Bloom himself and to his early writings on his true precursor, Blake" [56].

> there is a necessary element in their respective misreadings. . . .
>
> Some of the consequences of what I am saying dismay even me. Thus, it cheers me up to say that the misreading of Milton's Satan by Blake and Shelley is a lot stronger . . . than the pitifully weak misreading of Satan by T. S. Eliot. But I am rather downcast when I reflect that the misreading of Blake and Shelley by Yeats is a lot stronger than the misreading of Blake and Shelley by Bloom. [125-126]

In this remarkable passage, Bloom verges on the shadowy insight that his aggression towards Yeats five years earlier was a function in the transference of authority sought by an ephebe who swerves to evade, sometimes violently, the influence of the precursor. The fact that Yeats was a Kabbalist--a decadent occult Kabbalist, but a Kabbalist nonetheless--surely poured gall onto Bloom's wound. "In its degeneracy," he writes, "Kabbalah has sought vainly for a magical power over nature, but in its glory it sought, and found, a power of the mind over the universe of death" [47]. Wishing to associate with the latter and dissociate from the former, Bloom flings the charge of "occult mummery" at Yeats.[16] It is a testimony to Bloom's poetic courage--his "entering into the abyss of himself,"[17] as Yeats was to put it--that his admission to being "downcast" at the revisionary strength of Yeats-the-Kabbalist comes in Kabbalah and Criticism.

Discontinuously holding himself open to the wounds of his agon with Yeats, Bloom advances along a winding path: from his bitterly ambivalent stance in Yeats, to his more philosophically detached stance in his chapter on Yeats in Poetry and Repression

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[16] Yeats, p. 455.

[17] Yeats, p. 462.

six years later, to his stance of virtual silence in his assertively gnostic work of the early 1980s, Agon and The Breaking of the Vessels--a silence that can only persuade us now of his ongoing wariness of the precursor. Bloom evades any longer speaking of Yeats now that he has himself become the gnostic visionary that he once found so distasteful in Yeats. But "nothing is got for nothing," and in Bloom's recent book, Ruin the Sacred Truths (1989), a sublime portrait of revisionary literary history from the Yahwist to Kafka and Samuel Beckett has been purchased at the price of a wound that is a double silence--his silence on the white noise, the nightmare of history, and his silence on the precursor that he once recognized to be "[c]ertainly the major Gnostic poet in the language" [Agon 46].

Increasingly, Bloom has taken the Patriarch of the Yahwist for his antithetical model, Wrestling Jacob who struggled all night with a superhuman being, gaining the Blessing thereby, but at the cost of a wound to his hip.[18] Jacob's agon with the angel is offered as an allegory of the process that, since A Map of Misreading, Bloom has called "the Scene of Instruction," the primal scene in which the ephebe loses or gains a distinctive voice in an imaginative struggle for priority with the precursor. It is the Scene of Instruction that makes it possible for me to speculate on the waywardness of Bloom's agon with Yeats, wandering from bitter ambivalence to philosophical detachment, and finally to a wary but painful silence. Bloom's work, indeed, may be taken to be an extended meditation, an elaboration of the

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[18] The story of Wrestling Jacob takes special prominence in The Breaking of the Vessels and most recently in The Book of J (1990).

dialectical Scene of Instruction. But there may be no better illuminant of the bitter love that binds Bloom to Yeats, yet frees him, than this passage from A Map of Misreading, especially its final sentence.

> The Bible and Milton are not mocked, and even more vitally are not contained by their revisionists. Primal repression carried over into repetition yields the Sublime repression of belatedness or Romanticism, yet the fathers not only remain unaltered by the sons (except in the sons) but do not cease from altering their progeny. The last truth of the Primal Scene of Instruction is that purpose or aim--that is to say, meaning--cleaves more closely to origins the more intensely it strives to distance itself from origins. [62]

It is a paradox of the transference of poetic authority that Bloom must describe Yeats's vision as "systematic inhumanity," "spiritual squalor," "eugenic claptrap," "occult mummery," and "Pythagorean Fascism," if he is to redeem his own gnosticism from "the darkest bondages of the idols of determinism."[19] He must declare the precursor's vision depraved and fallen if he is to proclaim his own voice transcendent. Being much like Leda, being "so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood" of the precursor, Bloom must turn away in revulsion at the horrifying darkness of Yeatsian gnostic catastrophe; for Bloom, as is Yeats, is in a desperate struggle "for the only victory worth winning, the divinating triumph over oblivion."[20]

To the burgeoning crowd of idealizing realists, mimeticists, historicists, and psycho-structural-linguists, such tropes appear as self-aggrandizing melodrama, but to Bloom the strong ephebe (whether poet or critic) confronts, when writing, what he refers

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[19] The quotations come from Yeats, pp. 422, 455, 444, and 436.

[20] Poetry and Repression, p. 2.

to in various passages as "the agonistic self-questioning of the Sublime," a dialectic that matches the ephebe against anteriority and forces the question--am I more than, less than, equal to the precursor?[21] This was Jacob's question as well, when in the darkness he wrestled with the Daimon, so crucial was the Blessing to him, so necessary the wound. In fact, the association between the Blessing and the wound verges on an identity when we realize that "bless" derives from the Old English bloedsian, meaning to mark with blood, thus to consecrate, and that one of its meanings still today is to injure or to wound, as in French, blesser, to wound. In poetry, the achievement of the Blessing certainly requires a self-wounding, as in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," where "My Self" chooses the wound, chooses to "Endure that toil, . . . the distress, . . . pain, . . . clumsiness, . . . The mirror of malicious eyes, . . . the wintry blast"--all in order that a great sweetness may flow into the breast, and "Everything we look upon [be] blest" [351]. Following Ellmann, Bloom quotes the poet embracing the poetic necessity of the wound that may be a blessing, the wound that is the abyss of the self: "Why should we honor those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself."[22] In his agon with Yeats, Bloom participates in the Yeatsian wound that is a gnostic abyss, and there he finds his own wound, "the deep lie at every reimagined origin":

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[21] For example, Agon, pp. 117, 193, 226, 238, 239.

[22] The Man and the Masks, p. 6; Yeats, pp. 67-68, 462. Quoting the passage twice, Bloom slightly alters Ellmann's punctuation and spelling, changing honour to honor and a semi-colon to a question mark.

> Language does not become poetry for us until we know that language is telling us lies, because the truth is ambivalence and so also already death. Poetry has to be loved before we can know it as poetry, and must inspire ambivalence in us at the center of that love. [30]

Crazy Jane, that most wounded yet sublime of Yeatsian personae, reminds us of Bloom's "Primal Lie"[23] when she declares, against the Bishop's Platonizing Christianity, "'For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent'" [375]. The Yeatsian abyss is a gaping wound that Bloom has internalized. His creative struggle to heal the wound has led him along a winding path, moving from his early and violent attempt at externalizing or projecting the wound (his vitriolic attack on Yeats for "systematic inhumanity," etc.), to the visionary prose he now writes that reminds us of nothing if not of the deepest rhythms of Yeats:

> We make of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the 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. ["Per Amica Silentia Lunae" 331]

5.3 The Clash of Strong Readers

> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
> "The Second Coming"

Yet there still remains the issue of history as white noise, its menacing presence in Yeats and its apparent absence in Bloom. The dialectics of white noise and the poetic imagination seem to be the theme in this passage on "nobility" by Wallace Stevens:

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[23] Poetry and Repression, p. 287; quoted by Fite, p. 92.

> It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, help us to live our lives. [36]

The Stevens metaphor of "pressing back" may appear to contradict my metaphor of "holding oneself open," but appearances deceive. For what are "holding open" and "pressing back" but the poles of the Bloomian dialectic of poetic negation, "to absorb and resist"? The particular strategies that Yeats and Bloom practice as negative dialecticians differ slightly but significantly. Bloom's negation absorbs and resists all tropological anteriority while Yeats's negation holds him open to, and presses back against, all tropological anteriority <u>along with</u> an unknown that asserts itself as prior to all tropes. Such white noise invades Yeats's poems most famously perhaps as war or political conflicts, but personal events, though on a lesser cosmic scale, also constitute white noise. In other words, death, in its endlessly unforeseen forms, in its power as final threat, is the violence that presses on the imagination. (This is why Ramazani's research, discussed in the previous chapter, ought to provoke interest.) By holding himself open to death, the poet also pushes back against it, thus earning a temporary measure of what Stevens calls "self-preservation," which in poetic terms means divination, Wordsworth's intimations of immortality. "All changed, changed utterly," writes the poet, "A terrible beauty is born" [287].

Bloom too has his moments of openness to white noise, as in <u>Agon</u> when he describes the dialectic of the <u>kelippoth</u> of

Kabbalah, the "evil shells [that] are formed directly by God's nihilizing light":

> The Cossack insurrection of 1648 in Poland and Russia produced a quasi-Holocaust of East European Jewry. In this triumph of the evil husks of the kelippoth, the way was prepared for the Messianic advent of Sabbatai Zevi. . . . [85]

Bloom's description here allows the quasi-Holocaust he speaks of to play its negative role both in a Messianic advent and, as the passage goes on to show, in the Kabbalah of Nathan of Gaza, Sabbatai Zevi's prophet. Similarly, white noise breaks into his discussion of the formation of Emerson's Orphism:

> February 8, 1831: death of his first wife, Ellen;
> May 9, 1836: death of his brother, Charles;
> January 27, 1842; death of his first son, Waldo.
>
> These Orphic losses should have shattered the American Orpheus, for all his life long these were the three persons he loved best. As losses they mark the three phases in the strengthening of his self-reliant American religion, an Orphism that would place him beyond further loss, at the high price of coming to worship the goddess Ananke, dread but sublime Necessity. [161]

Here Bloom opens his criticism to a force beyond the obsessively internalized revision of tropes. But his usual practice, even in his most recent work, is to focus attention on the tropological agon of a work. The imagination participates thereby in a dark shadow, but it is the shadow of the precursor or poetic anteriority, not the darker shadow of white noise. "That even the strongest poets are subject to influences not poetical is obvious even to me," he notes with wry humor, "but again my concern is only with the poet in a poet, or the aboriginal poetic self" [Anxiety 11]. The history that a poem is involved in, as Bloom sees it, is the genealogy of tropes, the endless and discontinuous defense against prior poems.

Yet even as I make this claim, I ask myself--do I go too far, falsifying my own precursor? "There are no texts," he says, "so that it makes little difference to affirm [with Derrida] that there is nothing outside the text."[24] In The Breaking of the Vessels Bloom quotes a long passage from Emerson's Self-Reliance, the passage that contains the comment on the "alienated majesty" of our "rejected thoughts" which I quoted above to conclude (5.1). Bloom's own reading of this passage is what he calls an "antithetical apothegm":

> [E]ven the strongest poem, particularly the strongest poem, costs us too much, but without that cost the poem is only so many words, and not human action. . . . There are no texts, so that it makes little difference to affirm that there is nothing outside the text. Rather, there are configurations, richly perverse interlockings of a multiplicity of strong texts and a few scattered handfuls of strong readers. Poetry happens within those configurations, within those ratios of revision that adjust the balances of psychic warfare between and within texts and readers. [34, italics removed]

Setting aside, if we dare, the savage elegance of these lines, they certainly focus the issue I here seek to address. Literary history, rather than being a matter of texts, is a series of events or happenings, i.e., "human action." It is the dead letter that is only a text, "so many words," and is of no concern to Bloom. Yet his description falls short, does it not, of seeing the negative dialectics of poetry and white noise, for if poetry happens only between and within poems and readers, then raw event, the pure unknown, would seem to be either excluded

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[24] It should be obvious that Bloom is alluding not only to Derrida's use of the phrase, "Il n'y a pas de hors texte," but also and even more vehemently to the lesser followers of Derrida in the American academy who may have tended to wave the phrase as a flag. For in a subtle way, Bloom is here agreeing, provisionally, with Derrida, while arguing that there is more to poetry than textuality.

from the creative process or already contained within the tropes and the readers involved in psychic warfare. This would make my trope of white noise either a desperate and futile evasion of Bloom's ratios of revision or a new shattering of the vessels that contain those tropes. In order to gain the sublimity of a new shattering of the vessels, I risk a desperate and futile evasion.

It may be that Bloom's greatest dialectical openness to white noise comes not in his theory of poetry but in his theory of teaching. Both rely of course on the primal Scene of Instruction, but Bloom's discussion of the imperatives of teaching literature places the professor between the student and the literary tradition in a position of wounded openness to historical pressure in the widest possible sense. In A Map of Misreading Bloom meditates upon the implications of his own "Gospel of Gloom":

> The teacher of literature now in America, far more than the teacher of history or philosophy or religion, is condemned to teach the presentness of the past, because history, philosophy and religion have withdrawn as agents from the Scene of Instruction, leaving the bewildered teacher of literature alone at the altar, terrifiedly wondering whether he is to be sacrifice or priest. If he evades his burden by attempting to teach only the supposed presence of the present, he will find himself teaching only some simplistic, partial reduction that wholly obliterates the present in the name of one or another historicizing formula, or past injustice, or dead faith, whether secular or not. . . .
>
> All literary tradition has been necessarily élitist, in every period, if only because the Scene of Instruction always depends upon a primal choosing and being chosen, which is what "élite" means. Teaching, as Plato knew, is necessarily a branch of erotics, in the wide sense of desiring what we have not got, of redressing our poverty, of compounding with our fantasies. No teacher, however impartial he or she attempts to be, can avoid choosing among students, or being chosen by them, for this is the very nature of

> teaching. Literary teaching is precisely like literature itself; no strong writer can choose his precursors until first he is chosen by them, and no strong student can fail to be chosen by his teachers. Strong students, like strong writers, will find the sustenance they must have. And strong students, like strong writers, will rise in the most unexpected places and times, to wrestle with the internalized violence pressed upon them by their teachers and precursors. [39]

I have quoted this passage at such length in order to draw out the contrast between Bloom's use of the Scene of Instruction and my misreading of it in putting forward my argument about white noise. For I have no doubt that he is right on the mark concerning the analogy of teacher and student to precursor and ephebe. Yet it seems to me that Bloom's argument implies more than he would allow.

He creates the Scene of Instruction as a trope to seal off history from the creative process. In this view, the retreat of history, philosophy, and religion from the Scene of Instruction is an historical "fact" that is "external" to the literary Scene of Instruction; as I see it, however, this "fact" only more greatly pressurizes the Scene of Instruction for the contemporary teacher and student of literature, emphasizing and exaggerating the burden of their belatedness as well as the extravagance of any evasions of belatedness that they may make. Another way of putting this is to say that the curriculum is <u>not</u> equivalent or identical to the canon of literature, even though they are almost universally spoken of nowadays as one and the same. For if, by some bizarre yet increasingly possible evasion, the curriculum were to become the study of second, third, and fourth-rate works in order to assuage "one or another historicizing formula, or past injustice, or dead faith, whether secular or not," the

position in the canon of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats--"dead white males" all--would not have been overturned or deleted. On the contrary, for the canon is not a squalid political compromise decided by a committee vote. But what Bloom misses is that the very condition of curriculum pressure on the canon is a kind of white noise which teacher and student absorb and resist during the negations of the Scene of Instruction. Bloom's description of the repressive beauties of the process of election (elitism) portrays the sublimities of election and its inevitably "internalized violence," but the dialectics of choosing and being chosen among poems, teachers, and students is a process profoundly if negatively influenced (absorbed and resisted) by an all-pervasive white noise that is mysteriously alien yet internal to poem and players.

5.4 Facticity, Ruination, Tenebrio--Yeats in Bloom

> I sing what was lost and dread what was won,
> I walk in a battle fought over again,
> My king a lost king, and lost soldiers my men;
> Feet to the Rising and Setting may run,
> They always beat on the same small stone.
> "What Was Lost"

In a brief ten-line poem, "Men Made out of Words," Wallace Stevens--with the deft delicacy of the Keats of "Ode to a Nightingale"--sets out the negative dialectics of word and world, the anguish of fate and the beauty felt in absorbing and resisting it.

> What should we be without the sexual myth,
> The human revery or poem of death?
>
> Castratos of moon-mash--Life consists
> Of propositions about life. The human

> Revery is a solitude in which
> We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,
>
> By the terrible incantations of defeats
> And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.
>
> The whole race is a poet that writes down
> The eccentric propositions of its fate. [355-356]

As gnostic poet and gnostic critic, Yeats and Bloom, torn by dreams and defeats, take for their subjects the fear that defeats and dreams are one--an awful and antithetical dualism that shatters the heart of orthodox mimetic thought. Yet even this shattering is contained within the largest trope that Bloom has voiced, the trope that in Ruin the Sacred Truths he names "facticity." The trope of facticity contains, or rather re-contains, the shattering of the vessels because it marks the horizon of our visions and revisions where human revery is a solitude.

Speaking of the stories of the Yahwist, Bloom says that they are

> so original that we cannot read them [because] . . . we are still part of a tradition that has never been able to assimilate their originality, despite many efforts to do so. I am thinking of such weird tales as Yahweh making Adam by scooping up some wet clay and then breathing upon it, or Yahweh sitting upon the ground under the terebinths at Mamre, devouring roast calf, curd, milk and bread, and then being offended by the aged Sarah's sensible derision when he prophesies the birth of Isaac. [6]

It is as if the Yahwist were the originator of the figurative use of language, trapping us within our literalization of the figures of the book of J.

> J was a vastly eccentric great writer whose difficulty and originality are still obscured for us, and by us, because of a condition of enclosure that J's force has

> imposed upon us. When we attempt to call J's stories of Yahweh anthropomorphic, we truly are defending ourselves against J, by overliteralizing the figurative being he called Yahweh. [7]

Interpolating Bloom here, anthropomorphism applies, I would say, more to the pagan figures of ancient Greek divinity; it therefore cannot answer the question, Who is Yahweh?--a question too uncanny for our literalizing readings of J. As Bloom will argue in The Book of J, Yahweh is a literary character of consummate antitheticality, a figurative being entirely incommensurate with himself, a being of pure freedom.

Bloom goes on to name Shakespeare and Freud as "[t]he two other major instances of this imprisoning facticity" [7] in Western tradition. In trying to read Shakespeare,

> we confront a poetic strength that surpasses even the Yahwist, Homer, Dante, and Chaucer. We cannot see the originality of an originality that has become a contingency or a facticity for us. . . . [T]he greatest of [Shakespeare's] originalities [is] the representation of change by showing people pondering their own speeches and being altered by that consideration. We find this mode of representation commonplace and even natural, but it does not exist in Homer or the Bible, in Euripides or in Dante. [53, 54]

Freud too has imprisoned us in his vision due to the ineffable way that his enterprise "has usurped our diction for describing all psychic instances, agencies, and events" [7]. But Freud's map of the mind performs a transumption of Jewish tradition itself. Our father Freud

> transformed the initial prime obstacle to psychoanalysis, the transference, into the pragmatic prime instrument of analytical therapy. If there is something ineluctably Jewish about that transformation, then perhaps we can take it as a synechdoche for all the Jewish metamorphoses of exile into achievement. The wandering people has taught itself and others the lesson of wandering meaning, a wandering that has compelled a multitude of changes in the modes of interpretation available to the West. Of these

> changes, the Freudian speculation has been perhaps the most influential in our century, if only because we now find it difficult to recall that psychoanalysis, after all, is only a speculation, rather than a science, a philosophy, or even a religion. [146-147]

Like the Yahwist and Shakespeare, Freud profoundly reshapes our seeing and knowing, so much so that we mistake both his revision of Judaism and the arbitrary originality, the catastrophe creation of psychoanalysis. Moreover, Bloom's own originality in Ruin the Sacred Truths is to re-envision Western tradition as a dialectical genealogy of imaginative freedom engaged with the facticity of Western tropes.

Above I pointed out the sixteen years of wary silence that Bloom has kept on Yeats since Poetry and Repression. Although Ruin the Sacred Truths follows Bloom's usual practice of providing no index, I can say with confidence that in its pages Yeats is not mentioned once. Nevertheless, Yeats shades his way into Bloom, like a tenebrio, making his ghostly presence felt in the subtlest possible way within Bloom's discussion of "facticity," his largest trope for history-as-trope. The Yeatsian idiom that breaks through into Bloom's vision of the Yahwist's "imprisoning facticity" is the voice of Yeatsian history, the voice that holds itself open to white noise, here unavoidably the voice of "Leda and the Swan":

> By "facticity" I mean the state of being caught up in a factuality or contingency which is an inescapable context. . . . I am suggesting that there is a brute contingency to all origins as such, and so the engendering of every tradition is absolutely arbitrary, including the Yahwistic, Shakespearean, and Freudian traditions of seeing the nature and destiny of human beings. [7-8, my emphases]

Here the repressed presence of the voice of Yeats performs the "daemonization" that Bloom emphasizes in A Map of Misreading and

Poetry and Repression as the fourth of his six ratios of revision--the purposeful forgetting that remembers by way of poetic negation. Like the ghostly presence of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" in the critical writing of George Steiner (1.9), "Leda and the Swan" remains repressed here, driven down, but its voice breaks into the discourse, rising with palpable energy, as if Bloom himself were "so caught up" and "so mastered by" the Yeatsian Sublime that he becomes Leda to Yeats's Swan-god, "the brute blood of the air," "engender[ing] there," in the daemonic ratio of precursor and ephebe, the breaking, burning, deathly fiction of "facticity." Furthermore, while the Yeats poem exemplifies through myth what I have been calling the negative dialectics of Yeatsian history, the Bloomian fiction of "facticity" stubbornly--even gloriously resists holding itself open to white noise. The brute contingency integral to all origins, and the engendering of tradition that is absolutely arbitrary, remain sublimely internalized and internalizing forces that act within tropological traditions, and evade the forces of an unknown chaos beyond their horizon.

5.5 Crossings: From Bloom to J, From Man to Woman

> And thus declared that Arab lady:
> "Last night, where under the wild moon
> On grassy mattress I had laid me,
> Within my arms great Solomon,
> I suddenly cried out in a strange tongue
> Not his, not mine."
> "Solomon and the Witch"

One of the most salient features of Bloom's two decade migration from Yeats to The Book of J has been its self-

revisionary nature.[25] Never resting on his laurels, the tropes of his past works, never allowing his former figures, former selves, to reify, to harden into idols, Bloom invariably pressurizes not only the state of criticism and theory as he finds it, but also his own best work. "Everything that can be broken should be broken," he says, grandly quoting Emerson, and his own work receives no special exemption. Mapping the crossings and self-revisionism of Yeats's career will be the theme of my sixth and final chapter, but I here ask if, in shooting the gap between Ruin the Sacred Truths and The Book of J, the self-revisionary Bloom has crossed from an internalized and internalizing critical theory to the sort of negative dialectics that I have been pleading for.

The crucial indication that Bloom is at the threshold of this crossing comes in The Book of J's simplest yet most devastating coup--his fiction of the Yahwist as a woman.

> I am assuming that J lived at or nearby the court of Solomon's son and successor, King Rehoboam of Judah, under whom his father's kingdom fell apart soon after the death of Solomon in 922 B. C. E. My further assumption is that J was not a professional scribe but rather an immensely sophisticated, highly placed member of the Solomonic élite, enlightened and ironic. But my primary surmise is that J was a woman, and that she wrote for her contemporaries as a woman, in friendly competition with her only strong rival among those contemporaries, the male author of the court history narrative in 2 Samuel. Since I am aware that my vision of J will be condemned as a fancy or a fiction, I will begin by pointing out that all our accounts of the Bible are scholarly fictions or religious fantasies, and generally serve rather ten-

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[25] David Fite's book on Bloom patiently traces the permutations of Bloom's work from the 1959 book, Shelley's Mythmaking, through the 1977 book, Wallace Stevens. Except for a brief discussion of Bloom's use of Freudian repression, Fite hardly touches the 1982 books on the gnostic and Kabbalistic agon of poetry. But Fite avoids entering into an antithetical dialectic with Bloom, evading an authentic fight.

> dentious purposes. In proposing that J was a woman, at least I will not be furthering the interests of any religious or ideological group. Rather, I will be attempting to account, through my years of reading experience, for my increasing sense of the astonishing differences between J and every other biblical writer. [9]

Touché, Bloom! One day, when we come to accept as "natural" that the Yahwist was a woman, then Bloom will have profoundly demonstrated his thesis noted above, that "the engendering of every tradition is arbitrary." We will credit him (yet again, I must say) with having enlarged upon the horizons of our critical vision.

Among the many wonders of The Book of J is its predominant concern with matters "historical" as opposed to poetical or literary. As Bloom's summary above shows, The Book of J is devoted to a range of issues that center on the dialectics of word and world. This alone signals the distance from himself that Bloom has crossed since The Anxiety of Influence, for example, with its sole concern being the poet-in-a-poet. Now the court of Solomon and of his son, Rehoboam, the collapse of Solomon's kingdom after his death, the friendly imaginative rivalry between two elite writers, and the antithetical politics of his speculation that J was a woman--all these points and more, such as the consequences for the Yahwist's writings and for our readings once we see the writer as a woman, are woven by Bloom into a texture that is richer in historical speculation than anything else he has written. Has Bloom hereby crossed into the Yeatsian ethos of total exposure to white noise? Recall that twenty years earlier he had written, apropos of "A Dialogue of

Self and Soul," that "Yeats is never stronger than when he is totally exposed" [Yeats 373].

There are important reasons to answer that indeed he has made such a crossing, not least of these being the fact that in taking J to be a woman, Bloom speculatively identifies his self, his critical voice, with female subjectivity. This amounts to the making of a new poetic crossing from his predominantly patrilineal ethos (precursor-ephebe) to a new pathos of antithetical voicing. In some ways, this crossing re-enacts the crossing that Yeats made into the voice of Crazy Jane,[26] whose glory is born out of a great defeat, despite the orthodox pieties of the Bishop:

> "My friends are gone, but that's a truth
> Nor grave nor bed denied,
> Learned in bodily lowliness
> And in the heart's pride." [375]

Add to this the fact that The Book of J frequently speculates on the dialectical influence that historical events at the court of Solomon and elsewhere may have had on J's writing, and we seemingly must conclude that the book marks a new departure, a new crossing for Bloom.

Yet the question remains unanswered, for Bloom's otherwise hegemonic trajectory of tropological internalization can hardly be said to be here abandoned. His central concern composed with

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[26] While I see Yeats as having crossed over from his male ethos to a new and impossible pathos by having taken upon himself the voice of the female, C. L. Innes sees Yeats as having given his own voice to Crazy Jane, a gift which is then rejected for broadly political reasons. Concerning the Crazy Jane poems and the sequence of poems called "A Woman Young and Old," Innes writes that these poems "give women a voice, speaking from and of their bodies and their desires. . . . The subversive female [however] is removed from all social context so that her critique of male power becomes concerned with a sterile Christian morality which Yeats contrives to divorce from political or economic structures. . . . [Crazy Jane] inhabits Yeats's tongue and expresses his desire and not her own" [59, 69]. Thus poems should be political pamphlets instead of poems.

great good humor throughout, is to offer a practical yet antithetical criticism of the extant work of the Yahwist, treating it as the original facticity or primal ground of our self-knowing.

> If the history of religion is the process of choosing forms of worship from poetic tales,[27] in the West that history is even more extravagant; it is the worship, in greatly modified and revised forms, of an extraordinarily wayward and uncanny literary character, J's Yahweh. Churches are founded upon metaphors, such as rocks and crosses, but the Western worship of God is in one sense more astonishing than the foundation of any church. The original Yahweh of the Bible, J's, is a very complex and troublesome extended metaphor or figure of speech and thought. So is Hamlet. But we do not pray to Hamlet, or invoke him when we run for political office, or justify our opposition to abortion by appealing to him. [12]

In treating Yahweh as a trope, albeit a trope so influential and original that it virtually engendered three great monotheistic religions, Bloom is hereby involved mainly with a certain side of J--a writer who is

> tricky, sublime, ironic, a visionary of incommensurates, and so the direct ancestor of Kafka, and of any writer, Jewish or Gentile, condemned to work in Kafka's mode. This other side of J will receive the largest share of my exegesis, because it is the antithetical element that all normative traditions--Judaic, Christian, Islamic, secular--have been unable to assimilate, and so have ignored, or repressed, or evaded. [13]

Even in The Book of J, which is Bloom's subtlest and deepest encounter with the dark forces of history, there is an evasion of this darkness, as literary tradition remains an internalized and internalizing force. Yeats, on the other hand, holds himself open to the darkness, ecstatically singing, "Black out; Heaven blazing into the head: / Tragedy wrought to its uttermost" [412].

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[27] Bloom here alludes to a comment in Blake's work, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

Nonetheless, Bloom's critical evasion of this darkness remains the strongest lie-against-time available to criticism and theory. His "facticity" evokes a critical horizon that is more pragmatic than that of any other critic I have encountered. Even the de Manian abyss of aporia, which, reduces poetry to "the madness of words,"[28] fails as poetics because it merely seduces critics, like Nicholas Royale in (3.3), to suggest what Bloom would call the "gorgeous nonsense" that in Hamlet Derrida is Shakespeare's precursor. Moreover, Bloom's "tradition" imposes upon those of us who would know a poem the grandest burden possible, yet a burden of greater promise than offered by any other criticism, the burden of knowing ourselves by knowing the past. The only other claim that I would add here, as if this were not already enough, is that despite himself, Bloom draws his most persuasive antithetical, self-revisionary strength from Yeats.

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[28] "Disfiguring Shelley," The Rhetoric of Romanticism, p.122. I allude to my argument in chapter one, especially in (1.4).

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.
"Cuchulain Comforted"

Chapter Six
Antithetical Criticism: Yeats's Career as Crisis-Lyric

"Black out; Heaven blazing into the head," writes Yeats in "Lapis Lazuli" [421]; in so doing, he takes a revisionary stance against what seem to be similar visionary moments in earlier poems of his. Decades before, in "The Cold Heaven," he had written of being "Riddled with light" [227]. Precisely why and how the later poem's lightning should be seen as a strongly revisionary moment of negation that absorbs and resists, that holds itself open to and presses back against the earlier poem, will form much of the purpose of this, my concluding chapter. A useful way of describing Bloom's theory would be to say simply that the meaning of a poem is always another poem, or in my own antithetical formula, 1 = 1+/-. Building on Bloom's pragmatic theory of poetry as a revisionary event--in chapter five I showed how Bloom's career itself is a revisionary event--my larger strategy will be the critical articulation of Yeatsian moments of self-revision. That is to say, by way of my own misreading

of Bloom's enterprise, especially his dialectics of revisionism, I hope to turn Yeats's career into a critical poem of self-revision, a poem that, due to Yeats's revisionary energy, moves dialectically through the six phases of what Bloom calls the post-Miltonic crisis poem. The six phases are wounds self-inflicted by a poet in quest of divination, wounds that dare uncanny association with the "six mortal wounds" absorbed by the hero of "Cuchulain Comforted."[1]

This concern for poetry as a revisionary event, moreover, draws me into further consideration of the canon of poetry, and how it comes to be. In the previous chapter I claimed that the canon is by no means equivalent or identical to the curriculum, the reading list for a typical Bachelor's degree in literature. Whereas the curriculum is the result of a political compromise among university professors, I will here argue along with Bloom that the canon is the real expression of an internalized agonic activity that is in fact antithetical to political compromises as well as to itself. The canon of poetry results not from repetition, the weak reading of anterior work, but from the sublime event in which a poem breaks-yet-remakes its tradition. It is not constructed, but re-envisioned. Canonization, therefore, is a dialectical rupturing and reforming, and just as it can be described as the agon between poets--Milton's misreading of Shakespeare, Dante, Homer, and Genesis becoming

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[1] A fuller argument than I have space to present explicitly in this chapter would simultaneously articulate the dimensions of the dialectics of Yeats's career with those of Bloom's career, thus performing an antithetical reading of both at once and further drawing the wounds and the blessings of Bloom's agon with Yeats. I have outlined this reading in an article published in Paragraph, reviewing Ruin the Sacred Truths, "Harold Bloom: Crisis, Gnosis, Self-Revision."

both Blake's and Wordsworth's misreadings of Milton, etc.--so it can also be described as the agon within a poet, within a poetic career.

Bloom's general practice has been either to manifest the movement of a poem through his six ratios of revision, as in the Wordsworth chapter in Poetry and Repression where, among other things, he works "to uncover the patterns of revisionism" in "Tintern Abbey" [65]; or to trace the defensive permutations of a trope through the work of various poets, as in The Breaking of the Vessels where his third and final chapter follows the "transumptive chains" that link the tropes of the blank, of the leaves, and of cries, from Paradise Lost through Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman, to Wallace Stevens. But Bloom has also treated a poetic career as a poem subject to dialectical mutation, as in his book on Wallace Stevens. In any of these contexts the same revisionary principle applies--earlier strong poems act as blocking agents that later poems must not repeat but must usurp if there are to be new and stronger poems. The Yeatsian and Bloomian careers, which in truth are poems, enact this dialectic of self-revisionism, thereby canonizing their work both within and against their tradition.

Strong poems, whether individual poems or careers, survive only by imposing themselves upon earlier strong poems, and their ability to survive is in-built, not the result of academic politics. In Agon Bloom puts it this way: a strong poem, "to have any hope of permanence, necessarily builds the canonical ambition, process and agon directly into its own text" [284]. "Canon-formation is not, . . . for more than a generation or two,

socially or politically determined, even by the most intense of literary politics," writes Bloom in A Map of Misreading. And he continues:

> Poets survive because of inherent strength; this strength is manifested through their influence upon other strong poets, and influence that goes through more than two generations of strong poets tends to become part of tradition, even to become the tradition itself. Poems stay alive when they engender live poems, even through resistance, resentment, misinterpretation; and poems become immortal when their descendants in turn engender vital poems. Out of the strong comes forth strength, even if not sweetness, and when strength has imposed itself long enough, then we learn to call it tradition, whether we like it or not. [200]

This Bloomian version of canon-formation has the unique merit that it "de-idealizes" our sense of how traditions come to exist and to function. The New Critical view--that if poems have any relation to other poems, it is a benign relationship of imitating and borrowing ideas--is no more upheld by Bloom than is the currently fashionable, ideological view that cultural politics entirely determines the canon. Even the most academically canonized poet of this century, T. S. Eliot, poet of the self-desiccated imagination, may one day seem to be a bizarre example of academic misjudgment. In "The Scholars" (1914-1915) Yeats wrote:

> Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
> Old, learned, respectable bald heads
> Edit and annotate the lines
> That young men, tossing on their beds,
> Rhymed out in love's despair
> To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.
>
> All shuffle there; all cough in ink;
> All wear the carpet with their shoes;
> All think what other people think;
> All know the man their neighbour knows.
> Lord, what would they say
> Did their Catullus walk that way? [243]

We might ask today whether the literary academy has changed much since "The Scholars," or does its ethos remain, so far as poetry is concerned, that "All think what other people think"?

Bloom's thesis of canon-formation defends against more than extremes of weakness, past and present. For even the strengths of deconstructive criticism would send us into a free fall of infinite linguistic substitution and relativism, although it shares with Bloom the same canon. J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man, for example, choose to write about great poems, great works which, Bloom would say, chose them, yet they can provide no theoretical basis for this choosing or being chosen. In the labyrinth of Miller's "linguistic moment," in the aporia of de Man's "madness of words," there exists no defense or figure able to link literary transformations. Discontinuity becomes the new Demiurge, while genealogy appears as an arbitrary fiction of the un-self-deconstructed critical theorist. Yet Miller's book, The Linguistic Moment, repeats virtually the same canon from Wordsworth to Wallace Stevens that is the obsession of Harold Bloom,[2] just as the more cosmopolitan Paul de Man, from his 1960 PhD dissertation until his death, chose to write about the works of such figures as Rousseau, Wordsworth, Shelley, Nietzsche, Mallarmé and Yeats.

While refusing the bad conscience of political historicism as a basis of literary judgment, Bloom also refuses the free fall of deconstructive relativism which negates linguistically any and all grounding. Instead, Bloom insists that there must be a

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[2] Only Miller's choice to write on Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Carlos Williams excepts him from Bloom's choice of poets.

poetic genealogy and that its basis is found in the rather gloomy figurative area of aggressive defense. Yet even this dark area has its light humor, as here in Kabbalah and Criticism:

> No one would survive socially if he or she went around assuming or saying that he or she had to be misinterpreted, by everyone whosoever, but fortunately poems don't have to survive either in civil society or in a state of nature. Poems fight for survival in a state of poems, which by definition has been, is now, and is always going to be badly overpopulated. Any poem's initial problem is to make room for itself--it must force the previous poems to move over and so clear some space for itself. A new poem is not unlike a small child placed with a lot of other small children in a small playroom, with a limited number of toys, and no adult supervision whatever. [121]

Bloom's toys are the tropes he uses, just as Yeats at the twilight of his career-poem saw his previous tropes as "circus animals [that] were all on show" [471]. Had he not made them turn tricks and jump through fiery hoops? But what good now were such memories, such tropes? Jumping again through the old hoops will not suffice. Repetition of the old tropes is always a temptation, but will not engender a poem able to survive among so many other poems, able "To engross the present and dominate memory," instead of merely "enumerate old themes" [471]. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" manifests Yeats's anxiety about his own most characteristic stance, the stance of aggressive defense or revision of his own anterior voices. To repeat those voices would be a curse of death for a poet, who will evoke new life, only, paradoxically, by enacting the deathly burial of old voices:

Accursed who brings to light of day
The writings I have cast away!
But blessed he that stirs them not
And lets the kind worm take the lot.[3]

Here Yeats curses the curse of repetition, just as in another quatrain he blesses the antithetical process of remaking the self which is an act that is isomorphic with the writing of any strong poem:

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

Highly conscious of his belatedness regarding a tradition so embarrassingly rich that it seems already glutted with genius, and also highly conscious of his belatedness regarding his own strongly-voiced poems of the past, Yeats struggles to remake himself, to do more than enumerate old themes, to bury the past that, dead, it may breed new poetic life.

6.1 The Scene of Yeatsian Instruction

I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
Surely, thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?
"The Secret Rose"

I have already argued, in the fifth chapter, that Yeats (rather than Blake, as Fite has claimed) is the crucial precursor of Bloom's work, and the vision that I present in this chapter should work to reinforce this argument. But in the case of Yeats, I take the crucial precursor to be Shelley, a precursor

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[3] This and the next untitled quatrain are not part of Yeats's Collected Poems. They are published by Finneran, p. 549 and 548, in the section of The Poems: A New Edition (1983) that he calls "Additional Poems."

who later appears as a composite of Shelley and Hamlet. That is to say, I intend to show that the crucial crossings in Yeats's best poetry are made to happen when Yeats summons the pneumatic strength to seek the lie of voice by confronting and defending against the ghostly voice of the composite precursor welling up within him. Such creative moments Yeats experiences as the agon of a fiery darkness that he must pass through, as described in "Sailing to Byzantium" where the precursors are addressed--

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, pern in a gyre,
> And be the singing-masters of my soul . . . [301]

--and as described in "Byzantium," with its "agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve," where

> At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
> Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
> Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame. . . . [364]

Shelley's sublime skepticism and his passion for the epipsychidion, the soul out of his soul, and later Hamlet's tragic heroism and his passion for union with the fatherly voice from beyond the grave, combine variously to draw Yeats again and again into the darkness of a holy fire, a Scene of Instruction in the presence of sages and their absent internalized voices.

But there is more. With each passage through the Scene of Instruction, each breaking and remaking of the tropes of the precursor, Yeats's own prior poems tend to merge with the precursor, so that Yeats becomes his own precursor. As Bloom has put it, in a comment on a passage from Freud,

> the adult ego, at its strongest [the ephebe in his maturity], defend[s] itself against vanished dangers and even seek[s] substitutes for the vanished

> originals. In the agon of the strong poet, the achieved substitutes tend to be earlier versions of the ephebe himself, who in some sense laments a glory he never had. [Anxiety 89]

Thus, when we reach "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1937-1938),[4] we feel the uncanny effect of being in the presence of a Yeatsian voice that is struggling to evade merely enumerating old themes, and struggling once again to dominate memory dialectically by releasing it from obsession. And yet we hear a voice like that of an agèd Shelleyan poet, grown skeptical even of his love for visionary wonder--"Those masterful images [that] / Grew in pure mind" [472]; and we hear a voice like that of an agèd Hamlet, weary of the figurative transmutations required in heroic duels with rapier and dagger and ready to "lie down where all the ladders start."

Though it might be objected by New Critics, de Manians, and cultural ideologues alike that my story of Hamlet and Shelley and Yeats himself as the composite precursor of Yeats's poems is but an arbitrary fiction of my own choosing and making, I would contend that I here seek to perform upon Yeats's poems (and Bloom's critical theory) the very antithetical misreading of their work that I claim to be the source of their strength and that Bloom claims to be the source of all that is memorable and valuable in both poetry and criticism. Recalling that the divine pneuma of the Gnostic is spark or the lie of voice, just as the Hebraic davhar is "act made one with word rather than word referring only to another word (logos)," Bloom describes the dialectic that identifies poem, criticism, and reading: "A poem

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[4] Yeats's Poems, p. 641.

is spark and act, or else we need not read it a second time. Criticism is spark and act, or else we need not read it at all" [Vessels 4]. The critical reader is therefore an element inalienable to the dialectics of poetry; just as the ephebe is to the precursor, so the critic is to the poem. The relations of force that tie Hamlet, Shelley, Yeats, and Bloom, to myself in a knotty matrix of misreaders can be wished away, but such a wish would amount to a weak evasion of the challenge imposed upon us by our cultural heritage.

6.2 Clinamen, or the Fall that Is a First Breath

> What one in the rout
> Of fire-born moods
> Has fallen away?
> "The Moods"

With self-assured guile in the Council Scene, Claudius, false father and king, declares,

> And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?
> You told us of some suit. What is't, Laertes?
> You cannot speak of reason to the Dane,
> And lose your voice. [I, ii, 42-45; p. 71]

Yet it is in the darker dread that he will never gain his voice that, as a poet, Yeats begins--much like Hamlet, brooding and silent in his "inky cloak" of grief for the dead father and of protest against the false father and the weak and wayward mother; and reduced to clever but ineffectual quips about being "too much in the sun"; yet he will meet his fate ("My fate cries out," he warns Horatio) in the voice and form of the ghost of the king his father at midnight on the platform.[5] When Yeats begins, he

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[5] The quotations are from Act I: ii, 77, p. 73; ii, 67, p. 72; and iv, 81, p. 88.

begins by falling, falling away primarily from the voice of Shelley. As I have shown in previous chapters, especially in (4.5) and (5.2), Bornstein's Yeats and Shelley and Bloom's Yeats argue--each one emphasizing certain aspects from his point of view--that Yeats begins in Shelley. My own perspective on the Shelley-Yeats dyad is that the youthful Yeats felt utterly flooded by the voice of Shelley for many years. Indeed, in an early poem, "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (1892),[6] Yeats has Cuchulain, his heroic anti-self, murder a youth who turns out to be his son, and then wade into the sea to drown, doing battle, sword in hand, "with the invulnerable tide" [70]. Beyond merely reversing the Theban drama at the crossroads where Oedipus murdered his father Laius, Yeats here plunges into the deep ambivalence of his relation to Shelley. Is he the murderer or the murdered? Is he Cuchulain, or is Shelley Cuchulain and he the slain youth? Either way, Yeats was gasping for a breath of his own in poem after poem. And he only gradually and discontinuously achieved this breath, partly by invoking other voices against that of Shelley.

Permutations of Oedipal conflict engrossed Yeats throughout his career. Although my theme is Yeats-the-poet not Yeats-the-playwright, I should mention that he published his own versions of Oedipus Rex and Oedipus at Colonus; furthermore, that in his late play, Purgatory (1939), he has an old man--who as a youth had killed his own father--murder his son "on the same jackknife," as climax to his futile effort to liberate the ghost of his mother from the wheel of eternal recurrence that always

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[6] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 497.

brings round the violence of his mother's wedding night, the night that he was conceived. The drama of the rivalry of fathers and sons, its horrors and its sublimities, is a deep and crucial figure--a primal scene like Bloom's Scene of Instruction--of the Yeatsian imagination.

In The Witch of Atlas Shelley presents a mythic vision of the divine origins of love, pleasure, and desire fulfilled--the Witch herself being an angelic prankster [line 665] who "would write strange dreams upon the brain" [617], and sow "sweet joy" [651] into mortals. Hers is a world of pure creativity, of a narcissism before any fall or catastrophe. More than an arcadian myth, Shelley's poem writes the origins of Arcadia. But Yeats can only begin in a fall away from such origins. His "Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1885) is the first poem of his first book of poems, called Crossways (1889), aptly titled if we read it as an emblem of the crossroads where Yeats, a modern day Oedipus, must struggle with an unknown father as an internalized voice.

> The woods of Arcady are dead,
> And over is their antique joy;
> Of old the world on dreaming fed;
> Grey Truth is now her painted toy. . . . [41]

Unlike the voice of the tale of the Witch, the happy shepherd sings a song of loss. In Shelley's myth, death is only an irritant to be overcome at a whim by the Witch whose magic can transport a dead body into a mode of being that is protected from both life and death:

> And there the body lay, age after age,
> Mute, breathing, beating, warm, and undecaying,
> Like one asleep in a green hermitage,
> With gentle smiles about the eyelids playing,
> And living in its dreams beyond the rage
> Of death or life. [lines 609-614]

But unlike the happiness of Shelley's Witch, the happiness of Yeats's shepherd is under great pressure. Like the Witch, Yeats's shepherd practices a magical power to protect from life and death, but his powers are less confident and effective, more ambiguous and strained:

> I must be gone: there is a grave
> Where daffodil and lily wave,
> And I would please the hapless faun,
> Buried under the sleepy ground,
> With mirthful songs before the dawn.
> His shouting days with mirth were crowned;
> And still I dream he treads the lawn,
> Walking ghostly in the dew,
> Pierced by my glad singing through,
> My songs of old earth's dreamy youth:
> But ah! she dreams not now; dream thou!
> For fair are poppies on the brow:
> Dream, dream, for this is also sooth. [42]

Whereas the enchantments of the divine Witch are fail-proof, those of the earthly shepherd are not. That his glad singing may pierce through death, to quicken the buried hapless faun, remains but a song and a dream; yet this being all he has, he pours all his enthusiasm into this action that is also a word (Bloom's Hebraic <u>davhar</u>): "For words alone are certain good: / Sing, then, for this is also sooth."

We see here an example of the swerve from origins that Bloom calls "clinamen," the first of his six ratios of revision. Feeling the absence of the father as a overwhelming presence of voice, Yeats reacts against its presence while yet remaining within its absence. He repeats, but with a difference, the Shelleyan voice, gaining his first breath but at the cost of continuing to sing the song of the father. For the happy shepherd repeats the stance of the Witch in all but the certainty of his magical powers. In relation to the precursor, Yeats falls

or contracts, in order to begin. He thereby gains a first and measured victory, the evasion of mere repetition, the evasion of death-by-drowning in the voice of the precursor.

Some of Yeats's early work fails to gain even this first evasion. For instance, in his Yeats and Shelley Bornstein implies--and I here re-embed his argument in my own version of Bloom's terms--that some of Yeats's early work merely repeats, without a lifesaving difference, the stance and voice of Shelley's Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude. Concerning The Seeker, The Island of Statues, and Mosada (poems which Yeats rejected for inclusion in his Collected Poems), Bornstein points out that "Yeats followed Shelley in treating love as a continuous quest, ending in death and symbolized by star imagery, . . . [a] pattern most clearly [followed] in Alastor" [14]. Bloom also shows the dependence of these works on Alastor especially [Yeats 52-55]; and like Bornstein, Bloom notes the dependence of The Wanderings of Oisin upon a Shelleyan vision of the quest. Bloom's most important comment in this context is, "In Oisin, Yeats takes no more care to distance himself from his hero than Shelley does in Alastor" [96].[7]

It is not my purpose here to trace the matrix of synapses that link Shelley's Alastor, Yeats's rejected early poems (The Seeker, The Island of Statues, Mosada), and his Oisin, Bornstein's analysis of these links, and Bloom's revisionary comments

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[7] Bornstein identifies Oisin as much closer to Prometheus Unbound than to Alastor or The Triumph of Life, pp. 24-25. Bloom on the other hand finds the origins of Oisin in Alastor which, more than Wordsworth's Excursion or Keats's Endymion, is "a poem perfectly consistent with itself . . . ; its drastic solution contra naturam founded a tradition that Wordsworth and Keats could not themselves foster" [92], the tradition of the poem of quest in which "the Poet must die unfulfilled, his vision still evanescent" [91]. Bloom discusses Oisin among Alastor and its other precursor-poems in Yeats, pp. 83-103.

on all of these to my own version of the Shelley-Yeats dyad, although to do so would be an exemplary exercise in the pragmatics of revisionary misreading. However, I do find it crucial to draw out the importance of Bloom's observation that "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" was "originally printed as an Epilogue to both The Island of Statues and The Seeker" [54]. These two poems (along with Mosada) are so inundated with the voice of Shelley that they have no breath or pneuma of their own, which is surely why Yeats excluded them from his Collected Poems. Yet the epilogue that he wrote for the poems does achieve the fall or contraction from the precursor that is necessary for a beginning breath. Thus "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" is chosen by Yeats to begin his first book of lyric poems, Crossways.

Before moving beyond "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" as a crucial poem of clinamen in relation to Shelley, I should mention that along with its companion poem, "The Sad Shepherd," it performs a clinamen in relation to Milton when read against his companion poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Both sets of poems suggest the contrasting symmetry that links psychological states. But the Yeats pair defends against the Milton pair by making two significant turns. Firstly, Yeats's happy and sad shepherds may seem to reflect Milton's mirthful one and his contemplative, simply by virtue of symmetry, but both of Yeats's shepherds sing within the visionary space opened by Milton's contemplative, both rejecting the daylight naturalism of "L'Allegro." Instead, they both seek the darker compensations of imaginative voice in the world of "Il Penseroso." For both

the happy and the sad shepherds would sing their stories to an "echo-harbouring shell," thereby turning the world of experience into its artistic negation, much like the contemplative, who sings:

> Or let my lamp at midnight hour
> Be seen in some high lonely tow'r,
> Where I may oft outwatch the Bear,
> With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere
> The spirit of Plato to unfold
> What worlds or what vast regions hold
> The immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshy nook. [85-92]

But secondly, Yeats's happy shepherd is closer to Milton's contemplative than is his sad shepherd, since unlike the former two, the sad shepherd finds no reward at all for his effort to re-word his sorrow by singing into a shell:

> Then he sang softly nigh the pearly rim;
> But the sad dweller by the sea-ways lone
> Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan
> Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him. [43]

Milton's contemplative sings a high song of imaginative freedom, a song rejecting the naturalism of the companion piece, "L'Allegro"; and Yeats's happy shepherd, though he has broken faith with the world and its "Grey Truth," keeps faith with the power of the word and its dreams. But the sad shepherd has fallen even from the power of his own voice, for when he sings he hears only "inarticulate moan."[8]

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[8] In Yeats, pp. 8-10, Bloom discusses "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," but in relation to a grand sweep of poetic tradition after Milton, rather than as I have done in relation to Yeats's two early arcadian poems. As Bloom there points out, in "The Phases of the Moon" Yeats himself reminds us that his precursors are Milton and Shelley by alluding, self-mockingly, to "Il Penseroso" and "Prince Athanase":

> He has found, after the manner of his kind,
> Mere images, chosen this place to live in
> Because, it may be, of the candle-light
> From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
> Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince:
> The lonely tower that Samuel Palmer engraved,
> An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;

6.3 Rose-Breath, or the Swerve from the Rose

> Come near, come near, come near--Ah! leave me still
> A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
> "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time"

Despite the beginning breath taken in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," it is only with Yeats's second and third books of poems, The Rose (1893) and The Wind among the Reeds (1899), that Yeats's agon with Shelley takes more emphatic form, more aggressive turns of contraction and fall. These poems, more than any others that Yeats was to write, constitute his own rather occult version of Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty":

> The awful shadow of some unseen Power
> Floats through unseen among us,--visiting
> This various world with as inconstant wing
> As summer winds that creep from flower to flower,--
> . . . . . .
> Thy light alone--like mist o'er mountains driven,
> Or music by the night-winds sent
> Through strings of some still instrument,
> Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
> Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.
> [1-4, 32-36]

While Shelley derives his Platonic "Spirit of BEAUTY" from its poetic source in Dante's Celestial Rose in the Paradiso, Yeats combines Shelley's "unseen Power" with Dante's Rose, and gives it the extra twist of his esoteric Platonism, to culminate in the Rose of his own early poems.[9]

> And now he seeks in book or manuscript
> What he shall never find. [268]

Mocking his own belatedness, Yeats here again anticipates Bloom. The argument that links Milton and Shelley to Yeats and Bloom lends greater weight to my comments on the trope of the tower in (2.1) and to my discussion of Hermes Trismegistus and Yeats's Platonism especially in chapter four.

[9] As I have shown in chapter four (4.5) there is no better guide to the occult vision, the alchemical and esoteric Platonism, of Yeats's early poetry than Grossman's book on The Wind among the Reeds, Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats (1969).

I must distinguish my remarks in the discussion that follows from Bornstein's discussion of "the Rose poems" and the relation of Yeats's trope of the Rose to Shelley's Intellectual Beauty.[10] Bornstein's discussion, highly useful in its own way, balks at engaging in a strong misreading of Yeats and Shelley. More conventional than agonic, it is concerned with system and the conscious manipulation of system by Yeats. He comes closest to my theme when he writes that

> Yeats shared Shelley's intent to express his vision of Intellectual Beauty through a pattern of symbols. In place of Shelley's star [discussed by Yeats as Shelley's symbol of Intellectual Beauty in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," Essays and Introductions, pp. 88-89] he puts the Rose, with its Christian, hermetic, national, and literary associations. [48]

Bornstein explains his view of these associations as conscious borrowings, but he cannot explain the meaning of the substitution of Rose for Star as a purposefully evasive forgetting and remembering, because that would take him into the darker area of Bloomian transformations, a topos that he still mainly avoids, despite his increasing sympathies with Bloom, even in his later book, Transformation of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens (1976).

As his eyelids are splashed with the water of Paradise, Dante says,

> Splendour Divine, O thou through whom I saw
> The lofty triumph of that Realm of truth,
> Grant me the power to tell it as I saw it!
> Supernal light is there, light which reveals
> Creator unto all who are create,
> Whose peace consists alone in seeing Him.

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[10] Before having read Bornstein's account, I wrote a work-in-progress seminar paper articulating my reading of the genealogy of the Rose and Intellectual Beauty, titled "Self-Transformations: Yeats's Stones and Roses."

> It spreads into a figure circular,
> So broad that its circumference would be
> A girdle far too ample for the sun.
> . . . . . .
> Mirrored in thousand steps and more, I saw
> As many of us as have there returned
> And if the lowest of the steps includes
> Light so majestical, how great the breadth
> Between the utmost petals of the Rose!
> . . . . . .
> Into the yellow of th'eternal Rose,
> Which wider spreads and wider in its grades
> Successive, and exhales fragrance of praise
> Unto that Sun which makes perpetual spring,
> Beatrice drew me onward, like a man
> Who, speechless, longs to speak. . . .
> [canto XXX, lines 94-102, 110-114, 121-126]

"The courts of heaven this time assume the shape of a rose, expanding leaf over leaf of candid lustre, spreading outwards from the heart of gold to God who is its sun."[11] In Dante, the beatific vision is an achieved eternal moment, but in the more skeptical Shelley (as in the Wordsworth of the "Intimations" Ode) the vision splendid is painfully fleeting, so that he must dedicate poems like the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" to the possibility of achieving such an eternal moment:

> Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate
> With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
> Of human thought or form,--where art thou gone?
> Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
> This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
> [13-17]

But from Yeats's perspective as belated ephebe, Shelley's voice is already the fullness of hymns and odes, Alastor, Prometheus Unbound, Epipsychidion, and "Ode to the West Wind" being already the "awful LOVELINESS" [line 71] that Yeats himself quests after.

That Yeats identified Dante's Celestial Rose with Shelley's Intellectual Beauty should be clear from various perspectives,

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[11] Symonds, An Introduction to the Study of Dante, p. 193.

despite the ambivalence of some of his comments. In an early short story called "Out of the Rose," he wrote:

> After gazing a while towards the sun, he [an old knight in rusted armor] let the reins fall upon the neck of his horse, and stretching out both arms towards the west, he said, "O Divine Rose of Intellectual Flame, let the gates of thy peace be opened to me at last!" [Mythologies 157]

Beyond this, Yeats used "Rose" in the titles of six early poems, and in other poems he referred to "The Incorruptible Rose" [104], "the Immortal Rose" [107], and so on; he published a book of poems entitled The Rose, a book of short stories entitled The Secret Rose (1897), and in the same year an "apocalyptic romance"[12] entitled "Rosa Alchemica." His occult studies included the Christian heresy of Rosicrucianism, in which the Rose is a crucial symbol of transcendence and deification through the mystical marriage of male and female, Cross and Rose. Commenting on this powerful trope, Yeats had to mention Shelley, even though his need to take possession of the trope made his comments evasively ambivalent about the precursor:

> the quality symbolised as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar. . . .
> With a rhythm that still echoed Morris I prayed to the Red Rose, to Intellectual Beauty.
> [Yeats's Poems 495, 496]

Yeats's perception of the relation between his own esoteric trope called "The Rose" and Shelley's more conventionally Platonic trope called "Intellectual Beauty" tries but fails to conceal the true nature of their relation. He says that unlike Shelley's Intellectual Beauty, his Rose suffers with man, and he thereby

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[12] The phrase is Whitaker's, p. 38.

turns what he takes to be a Platonic trope into his own heretical Christian trope. But he forgets that Prometheus, as Shelley's lyrical drama begins, is certainly a Christ-like Rose, "crucified" upon a rock, yet destined for a redemptive transcendental vision. Similarly, his Rose is not pursued from afar, says Yeats, and he thereby turns Shelley's "Spirit of BEAUTY" into an external experience. But Shelley's trope gains all its power by evoking an internal experience, all the more painful for having now fled. The Poet who is the protagonist of Alastor is driven to his death only because he is true to a quest that begins in a visionary dream--most inward of human experiences:

> A vision on his sleep
> There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
> Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veilèd maid
> Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
> Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
> Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
> Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held
> His inmost sense suspended in its web
> Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues.
> Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
> And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
> Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
> Herself a poet. [149-161]

The true distance between Yeats's Rose and Shelley's Intellectual Beauty--the mention of Morris is an evasion, for he cannot match the influence that Shelley has over Yeats's voice--is not just his contraction from the Platonic to the occult, for both suggest powerfully internal experiences of the Divine. The true distance is that Yeats desires yet fears the voice of the Rose. He must be possessed by the Rose if he is to achieve divination, the voice of an eternal; yet he must not die the death of drowning in the voice of the Rose, the death of merely

repeating the precursor. He must struggle, at the cost of a wound like wrestling Jacob, to achieve a blessing that is his own pneuma, his own spark or breath. And as we shall see, the soul out of his soul, the epipsyche, will be crucial to the quest for the blessing, a blessing intuited from a voice that is "like the voice of his soul / Heard in the calm of thought."

Yeats's anxiety to perform the fall from Shelley that is also the stealing of some of the power of the voice of the precursor is acutely felt in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" (1892),[13] a poem whose title alludes to Yeats's Rosicrucianism, and the poem which introduces the book entitled The Rose:

> Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
> Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:
> Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;
> . . . . . .
> Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
> I find under the boughs of love and hate,
> In all poor foolish things that live a day,
> Eternal beauty wandering on her way.
>
> Come near, come near, come near--Ah, leave me still
> A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
> Lest I no more hear common things that crave. . . .
> [65]

"Rose-breath" is the crucial trope here. It may seem to be an emanation from the precursor-as-Rose, but read agonicly, it is Yeats's desperate defensive trope against drowning in the Rose. He still quests after an immortal, internal, and (for him) esoteric voice--

> But seek alone to hear the strange things said
> By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,
> And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know . . .

---

[13] Date of first publication, in The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics, Yeats's Poems, p. 496.

--yet he prays that he may remain in touch with the cries of mortals, with

> common things that crave;
> The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,
> The field-mouse running by me in the grass,
> And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass. . . .

This poem shows Yeats to be wounded nearly to death in pleading to be engulfed by the divine tropes of the precursor. He gains the poetic blessing of rose-breath, but only through the process of misreading the precursor to make him appear to be less concerned with "common things that crave" or the "suffering of man," and more concerned with the illusory pursuit of things "seen from afar" instead of with the occult voice of a God who speaks to "the bright hearts of those long dead."

The struggle for the rose-breath is emblematical of Yeats's first swerve away from origins--a falling away that he enacts many times in his early poetry, and that may be seen as the very theme of "The Moods" (1893):[14]

> Time drops in decay,
> Like a candle burnt out,
> And the mountains and woods
> Have their day, have their day;
> What one in the rout
> Of fire-born moods
> Has fallen away? [90]

The weariness, indeed the utter exhaustion, suggested by this poem manifests the energy required for poets to contract into a fall that will free them, even if temporarily and marginally, from the voice of a precursor. This exhaustion or loss of breath may imply that the poet has reached the limit of his contraction and may be approaching a new dialectical crossing. In Yeats's

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[14] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 508.

case the crossing out of the first contraction of clinamen, and into what Bloom calls the new restitution of "tessera" or the second ratio of revision, took place prior to "The Moods" on at least one occasion. While the whole of The Wind among the Reeds (to which "The Moods" belongs) may be an occult fall from the voice of Shelley, Yeats had already created for himself another voice, another way to write a poem, by writing "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890).

6.4 Tessera, or the New Fullness

> And no more turn aside and brood
> Upon love's bitter mystery.
> "Who Goes with Fergus?"

Bornstein has insightfully observed that "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (a poem from The Wind among the Reeds) "is an Irish Alastor in miniature." For like the Poet-protagonist of Alastor, Yeats's Irish Aengus "has a vision of an ideal maiden in a forest by a stream; furthermore, as in Shelley's poem, she then vanishes."[15] By virtue of being "an Irish Alastor," the poem performs a clinamen in relation to Alastor, with Yeats repressing quotation while repeating Shelley's vision. Intriguingly, the first Yeatsian crossing from clinamen to tessera, from contraction to completion or restitution, is achieved when Yeats uses Wordsworth against Shelley. For "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is as much an Irish "Tintern Abbey," a

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[15] Yeats and Shelley, p. 56. In "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" in Essays and Introductions, Yeats refers to Alastor as the poem's protagonist. Bornstein uses the symbol "Alastor" to refer to Yeats's mistaken identification of the name in the title with "the nameless youth of Shelley's Alastor" [29-30]. For Alastor properly refers to the spirit pursued by the Poet, the nameless youth, rather than to the youth himself. I add that Yeats's mistake amounts to a classic example of what Bloom calls poetic misprision.

clinamen or swerve from "Tintern Abbey," as it is a completion or even a fulfillment of Alastor.

In The Anxiety of Influence Bloom refers to tessera as "a completing link," and observes that

> tessera represents any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe. [67]

In A Map of Misreading clinamen is paired with tessera (just as the third ratio, "kenosis," is with the fourth, "daemonization," and the fifth, "askesis," with the sixth, "apophrades"). The impression therefore received from Anxiety, that the strong poet simply passes through the six phases, is revised and replaced with an impression of a dialectical crossing from first to second, from third to fourth, and from fifth to sixth, each being a crossing from the ethos or fate of a contraction to the pathos or power of a restitution, and with each successive pair increasing the strain of the dialectical pattern. In his Wallace Stevens book, Bloom gives names to each crossing and elaborates the purpose of each. The first is "the Crossing of Election." Here a poet "faces the death of the creative gift and seeks an answer to the question Am I still a poet." The second is "the Crossing of Solipsism" (in Agon called "the Sublime Crossing"). Here a poet "struggles with the death of love, and tries to answer the fearful query Am I capable of loving another besides myself." The third is "the Crossing of Identification." Here a poet suffers a "confrontation with mortality, with total death, and the prohibited instinct is the drive toward death" [Wallace

Stevens 403].[16] In A Map of Misreading Bloom illustrates the first crossing in these terms:

> When the latecomer initially swerves (clinamen) from his poetic father, he brings about a contraction or withdrawal of meaning from the father. . . . The answering movement, antithetical to this primary, is the link called tessera, a completion that is also an opposition, or restorer of some of the degrees-of-difference between ancestral text and the new poem. [97]

Just as some of the key attributes of clinamen are limitation, contraction, swerve, and fall, some of the crucial characteristics of tessera are restoration, completion, reversal, and fulfillment.

Yet even as early as Poetry and Repression as well as later in Ruin the Sacred Truths and in various essays collected in Poetics of Influence (1988), tessera as a term is dropped in favor of "figura." This allows Bloom to attack what is surely his least favorite ratio. For figura, as he uses it, is the trope that lays bare the illusion that the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. In the chapter called "Shelley and His Precursors" in Poetry and Repression--without linking his discussion to his own trope of tessera yet using the same figures that describe tessera--Bloom describes the illusion of figura as part of "a basic principle of poetic misprision":

> No later poet can be the fulfillment of any earlier poet. He can be the reversal of the precursor, or the deformation of the precursor, but whatever he is, to revise is not to fulfill. [88, italics removed]

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[16] The leap from a contraction to a restitution is described, in A Map of Misreading and Poetry and Repression, as a "substitution." But by increasingly associating this crossing or leap with the Kabbalistic "breaking of the vessels" and later with Gnostic evasion and catastrophe creation, Bloom revises his own dialectic which later becomes the Gnostic dialectical triad of negation, evasion (or freedom), and extravagance that I have referred to earlier, in (1.10), (3.5), and (4.8).

Later, in Ruin the Sacred Truths, Bloom attacks the critical notion that Dante's Commedia is a fulfillment of Virgil's Aeneid, and he likewise excoriates the Christian version of figura in which,

> Instead of the Hebrew Bible of J, Jeremiah, and Job, we get the captive work, the Old or indeed senescent Testament, considerably less vital than the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible becomes the letter, while Saint Paul and Saint John become the spirit. [42]

By re-seeing tessera as the trope of figura, Bloom exposes the bad faith hidden in the Christian tropes of Old and New Testaments, which he rightly renames the Original and Belated Testaments.[17] We might therefore call figura the illusion of tessera. Bloom also uses tessera to describe derisively the link that Lacan made in his work to Freud. Ironically, however, Bloom's work itself might be seen, not only as the perversely complex revision of Yeats that I have argued mainly in chapter five, but also as a completion or fulfillment of Freud in the area of creativity theory.[18]

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[17] Poetics of Influence, pp. 387-403. It is precisely the view that the spirit of the New Testament fulfills the letter of the Old that Susan Handelman strongly criticizes in "Escape from Textuality: The Fulfiller of Signs," a chapter from The Slayers of Moses which I referred to in (4.6) and (5.2). In various late essays in Bloom's Poetics of Influence, a collection of articles edited by John Hollander, Bloom continues his assault on figura, especially as it relates to Christian revisionism of the Torah and the Talmud. In effect, tessera or figura here becomes a trope for the misreading that we must call Pauline Christian anti-Semitism.

[18] Much of the fourth chapter of Agon, "Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory of Creativity," is devoted to fending off Lacan as a useful author within Bloom's field of Freudian poetics. "In tribute to Lacan," says Bloom, "Lacan in particular has uncovered Freud as the greatest theorist we have of what I would call the necessity of misreading" [92]. But he goes on to say that "any theory of artistic creativity that wishes to use Freud must depart from the Freudian letter in order to develop the Freudian spirit [this is clearly the trope of tessera or figura], which in some sense is already the achievement of Lacan and his school, though they have had no conspicuous success in speculating upon art" [97-98]. I have dealt with the issue of Bloom on Lacan at greater length in "Harold Bloom in/and History."

6.5 Yeatsian Tessera and the Music of the Heart

> [We] had been savagely undone
> Were it not that Love upon the cry
> Of a most ridiculous little bird
> Tore from the clouds his marvelous moon.
> "A Memory of Youth"

Returning to our consideration of Yeats, "Tintern Abbey," and Alastor, it is my argument that, in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Yeats uses a clinamen from the Wordsworth poem to defend against the Shelley poem. The relation to Shelley is a tessera because "Innisfree" may be seen as a reversal that restores the potential of Alastor. Indeed, from the point of view of "Innisfree," Alastor is a divine failure. The nameless youth or Poet of Alastor pursues his dream or gnostic quest--

> thus driven
> By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,
> Beneath the cold glare of that desolate night,
> Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,
> Startling with careless step the moonlight snake . . .
> [lines 232-236]

--but he achieves in the end only a sublime death. While just such a death is the occult prayer of almost every poem in The Wind among the Reeds, the earlier poem, "Innisfree," seeks to fulfill Shelley's Alastor by showing how a nameless youth would achieve a dream:

> I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
> And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
> Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
> And live alone in the bee-loud glade. [74]

At Innisfree all glorious and vain pursuit--whether that of Yeats's recently completed and longest poem, The Wanderings of Oisin,[19] or that of the Poet-youth of Alastor--comes to rest, as

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[19] Begun in 1886, Oisin was completed in 1887, while "Innisfree" was composed in 1888; Yeats's Poems, pp. 483 and 499.

Yeats achieves his first intuition of what later becomes known as "Unity of Being."

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
> dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where
> the cricket sings;
> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings.

The delicacy of the images disguises the utter strength of Yeats's lying against time in these lines. For the fullness of the perfection of nature here coincides with the peace that is the speaker's; combine this with the formal perfection of the verse, and we are left with the impression that time has stopped--not in the death of a youthful hero who has failed in his quest, but in a new life beyond death and time, a life fully at one with self and nature.

But it is precisely at this point that Yeats combines his tessera vis à vis Shelley with his clinamen regarding Wordsworth. The bard of Cumbria finds his voice on the banks of the river Wye in listening to the rolling music of its waters--

> Five years have past; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur. [1-4]

--and this music of the waters becomes the occasion of the memory of "The still, sad music of humanity," and the memory of

> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. [91, 94-102]

The "presence" that disturbs Wordsworth possesses Yeats as an absence, and he gains a measure of release from the power of that absence over him by splitting his Being in order to achieve its Unity. (Recall that much later Yeats will write the antithetical knowledge or gnosis of Crazy Jane, "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent" [375].) Unlike Wordsworth who is present at the Wye, Yeats is standing "on the roadway," directing his Being (thoughts, memories, desires, all at once) to its moment of Irish perfection at Innisfree. While Wordsworth's moment of perfection involves, even requires his physical presence at the Wye, Yeats achieves his musical moment of glory only at the more strenuous cost of his physical absence from the lake isle in Lough Gill near his hometown of Sligo:

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day
> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
> While I stand on the roadway or on the pavements grey,
> I hear it in the deep heart's core. [74]

The Yeatsian clinamen or creative correction of Wordsworth's vision is to claim that the music of the deep heart's core is a deeper, a more sublime music, than the still, sad music of humanity. Both poets hear the heart's music in the music of the waters, whether it be in the lapping of the lake water or in the rolling of the river waters. But being a belated Romantic, Yeats must suffer a more severe dialectic than Wordsworth, for the Irish bard must negate the white noise of his presence in London in order to achieve the poetic sublimities of his vision at Innisfree.

As I noted above, Bloom contends that "poems become immortal when their descendants in turn engender vital poems."[20] From "Tintern Abbey" through "Innisfree" to Patrick Kavanagh's modified Shakespearean sonnet "Canal Bank Walk," I read a line of descent. The apostrophe that is also the final quatrain and couplet of the sonnet bears witness to Kavanagh's Wordsworthian passion, a passion that is mediated through the Yeatsian lyricism of "Innisfree" as well as through the occult presences that enrapture and transfigure the Yeats of The Wind among the Reeds, despite Kavanagh's famous (if self-deluded) derision of all things Yeatsian:[21]

> O unworn world enrapture me, enrapture me in a web
> Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
> Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
> To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech
> For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
> From green and blue things and arguments
> that cannot be proven.[22]

While Wordsworth's rolling river waters fall off into the lapping lake waters of Innisfree (and these waters further

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[20] Misreading, p. 200.

[21] In her essay on Kavanagh in Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry (1989), Antoinette Quinn notes that "Kavanagh explicitly opposed his 'parish myth regarding literature' to the 'myth of Ireland as a spiritual entity' which he attributed to Yeats in the first instance"[112]. And considering Yeats's influence on Kavanagh, she goes on to say:

> The most formidable of Kavanagh's Literary Revival antagonists was, of course, Yeats, whose poetry he could neither comprehend nor ignore. He was obsessed with the older poet and over and over again attempted to assess and dismiss him but Yeats resisted his parochial interrogation and remained impervious to his every polemical ploy. Kavanagh's attitude to Yeats from first to last was one of reluctant admiration. He had to content himself with attempting to demolish the Yeatsian academy since for him Yeats was the inventor of the Irish national literary myth and as the instigator of the Literary Revival was responsible for all its bogus works and pomps. [114]

If nothing else, Quinn's remarks show Bloom's subterranean influence on critics, and this coming from a volume overtly antagonistic to Bloom. Again I refer the reader to my published review of this volume.

[22] Collected Poems, p. 150. In his essay on Kavanagh in Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry, Seamus Heaney quotes the first line here as: "enrapture me, encapture me . . . "; p. 184.

contract to the waters of the canal that Kavanagh walks along), the waters that threaten the voice of the ephebe will return with greater force as Yeats begins to feel the influence of the sea surrounding Hamlet's Elsinore, the sea that, despite Horatio's warning, Hamlet dares in order that he may hear the voice of the ghost of his father:

> What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
> Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
> That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
> And there assume some other, horrible form,
> Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
> And draw you into madness? [I, iv, 69-74; p. 88]

But before going on to discuss Hamlet-in-Yeats, the story of Yeatsian tessera needs more elaboration.

6.6 The Reversal of the Curse

> What could have made her peaceful with a mind
> That nobleness made simple as a fire,
> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?
> "No Second Troy"

As he leaves behind the occult beauties of The Rose and especially of The Wind among the Reeds, as he remakes himself in the poems of books called In the Seven Woods (1904) and The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910), Yeats begins again the project of attempting to fulfill Shelley, a project begun at Innisfree and now extended in poems like the stately and composed "Adam's Curse" (1902) and the noble and taut "No Second Troy" (1908).[23]

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[23] I shall have space to discuss in detail here only "Adam's Curse." However, by way of summary I can say that "No Second Troy" enacts a tessera of Epipsychidion by reversing and completing Shelley's vision of womanly beauty. Whereas Shelley's epipsyche appears as a near-bodiless spirit--"An image of some bright Eternity; / A shadow of some golden dream" [115-116]--the soul out of Yeats's soul in "No Second Troy" is an image of beauty and nobility fused ineluctably with tension, energy, and violence:

> Why should I blame her that she filled my days

"Adam's Curse" is Yeats's first truly strong love poem, the precursor of one of his greatest poems, "Among School Children," and as a meditation on the theme of love, its Shelleyan precursor is Epipsychidion. It may be no mere accident that like Epipsychidion "Adam's Curse" is a poem of pentameter couplets--a rare formal pattern in Yeats's work. The dialogue between the two poems reveals their mutual importance. The Shelley poem endows the Yeats poem with the very vision of Love that the Yeats poem desires and mourns for, while the Yeats poem seems to be consoling itself, saying to the Shelley poem--this is what a poem on "the name of love" must now become, a poem that seeks to transcend Original Sin by voicing labor's transfiguration into beauty. It is as though "Adam's Curse" were saying to Epipsychidion--you are beautiful because you have evaded Original Sin, while I am beautiful because I have transformed Original Sin, and I thereby fulfill your letter with my spirit.

The audacity here of the belated poem can be seen when we realize the reversal that Yeats has attempted. Despite Shelley's clear allusion to the "eternal Curse" as the condition or place of his voicing, Epipsychidion presents to Yeats's memory a voice and a vision of "the eternal Moon of Love," the fullness of love before any catastrophe or fall into nature; furthermore, Yeats manages to compose a poem on the very subject of the fall, "Adam's Curse," which refuses to be simply a fall or clinamen from the Shelley poem, and which instead makes the dialectical crossing from limitation to restitution simply and effectively

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With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways. . . . [185]

See also the epigraph for this section.

by transforming Adam's fall into a new Gnostic pleroma or fullness of voice--even if this voice must end by being "As weary-hearted as [a] hollow moon."

Whereas the nameless Poet-youth of Alastor dies in a vain if noble quest after "the voice of his own soul" [line 153] which appears to him in a dream, the voice that speaks in Epipsychidion pursues not a dream, but a woman whose very presence is felt as the fulfillment and source of his quest, each being the soul out of the other's soul:

> Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse!
> Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!
> Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form
> Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm!
> Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!
> Thou Harmony of Nature's art! Thou Mirror
> In whom, as in the splendour of the Sun,
> All Shapes look glorious which thou gazest on!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I never thought before my death to see
> Youth's vision thus made perfect. Emily,
> I love thee. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!
> I am not thine: I am part of thee.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> See where she stands! . . .
> An image of some bright Eternity;
> A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
> Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender
> Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> We shall become the same, we shall be one
> Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?
> One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,
> Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
> Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
> Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
> Burning, yet ever inconsumable. . . .
> [25-32, 41-43, 51-52, 112, 115-118, 573-579]

Clearly, Plato's Symposium on Love (which Yeats will later allude to in "Among School Children") and Neoplatonic visions of Love, such as Dante's vision of Beatrice, influence Shelley's grand trope of the soul out of one's soul, but I am here more concerned

with how "Adam's Curse" receives Shelley's influence. In this context, the trope of the moon in both poems is important, as we shall see presently.

Even as "Adam's Curse" enacts a tessera in relation to Epipsychidion, as a crisis lyric it also moves through the six dialectical phases of revision. In order to begin, it takes the ironic stance of clinamen towards its origins. Rather than making love through a poem, as Shelley's theme seems in large part to be, "Adam's Curse" takes for its theme the ironies of the troubled relationship between labor and beauty as seen in the act of love that is the writing of a poem:

> We sat together at one summer's end,
> That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
> And you and I, and talked of poetry.
> I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like a pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world." [132]

Clearly Yeats is frustrated by the white noise that is passively accepted by martyrs as though it were the world. To articulate sweet sounds together may be an active negation of the noisy world, but it is also to be thought an idler--ironic since it is experienced as the supreme labor. Unexpectedly, the speaker who replies is not the poet's Muse, the figure of Maud Gonne (Beatrice to Yeats's Dante), but her "close friend."[24]

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[24] Jeffares reports that she is Maud Gonne's sister, Mrs. Kathleen Pilcher; Yeats's Poems, p. 527.

And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, "To be born woman is to know--
Although they do not talk of it at school--
That we must labour to be beautiful."

Here the poem moves dialectically from clinamen to tessera, from its initial ironies to the difficult antithetical completion of labor in beauty and in love. It is not a pleasant lesson to learn that, like poetic beauty, a woman's beauty is not simply spontaneous (Wordsworth) or unselfconscious (Kavanagh), but is the result of labor. Yeats realizes, however, that what links poetic beauty to womanly beauty is not only labor but also love, the love that may be the drive of labor itself. Yet the human condition being fallen, even this love "seems an idle trade enough." Now the poet enters the more severe contraction of kenosis or self-isolation, for he wounds himself by wounding the poetic tradition out of which he comes, appearing now to agree with "the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" whom he had earlier dismissed:

I said, "It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough. [132-133]

Adam's fall has already made labor inevitable, but in appearing to accept that the practice of poetic love-making is itself an idle trade, the poet inflicts a wound upon himself, silencing the would-be lover in him.

Yet here the poem suddenly crosses from a self-emptying kenosis to a daemonic sublime, as it rises to its true theme, its meditation on Love as a dying ember and as a hollow moon:

> We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
> We saw the last embers of daylight die,
> And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
> A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
> Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
> About the stars and broke in days and years.

Though the poem says that it is time's waters that rose and fell, its antithetical meaning is that its own sublime voice rises and falls <u>despite</u> time's waters. But nothing is got for nothing, and here the Yeatsian Sublime, perhaps the first true instance of it since "Innisfree," is purchased at the cost of troping itself as a worn moon, hollowed out by time's waters. The poem moves into the fifth phase, the limitation called askesis. Love, and therefore woman's beauty, and also poetry are worn by time's waters, compounding the defeat of Adam's fall into labor. The Muse-beloved, who has remained silent throughout, and the poet-lover approach spiritual union via the perspectivizing metaphor of "the old high way of love":

> I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
> That you were beautiful and that I strove
> To love you in the old high way of love;
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. [133]

A metaphor in Bloom's terms is a limitation or contraction because it tropes us into infinitely reversible perspectivizations of inside and outside. It "condenses through resemblance."[25] Here, "the old high way of love" is felt as an externality, something outside, and thus as a limitation. But

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[25] <u>A Map of Misreading</u>, p. 101.

in relation to Love, Beauty, and Poetry, the hollow moon is not a metaphor. Rather the hollow moon is a transumption in relation to Love, Beauty, and Poetry, for it makes them seem late, worn, and hollow, the victims of time's waters, while it makes itself seem early, more primeval and more resilient than such labor-torn and worn Shelleyan figures as Love, Beauty, and Poetry. The poem therefore ends by crossing from the limitations of askesis to the restitutions of the transumptive mode called apophrades. Even though Yeats's moon is "worn as if it had been a shell," it is an image that stands before and against time, an image that will resist time's rage and ravage.

In relation to Epipsychidion, its "Moon beyond the clouds" and its "Moon of Love," Yeats's hollow moon and his poem as a whole, therefore, perform a reversal of the fall or curse afflicting Shelley's poem. Seen from the perspective of "Adam's Curse," Epipsychidion operates the illusion of creating a Divine or Intellectual Moon prior to any fall or redemption, whereas to itself "Adam's Curse" antithetically completes the Shelley poem by accepting the wounds of the fall and redeeming them in the transfigurative power of his own poetic word. Yeats thus completes a Crossing of Election in which he assures the life of his own poetic gift, but only at the cost of a new wound. The movement of Shelley's soul out of the soul is upward and outward, but the movement of Yeats's self-wounding voice is downward and inward, like "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" as we saw in chapter four. As a result, in this poem Yeats no longer simply swerves or falls away from Shelley's Rose of Intellectual Beauty, for the soul out of Yeats's soul brings him not a fallen vision of "the

eternal Moon of Love," but rather a vision of a hollow moon that appears to restore or complete Shelley's vision by redeeming it, but only at the cost of a great weariness and hollowness.

However, as Yeats continues to pressurize his own past work and the tradition itself, he begins to transform great weariness into greater strength. Just as the trope of the Rose suggests the Yeatsian clinamen from Shelley's Intellectual Beauty, and just as the trope of the hollow moon in "Adam's Curse" suggests Yeats's attempt to restore or fulfill a lack hidden within his Rose and Shelley's Beauty, so we will find that the trope of the Moon gains strength in Yeats's career-poem, especially when what he calls "the phases of the moon" comes to dominate his "daemonization" or Counter-Sublime to Shelley. But daemonization is a second restitution of pathos, and its story will follow the story of a second contraction into fate, the story of kenosis.

6.7 Kenosis, the Wound that Empties the Self

> "I would but find what's there to find,
> Love or deceit."
> "It was the mask engaged your mind,
> And after set your heart to beat,
> Not what's behind."
> "The Mask"

Having returned home after hearing that his father was murdered, Laertes arrives at Elsinore only to find that his sister has gone mad, and he addresses her as, "O rose of May, / Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!" [IV, v, 159-160; p. 168] As Yeats enters a new phase of his career-as-poem, the third ratio that Bloom calls kenosis, Yeats begins to feel and give voice to Shakespearean influences, notably influences from <u>Hamlet</u>, and influences not always having their source only in

Hamlet himself. Ophelia too, the rose of May, will play her role in breathing a little life and madness into our poet; but firstly to Bloom's theory of poetic misprision.

The Anxiety of Influence describes kenosis in terms of the purposeful discontinuity of ephebe from precursor, resulting in the appearance of a mutual emptying. Defensive "undoing" and "self-isolation" are key terms here. As Bloom puts it,

> kenosis is a revisionary act in which an "emptying" or "ebbing" takes place in relation to the precursor. This "emptying" is a liberating discontinuity, and makes possible a kind of poem that a simple repetition of the precursor's afflatus or godhood could not allow. "Undoing" the precursor's strength in oneself serves also to isolate the self from the precursor's stance, and saves the latecomer-poet from becoming taboo in and to himself. [87-88, italics removed]

In A Map of Misreading, as I have mentioned, kenosis is paired in dialectical opposition to daemonization, the fourth ratio. These two together therefore make up the second movement from limitation to restitution. But this pair constitute a more drastic revision of self and precursor than the simple swerve of clinamen and its antithetical completion in tessera, for in this pair we follow a movement from the emptying out of the self to the heights and depths of what Bloom calls the ephebe's Counter-Sublime. Looking ahead I note that, in the Yeatsian kenosis, there is an undoing of the self that revises Hamlet in order to isolate Shelley.

The Yeatsian kenosis begins with the collapse of his few efforts at the fulfillment of Shelley. His tessera is a relatively weak phase so that even a poem as strong as "Adam's Curse" is in fact much weaker than the precursor poem, Epi-psychidion, that it bravely seeks to complete antithetically--

thus, the weariness and hollowness of the moon, the trope that attempts the tessera. Beyond "Adam's Curse" and "No Second Troy" there are very few canonical poems that contribute to In the Seven Woods and The Green Helmet and other Poems. What strong poems there are in these two books from the early middle period--poems such as "The Folly of Being Comforted" (1902), "Never Give All the Heart" (1905),[26] "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1909-1910) which I quoted in chapter three (3.0), and "The Mask" (1910)--all tend to be poems of the third phase, kenosis, rather than of tessera. For example, in both "The Folly of Being Comforted" and "Never Give All the Heart," Yeats isolates himself not only from the precursor's visions of the epipsyche (both his own and Shelley's), but he also alienates himself even from his own "heart" which must learn the lesson that love is ambivalence, i.e., that the Muse who is promiscuous will nevertheless still be loved:

> "Because of that great nobleness of hers
> The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs,
> Burns but more clearly." [130]

In the face of a kind of white noise felt as the beloved's betrayal, the poet's only recourse is a self-isolation that both absorbs and resists this worldly event by isolating even the poet's own heart:

> He that made this knows all the cost,
> For he gave all his heart and lost. [131]

Similarly, "The Fascination of What's Difficult" admits that this fascination and its white noise

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[26] 1902 and 1905 are dates of first publication according to Jeffares, Yeats's Poems, p. 526.

> Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
> Spontaneous joy and natural content
> Out of my heart. [188]

Here, the poet's sense of self has been so reduced to the dross of existence that he feels "As though [he] dragged road metal." "The Mask" so empties the self that only lying surfaces or traces are to be seen, no guarantees beneath:

> "Put off that mask of burning gold
> With emerald eyes."
> "O no, my dear, you make so bold
> To find if hearts be wild and wise,
> And yet not cold." [189]

Despite these fine yet intermittent examples, the Yeatsian collapse of the self into kenosis truly establishes itself as a phase in some of the canonical poems of two books of the middle period, Responsibilities (1914) and The Wild Swans at Coole (1919). In these two books the Yeatsian imagination walks a barren and bitter landscape, like that of "Lines Written in Dejection" (1915)--

> When have I last looked on
> The round green eyes and the long wavering bodies
> Of the dark leopards of the moon?
> . . . . . .
> The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished;
> I have nothing but the embittered sun;
> Banished heroic mother moon and vanished. . . .
> [249]

Such remarkable self-emptyings only prepare the way for Yeats's second poetic crossing, his shooting of the gap from kenosis to the Counter-Sublime of daemonization.

It is two of the poems in the cluster of elegiac poems on Robert Gregory that most interestingly delineate the complex revisionary matrix linking Yeats to his own prior poems, to Shelley, and to Hamlet. There is a sense in which all strong poems are strong because they quest after the divination of the

poet, seeking intimations of immortality that will carry the poet beyond word and world. But this is acutely true for elegies or poems in the elegiac mode. Shelley's Adonais, his elegy for John Keats, stands out, along with Milton's "Lycidas" and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" for Abraham Lincoln, as one of the most intensely self-divinating formal elegies in the language. In mourning the loss of the ostensible hero, the poem mourns by anticipation the loss-to-come of the true hero, who is the poet, and in mourning this loss tries to turn this loss into a gain, a poetic victory over death. Shelley begins with, "I weep for Adonais--he is dead! / O, weep for Adonais," but he then reverses the vision with, "He lives, he wakes--'tis Death is dead, not he; / Mourn not for Adonais" [1-2, 361-362]. When Yeats comes to write his first formal elegy, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (1918), he too seeks a triumph over death, but his strategy diverges markedly from his precursor's in Adonais.

The divergence of strategies has nothing to do with the fact that Keats was a far greater artistic genius than Gregory, for unlike Yeats Shelley pays no attention at all to the life and career of his ostensible hero. But the divergence has everything to do with Yeats feeling hemmed in by the magnificence of Adonais. If he diverges from Adonais in that he dwells on the horsemanship and artistry of Gregory, then he duly repeats the strategy of Adonais insofar as both elegies portray mock funeral pageants in which spirits (the already-dead Lionel Johnson, John Synge, and George Pollexfen in the Yeats poem) pay their respects to the newly-dead. But the crucial divergence of the Yeats poem

from Adonais comes in the fact that divination is sought in the Yeats poem despite, not through, any divination of the ostensible hero. Indeed, whereas the Keats elegy immediately announces that it is an elegy for someone called Adonais, the Gregory elegy wanders through nearly half its length, five stanzas, before it finally mentions the occasion that prompts the poem. The intensity of Shelley's passion for the figure of Adonais contrasts sharply with the relative disinterest that Yeats shows in the figure of Gregory. But why should the Yeats poem be seen as a kenosis in relation to the Shelley poem? The answer is that Yeats's stance towards Gregory amounts to an emptying out of his own Shelleyan self.

Phlegmatic rather than sanguine about Gregory, unable to throw himself with his usual Shelleyan zeal into passionate identification with his poetic hero, Yeats seems instead to recoil from his hero, seeming to force himself to praise him and mourn his death--Gregory having been after all the only son of his close friend, literary collaborator, benefactor, and colleague in management of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Lady Gregory. After subtly implying throughout stanzas VII, VIII, IX, and X that Gregory was a man who failed to live up to his potential--

> And yet he had the intensity
> To have published all to be a world's delight . . .
> [236]

--in stanza XI Yeats marks out clearly his own difference from Gregory, for Yeats identifies with those who "burn damp faggots,"

who burn a slow flame, whereas Gregory's fire had been reckless and wasteful:

> Some burn damp faggots, others may consume
> The entire combustible world in one small room
> As though dried straw, and if we turn about
> The bare chimney is gone black out
> Because the work had finished in that flare.

By turning against the figure of Gregory, Yeats turns against his own passionate and profligate (Shelleyan) self. Had he not, in so many early poems, troped his self into an occult flame that would burn the world of white noise and itself in order to become a transcendent spirit, a new Shelleyan visionary? He had sought to identify with

> the embattled flaming multitude
> Who rise, wing above wing, flame above flame,
> And, like a storm, cry the Ineffable Name,
> And with the clashing of their sword-blades make
> A rapturous music, till the morning break
> And the white hush end all but the loud beat
> Of their long wings, the flash of their white feet.[27]

Now impatient with visionary flames, Yeats isolates and wounds his Shelleyan self. And yet if his elegy is to be strong, it must be an act of divination. Yeats achieves a divination in the phase of kenosis by wounding (which paradoxically is also blessing) his Shelleyan self at the same time that he introjects some of the divine afflatus of Hamlet.

In this respect only two points need to be mentioned. Firstly, Ophelia's most sublime speech reappears in the Gregory elegy. Her response to Hamlet's violence and madness in the Nunnery Scene (which itself follows hard upon his most famous soliloquy) is to observe:

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[27] These lines come from the poem, "To Some I Have Talked with by the Fire," first published in 1895 (Yeats's Poems, p. 505).

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's,
> eye, tongue, sword,
> The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
> [III, i, 151-155; p. 127]

The thrice repeated line, "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he," not only remembers Ophelia's speech, thus usurping some of the power of Hamlet, but also alludes to Yeats's ambivalences in the poem. Yeats is in love with the Hamlet within himself--had he not taken Hamlet's retort to Gertrude, his mother, in the Portrait Scene as the epigraph for his early three volume study of Blake?--"Bring me to the test, / And I the matter will re-word, which madness / Would gambol from." Yet here Ophelia's description of the mad Hamlet is given to Robert Gregory, which shows that Yeats in fact identifies with the profligacy in Gregory that he seemed to reject. The wounds and wanderings of poetic misprision were never more intricate.

The second point that needs mention is the sudden rising of the spirit of Hamlet in the last line and a half of the elegy. Hamlet's final word--"the rest is silence"--echoes eerily the conclusion of the elegy, again bringing Yeats darkly closer to Gregory than he would like to admit. When Yeats concludes his poem with the words, "but a thought / Of that late death took all my heart for speech," he merges his own voice with the silence of Gregory via the divine silence of Hamlet. In so doing, Yeats gains through kenosis a victory over himself and his precursor Shelley. His lie against time here is to empty out the precursor and former self by appearing to reject and dissociate his own voice from the transcendent voice of that composite precursor,

yet at the same time to steal back that divine voice by invoking the voice of Hamlet, thus permitting his ambivalent identification with the profligate-in-life but now immortal Robert Gregory.

"An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" (1918) is the second poem in the Gregory cluster that enacts a kenosis of Shelley via Hamlet. But here Yeats does not perform the evasion of distancing himself from Gregory only then to identify with him. Here the method is more direct, indeed more Shelleyan--simple and complete identification with the airman. Yet the poem begins as a kenosis of Shelley and of the Shelley in Yeats by virtue of its stance towards Alastor.

> I know that I shall meet my fate
> Somewhere among the clouds above;
> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;
> . . . . . .
> Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
> Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death. [237]

The Poet-hero of Alastor follows a lonely impulse but achieves no vision, only death. His quest remains as evanescent as the moment it seized and obsessed him. But the Irish airman has it both ways. Unlike Shelley's hero, his moment of deathly emptying is also his moment of visionary fullness. Yeats hereby drains the Shelleyan precursor of voice, while himself crossing over into a new phase. Like Hamlet whose fate cries out among the midnight mists of the platform above the sea at Elsinore, the Irish airman also is to meet his fate somewhere among the clouds.

Similarly, Hamlet discovers his deepest internal sublimities in his victory over himself--"the readiness is all," says Hamlet, finally at peace with himself even as he chooses to duel Laertes.[28] Likewise, the Irish airman, with utter equanimity in his lonely impulse of delight, balances all, death and breath. The white noise of The Great War pressurizes Yeats who responds dialectically by holding himself open to it yet also pushing back, absorbing yet resisting. The poem which begins as a kenosis of Shelley ends as a daemonization by Hamlet, with Yeats making the crossing from self-isolation to the Counter-Sublime, Bloom's Crossing of Solipsism, a crossing that many of his poems will repeat, each uniquely.

Before turning to daemonization proper, I wish to re-emphasize the uncanny importance of Ophelia for Yeats's work, and here I must quote in full her soliloquy that follows the violent Nunnery Scene.

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's,
> eye, tongue, sword,
> The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
> And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
> That sucked the honey of his music vows,
> Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
> Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh,
> That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
> Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me
> T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!
> [III, i, 151-162; p. 127]

Not at all do I wish to claim that "Another Song of a Fool" (1919)[29] matches Ophelia's soliloquy in passion, sublimity,

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[28] V, ii, 216; p. 195.

[29] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 567.

theme, or stance. But far more than the allusion to the soliloquy in the Gregory elegy--an allusion that borders on conscious echoing rather than repressive remembering--the allusion to it and more broadly to Ophelia in "Another Song of a Fool" are startling and bottomless or imageless. As Shelley's Demogorgon says, "the deep truth is imageless."[30]

> This great purple butterfly,
> In the prison of my hands,
> Has a learning in his eye
> Not a poor fool understands.
>
> Once he lived a schoolmaster
> With a stark, denying look;
> A string of scholars went in fear
> Of his great birch and his great book.
>
> Like the clangour of a bell,
> Sweet and harsh, harsh and sweet,
> That is how he learnt so well
> To take the roses for his meat. [275-276]

In reading the third quatrain against Ophelia's speech, we enter the dark beauties of poetic misprision. "Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh," she says of Hamlet's sovereign reason which has now become a shambles. Yeats has held on to the line and the speech; smitten by its "imageless" beauty he has made his poetic unconscious of it. The contents of such repression cannot be known directly, but only through negation which allows the distorted (troped) appearance of the image or word repressed.[31] Ophelia's word erupts, negatively, into the third quatrain--"Like the clangour of a bell, / Sweet and harsh, harsh and sweet." The "rose" which is also a name of Ophelia (at

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[30] Prometheus Unbound, II, iv, 116.

[31] In The Breaking of the Vessels Bloom comments that "Negation is a way of taking account of what is repressed. . . . The result is a kind of intellectual acceptance of what is repressed, though in all essentials the repression persists" [11].

least according to Laertes), returns in her speech to suggest her view of Hamlet--"Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state," but it also returns, now deeply distorted, in the song of the fool who sings of the butterfly that takes "the roses for his meat." Even the scholar of Ophelia's speech returns in the "string of scholars" in the song of the fool. Both the soliloquy and the song condense a story of metamorphosis, Hamlet into a form become "Blasted with ecstasy," and the schoolmaster into the form of a "great purple butterfly." Finally, the ballad form of the Yeats poem remembers the similar form of the songs sung by Ophelia later in Act IV when she herself has gone mad, blasted with ecstasy. Insofar as a fool is a kind of madman, Ophelia's ballads are also songs of a fool.

> He is dead and gone, lady.
> He is dead and gone.
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone. [IV, v, 29-32; p. 163]

This seemingly self-indulgent digression upon the Ophelia within Yeats--I could easily adduce much more, for example the distortions of Ophelia that return in the figure of Crazy Jane--should serve pragmatically as an introduction to the fourth phase of daemonization or the Counter-Sublime, for the repressive movement into the Sublime, the Crossing of Solipsism, is, along with the movement into the sixth phase of apophrades, a crossing of profound importance in Bloom's work.

6.8 Return of the Daemonic

> All changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born.
> "Easter, 1916"

It is quite possible that, even more so than "Innisfree," and despite a few famous lines from the first strophe of "The Second Coming," Yeats's "Easter, 1916" (1916) is his poem of most popular acquaintance. This has seemed to be due to its depiction of the historically important Easter Rising in Dublin that for many marks the beginning of de facto Irish independence. But as this thesis has argued, such criticism entirely misconstrues, weakly misreads, the relation between a strong poem and history. The poetic strength of a poem has nothing to do with the importance and positivity of any historical event, and the persuasiveness of Yeats's poem has nothing to do either with the Rising as an event, or with his representation of it as an event. Its positive or mimetic political truth-value is irrelevant, but its negative poetical lie-value is all-important. Its persuasiveness derives entirely from the vigor with which "Easter, 1916" holds itself open to and pushes against the white noise of historical events, while also absorbing and resisting its precursor poems, Prometheus Unbound, Hamlet, and Yeats's own "September 1913."[32] Were it not for this negative vigor, the poem would not be memorable; it would be just another forgettable description of the Rising, unable to have imposed itself upon our imaginations and upon its tradition. As it is, however, the poem

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[32] I will not have space in this chapter to explore the revisionary relationship between "September 1913" and "Easter, 1916," other than here to suggest that the later poem revises the earlier by quarrying more deeply the rich vein of Yeats's ambivalence towards the Irish as an uncanny mixture of small-minded Paudeens and tragic heroes.

is so daemonized by its precursor poems that it rises to a Counter-Sublime, creating the trope or lie that we have come to know as Yeatsian voice.

Yeats's comments on Prometheus Unbound show that it had imposed itself upon his imagination at a very young age. He is known to have regarded it as one of "the sacred books of the world."[33] Its heroic and redemptive vision of a final defeat of tyranny and pain due to the power of long-suffering Love and forgiveness haunted Yeats throughout his career. How could it be otherwise when the ephebe, who himself seeks poetic strength, confronts a poem by discovering it within himself--a poem that competes for poetic immortality with Paradise Lost and The Divine Comedy? At the turn of the century Prometheus Unbound plays a crucial role in Yeats's critical essay, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900), and three decades later, still obsessed with the problem of Demogorgon, Yeats publishes a short essay called "Prometheus Unbound." But such works of critical thought, although agonistic and highly original, are not my primary concern. It is the daemonic presence of Prometheus Unbound in "Easter, 1916" that concerns me.

In passing, however, I note that some of Yeats's early poems, especially some collected in The Rose and The Wind among the Reeds, are Yeats's versions of the many hymns and songs of Prometheus Unbound. Early lyrics, such as "The Countess Cathleen in Paradise" (1891),[34] re-enact the welcoming of the new dispensation of Act IV of Shelley's lyrical drama:

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[33] Essays and Introductions, p. 65.

[34] Date of first publication, Yeats's Poems, p. 502.

All the heavy days are over;
Leave the body's coloured pride
Underneath the grass and clover
With feet laid side by side.
. . . . . .
'Mong the feet of angels seven
What a dancer, glimmering!
All the heavens bow down to Heaven,
Flame to flame and wing to wing. [77-78]

Other early poems, such as "The Everlasting Voices" (1895), "The Unappeasable Host" (1896), and "The Valley of the Black Pig" (1896),[35] seek to usher in the new dispensation by performing an occult prayer to the Powers of Eternity. They therefore seek a Promethean voice, but a voice that twists Shelley's more orthodox Neoplatonic metaphysics into Yeats's more characteristic heretical vision:

Desolate winds that beat the doors of Heaven, and beat
The doors of Hell and blow there many a whimpering ghost;
O heart the winds have shaken, the unappeasable host
Is comelier than candles at Mother Mary's feet. [92]

But such lyrics are only a weak clinamen from Prometheus Unbound which continues for years to dominate Yeats's imagination, while "Easter, 1916" is a better match for the Shelley poem.

What is at stake in the match is each poem's vision of the pragmatics and the meaning of its transformative powers. The Shelley poem sees its powers in the sublime act which transforms suffering into the final defeat of tyranny through an act of Love. In retracting his curse upon the tyrant Jupiter by pitying and forgiving his torturer, Prometheus initiates a chain of events that includes the release of Asia, his epipsyche, from isolation, his own release from eternal pain, and the defeat of the tyrant by Demogorgon whose reign in Love will resist all

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[35] Dates for the second and third poems are of first publication, Yeats's Poems, pp. 510, 516.

further strife. At the conclusion to the drama Demogorgon addresses Prometheus in the presence of all of the spirits of Heaven and Earth, now liberated from tyranny through the redemptive action of the hero:

> This is the day . . .
> Love, from its awful throne of patient power
> In the wise heart . . .
> springs
> And folds over the world its healing wings.
> . . . . . .
> And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
> Mother of many acts and hours, should free
> The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
> These are the spells by which to resume
> An empire o'er the disentangled doom.
>
> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
> This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
> Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
> This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.
> [IV, 554-578]

The conclusion of the drama shows Shelley's ambivalence and skepticism in that the seeming final victory of Prometheus may turn out to be no final victory at all, "if, with infirm hand, Eternity / . . . should free / The serpent that would clasp her with its length." In this case the battle to suffer, to forgive, to love and bear, to hope and so on, would be rejoined. This vision, though it sincerely desires a final redemption, admits the possibility that Empedocles saw as an infinite contest between Love and Strife. But when Yeats feels <u>Prometheus Unbound</u> as an internalized poetic presence, he feels it as the voice of the final victory of Love over Strife, a voice which irritates or agitates him. For Yeats, the great message of the final stanza is "to defy Power" which he translates as "to defy

Shelley," not the ambivalent or skeptical Shelley but the Shelley of the final victory of Love. It is in this sense that I suggested in chapter four (4.5) that Yeats invokes Empedocles and Heraclitus (just as he also invokes Hamlet) against his reading of Shelley in order "to defy Power" in order to gain some leverage against the Shelley within him. We can measure his relative success in this effort by reading "Easter, 1916" against Prometheus Unbound.

"Easter, 1916" is a deeply Promethean poem. The ordinariness, which the first section illustrates with its twice-mentioned "polite meaningless words," is only a polite veil that was covering the truly enchained condition of the Irish Prometheus, a condition that the first section announces to be now "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born" [287]. The second section likewise numbers the individuals who were such unlikely Prometheans, in the speaker's eye at least. Yet it is the burden of the poem to find an understanding of the crossing from the ordinary to the heroic. Such a crossing entails a strong negation of history as white noise. Somehow, ordinary people had thrown off their chains, even one who was

> A drunken, vainglorious lout.
> He had done most bitter wrong
> To some who are near my heart,
> Yet I number him in the song;
> He too has resigned his part
> In the casual comedy;
> He, too, has been changed in his turn,
> Transformed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born. [287-288]

But how could the casual comedy, where even a drunken lout plays his part, be transformed into a terrible beauty?

Breaking and re-making his precursor, Yeats's beauty must be a terrible beauty. Shelley's Prometheus is a figure so powerful and integral that he is able to suffer the torture of Jupiter's furies yet remain master of his self and destiny, thanks to his visionary retraction of the curse on the tyrant, for when one of the furies says to Prometheus,

> . . . we will be dread thought beneath thy brain,
> And foul desire round thine astonished heart,
> And blood within thy labyrinthine veins
> Crawling with agony

--Prometheus is able to answer:

> Why, ye are thus now;
> Yet I am king over myself, and rule
> The torturing and conflicting throngs within,
> As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous.
> [I, 488-494]

In the drama of Prometheus his moments of torture are moments of terror. The movement of Prometheus Unbound is from terror to beauty, as Jupiter's power is defeated through the Love of Prometheus. But in "Easter, 1916" terror is beauty. It is as if the drama of Prometheus were so condensed that the transition from slavery to freedom, from terror to beauty, has become one moment of terrible beauty, with no suggestion of any beauty beyond or without terror.

More than a mere fulfillment or tessera of Shelley, the poem is Yeats's Counter-Sublime just as it is Shelley's daemonization of Yeats. In The Anxiety of Influence Bloom says of this fourth phase in the dialectic, this fourth wound among Cuchulain's six mortal wounds, that solipsism invades the ephebe, a solipsism that originates in the glance of the precursor:

> To appropriate the precursor's landscape for himself, the ephebe must estrange it further from himself. To attain a self yet more inward than the precursor's,

> the ephebe becomes necessarily more solipsistic. To evade the precursor's imagined glance, the ephebe seeks to confine it in scope, which perversely enlarges the glance, so that it rarely can be evaded. [105]

Yeats's poem attempts to overturn the glance of Shelley's poem by reducing its entire drama to a single moment in which terror and beauty are one, or alternatively by enlarging the moment of Prometheus's act of liberating forgiveness so that all else falls away as insignificant. Yeats hereby seeks to replace Shelley's vision of the transformation of suffering into beauty with his own vision of the union of suffering and beauty. But as Bloom's description of daemonization suggests, such a stance towards the precursor, a stance which breaks the glance of the precursor, only succeeds in re-making the centrality of the precursor, as Sublime counters Sublime in a daemonic dance of difference within identity. Whereas Shelley's Prometheus transforms heroic suffering into victory over the tyrant, Yeats's ordinary men and women transform their "casual comedy" into a heroic drama, with earthly victory remaining ambiguous. And while Prometheus transforms the universal condition, Yeats's quotidian heroes transform themselves whose only victory is won in their own deaths. It is precisely here, at the point where lyricism meets tragedy, that Yeats confronts Shelley with Hamlet and takes death rather than love as the meaning of life and action.

To speak of the rising of Hamlet in "Easter, 1916" is to speak of the mysterious sacrifice that can make "a stone of the heart." For the meditation that obsesses this poem daemonically remembers the meditation that obsessed Hamlet in his darkest moment. Yeats verges on this moment in the third section of the

poem with its contrast of the stone to the Heraclitean living stream.

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream.
> The horse that comes from the road,
> The rider, the birds that range
> From cloud to tumbling cloud,
> Minute by minute they change;
> A shadow of cloud on the stream
> Changes minute by minute;
> . . . . .
> The stone's in the midst of all.[36] [288]

Yeats here holds himself open to the deepest ambivalences about history. Change, only change or the living stream is beautiful. Yet the stone, emblematic of supreme resistance to change, is also beautiful. More than this, it is the hearts which have become enchanted to a stone that are the power of transformation or the deepest change--at the cost of the highest personal sacrifice, for "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." The poet's admiration for the beauty of the living stream is schooled by his awareness that the living stream and its antinomy, the stone which must be death, are linked, like Love and Strife, in a terrible antithetical union. To love and admire the beauty of the stream one must also love and admire the antithetical beauty of death, the stone of the heart. Should there remain any doubt that Yeats is here ambivalently at one with both living stream and stubborn stone, we need only recall that in "Men Improve with the Years" (1916), a poem written during the same months as "Easter, 1916," Yeats writes:

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[36] In fragment L, Heraclitus says, "As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them"; and in fragment LI, "One cannot step twice into the same river" [Kahn 53].

> I am worn out with dreams;
> A weather-worn marble triton
> Among the streams. [238]

Though the figure of the stone in "Easter, 1916" may conventionally be taken as a denigration of political fanatics, Yeats here clearly identifies with the stone, albeit an artistically carved stone, among the streams.

The revisionary, self-canonizing force of Yeats's poem can be measured when we read the daemonic voice of Hamlet rising through Yeats's verse. For Hamlet too is burdened by a "sea of troubles" occasioned by the pressure to know the meaning of his own death within the processes of the living stream:

> To die, to sleep--
> No more--and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep--
> To sleep--perchance to dream. Ah, there's the rub.
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause. [III, i, 60-68; p. 124]

Such questioning of the permutations of the meaning of death may or may not have exercised the minds of those who turned their hearts to stone in order to trouble the living stream, but such questioning certainly exercises our poet who finds that in order to speak he must re-absorb the voice of Hamlet within his own voice:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.
> O when may it suffice?
> That is Heaven's part, our part
> To murmur name upon name
> As a mother names her child
> When sleep at last has come
> On limbs that had run wild.
> What is it but nightfall?
> No, no, not night but death;

> Was it needless death after all?
> . . . . . .
> We know their dream; enough
> To know they dreamed and are dead;
> And what if excess of love
> Bewildered them until they died?

The voice of Hamlet, who observes that in "that sleep of death what dreams may come / . . . / Must give us pause," erupts ghostly into the voice of Yeats who is burdened by quite similar questions as to the links between sleep and death and dreams.

In troping the martyrs of the Easter Rising as deathly stones in the living stream, Yeats not only exhibits his great ambivalence about the meaning of their self-sacrifice, his admiration coupled with his skepticism, but he also provokes a great questioning of the meaning of those deaths. But more than this, his questioning returns him to a Scene of Instruction in which Hamlet displaces Shelley as the daemonic precursor, for it is the voice of Hamlet, not of Shelley, that wells up within the voice of the final section of "Easter, 1916." Prometheus Unbound daemonizes the Yeats poem insofar as the latter rises to a vision in which terror becomes one with beauty, but Shelley's poem cannot inspire a Yeatsian Counter-Sublime in which the question of "terrible beauty" becomes the solipsistic question of death. For this vision the Yeatsian voice turns to Hamlet's meditation on sleep, death, and dreams in the third soliloquy. Yeats's repression of Hamlet's speech yields a return to the names of sleep, death, and dreams, in which, like a mother, "Yeats "murmur[s] name upon name" in a vain yet Sublime quest after the meaning of death. And like Demogorgon whose deep truth is imageless, the only "answer" that the poem can make suggests the

negative transcendence of an enigmatic oxymoron, "A terrible beauty is born."

6.9 Askesis, and the Fire of the Gnostic

> O sweet everlasting Voices, be still;
> Go to the guards of the heavenly fold
> And bid them wander obeying your will,
> Flame under flame, till Time be no more.
> "The Everlasting Voices"

In A Vision and in "The Phases of the Moon" (1918), which he included as part of A Vision, Yeats creates his own occult system in which each of us passes through the phases of a great wheel that is the pattern of the soul's fate, each phase being a different ratio of the influences pressed upon that soul and the counter-influences emanating from that soul. It could be argued that Bloom's theory of six poetic phases bears much more than a chance relationship to Yeats's twenty-eight cradles of the moon. I will have to leave for a future project the articulation of the ratios that link these two systems, but the following lines from "The Phases of the Moon" suggest a summary of what the Yeatsian and Bloomian systems have in common:

> The song will have it
> That those that we have loved got their long fingers
> From death, and wounds, or on Sinai's top,
> Or from some bloody whip in their own hands.
> They ran from cradle to cradle till at last
> Their beauty dropped out of the loneliness
> Of body and soul. [270]

As this chapter runs from cradle to cradle, there is much that, regretfully, it must bypass in order to fulfill its purpose, including several useful examples of daemonization or the Crossing of Solipsism: Shelley's magnificent "Ode to the West Wind" and its daemonization of "Nineteen Hundred and

Nineteen"; "Ozymandias" and its daemonization of "The Second Coming";[37] the Sublime revision of "Adam's Curse" by "Among School Children"; the repressive remembering or patterns of forgetting of Alastor and Epipsychidion in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul"; the Sublime Crossing from the poems of the Rose of Intellectual Beauty to "Sailing to Byzantium" and its vision of Unity of Being. By listing these examples of Yeats's Counter-Sublime, I hope to suggest the dimensions and the pragmatic value of Bloom's revisionary project.

As opposed to the restituting phase of daemonization, the cradle of askesis is a contraction, but it is such a severe contraction that Bloom associates it with "purgation," and inevitably therefore with Dante and with fire. Furthermore, Bloom's reading of Yeats's Paterian work, "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (1918) (which he calls a "marmoreal revery" and which he greatly prefers to A Vision), causes him rightly to associate askesis also with Heraclitus. Such a confusion of associations requires some sorting and patterning, not least because Yeats drew upon Heraclitus and Empedocles for his sense of poetic purgation-as-endless-conflict, mainly, as I suggested in (4.5), in order to defend against his own tendency toward Platonism.

Whereas daemonization is linked with the deep-rising of repression or Sublime-remembering and with the trope of hyperbole, askesis is linked with the defense of sublimation and

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[37] I have performed in detail a reading of the Sublime Crossings from "Ode to the West Wind" to "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and from "Ozymandias" to "The Second Coming" in two work-in-progress seminar papers, called "Revisionism, Canonization, and the Play of History," and "Bloomian Self-Transformations: Yeats's Stones and Roses."

the perspectivizing trope of metaphor. In The Anxiety of Influence Bloom's early musings on askesis are highly suggestive:

> But what the poets call their Purgatory is largely what Platonists, Christians, Nietzscheans, or Freudians would agree to call a kind of sublimation, or ego defenses that work. . . . [S]ublimation becomes a form of askesis, a self-curtailment which seeks transformation at the expense of narrowing the creative circumference of precursor and ephebe alike. [118-119]

Likewise, in Poetry and Repression Bloom's comments on the trope of fire are insightful:

> Shelley first tried to achieve a perspectivizing stance in relation to precursors through the limiting trope of metaphor. Fire is the prime perspectivizing metaphor of Romanticism, and to burn through context, the context of precursors and of nature, is the revisionary aim of that metaphor. [105]

The perfect narrowing of a poet's creative circumference would be to narrow it to a point, to the center of the circumference, thus purifying the precursor and ephebe, who together are a circle, of any dross. Fire would be the purest image of this act of purification or sublimation, for as Heraclitus says, "All things are requital for fire, and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods."[38] In askesis, a poet reduces precursor and self to a fiery center. Says Bloom,

> Purgatory for post-Enlightenment strong poets is always oxymoronic, and never merely painful, because every narrowing of circumference is compensated for by the poetic illusion (a delusion, and yet a strong poem) that the center therefore will hold better. [121]

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[38] Kahn, fragment XL, p. 47.

The center that cannot hold in "The Second Coming" (which is a poem of daemonization, a successful repression of "Ozymandias")[39] becomes a center that appears to hold in "Byzantium" because the poet has reduced the agonic circle of self and precursor to a fiery center--"An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve."

It is instructive that the movement both in the Inferno and in the Purgatorio is a narrowing movement from circumference to center. Whether falsely or truly, the saying that God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere has been attributed to Empedocles.[40] Yeats himself alludes to this gnomic proverb when he writes, "If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again."[41] On the face of it, the proverb looks to be Neoplatonic or Hermetic, the kind of Shelleyan Intellectual mystery that would interest Pico della Mirandola, the Italian Renaissance enthusiast who influenced Yeats through Pater.[42] In stanza XLVII of his Adonais, Shelley brilliantly adopts the center/circumference trope in his strategy to immortalize the dead hero:

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[39] In Poetry and Repression, especially pp. 219-221, Bloom reads "The Second Coming" not only against "Ozymandius" but also against passages in Prometheus Unbound and The Triumph of Life.

[40] The Cohens, in The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations, p. 155. But in A Dictionary of Religious & Spiritual Quotations, p. 34, Parrinder says the sentence is quoted in Roman de la Rose, without naming an origin. In The Home Book of Quotations: Classical and Modern, p. 273, Stevenson attributes the saying to Augustine (who was a Gnostic until he became a Christian) via Emerson's essay, "Circles."

[41] Essays and Introductions, p. 287. Yeats's comment comes originally from "Discoveries," included in The Cutting of an Agate (1912).

[42] Pater wrote a chapter on Pico in The Renaissance (1873).

> Who mourns for Adonais? Oh, come forth,
> Fond wretch! and know thyself and him aright.
> Clasp with thy panting soul the pendulous Earth;
> As from a centre, dart thy spirit's light
> Beyond all worlds, until its spacious might
> Satiate the void circumference: then shrink
> Even to a point within our day and night;
> And keep thy heart light lest it make thee sink
> When hope has kindled hope, and lured thee to the brink.

There is no evidence that Yeats was interested, during his early Platonizing period, in Empedocles, but it seems to me that Yeats was drawn to Empedocles and to Heraclitus as he began more and more to subject his Platonism to gnostic revision. The circumference that is also the center is an important trope in the context of Platonism and Gnosticism, but the trope of the fire as used by Yeats--a metaphor which allows him to be the consumer and the consumed, the knower and the known--moves him away from the Platonic One and into a gnostic stance that is so antithetical to itself that it exceeds or evades the One, as in the figure 1 = 1+/-.

In Poetry and Repression Bloom links the Yeatsian "Condition of Fire" with Heraclitus, through Shelley and Pater [207]. The Condition of Fire is the goal of Yeatsian gnosis and is identified by Bloom with his own Scene of Instruction:

> At the center of Per Amica is Yeats's Gnostic version of what I have called the Scene of Instruction, the state of heightened demand that carries a new poet from his origins into his first strong representations. [207]

Besides virtually here admitting that Yeats is his central influence and crucial precursor (which was the theme of my fifth chapter), Bloom follows Yeats in tracing the gnostic Condition of Fire back to Heraclitus. "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" elaborates an agon between poet and "Daimon" (or anti-self), and

Yeats cites Heraclitus, saying that "The Daimon is our destiny." The agonistic confrontation with the Daimon, like Jacob's nightlong duel with a Dark Angel, leads the poet to the Condition of Fire just as the Scene of Instruction leads eventually to the ratio of askesis, that cradle of sacrifice in which the self becomes a flame. In "Vacillation" (1931-1932), section VII, which is a poem of six wounds, six brief lines of dialogue between "Soul" and "Heart," the fourth line is the Heart's rising to a daemonic exclamation--"Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!"--while the fifth line is the Soul's narrowing to an askesis or purification--"Look on that fire, salvation walks within" [367]. And the Daimon that Yeats invariably confronts in the Scene of Instruction is the figure of Shelley, a voice that, in Adonais, also saw a vision of the Heraclitean fire as a burning fountain:

> Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow
> Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
> A portion of the Eternal, which must glow
> Through time and change, unquenchable the same,
> Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame.
> [XXXVIII]

Just as Bloom has pointed out that "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" articulates a Heraclitean vision of the Daimon and the Primal Fire, so A Vision extends Yeats's usurpation of tropes of Heraclitus and Empedocles in his agon with Platonism.[43] At the beginning of Book I of A Vision, called "The Great Wheel," Yeats cites Empedocles primarily, but also Heraclitus, as the sources

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[43] As I pointed out in chapter four, James Olney traces the pre-Socratic philosophers through Plato into Yeats. My great quarrel with Olney is that there is no sense of agon or revisionism in his argument, while I argue specifically that Yeats uses Heraclitus and Empedocles--but not Parmenides and Pythagoras who remain Platonic formalists in Yeats's view--against Plato in his gnostic quarrel with his own internalized Platonism.

of the great antithetical scheme he is about to put forward. Empedocles' grand tropes of Love and Discord Yeats usurps as the model for the interpenetrating gyres of his great wheel or "vortex." Translating Love and Discord into his own terms as "primary" and "antithetical," Yeats builds upon an Empedoclean base his vision which unfolds his own argument between esoteric Platonism and gnostic negative transcendence. But he claims that Heraclitus is the founder of the vision: "Here the thought of Heraclitus dominates all: 'Dying each other's life, living each other's death'" [68].

The quotation of Heraclitus, meant to illustrate his gyres, is found scattered throughout Yeats's late writings.[44] But in "Byzantium," quotation is transformed into poetry:

> A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
> Breathless mouths may summon;
> I hail the superhuman;
> I call it death-in-life and life-in-death. [363]

Like Hamlet, who is fascinated by the interpenetration of opposite principles--

> Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. . . . A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm. [IV, iii, 20-22, 26-27; pp. 158-159]

--Yeats too imagines a negative dialectic in which things are their own negation, where

> Everything that man esteems
> Endures a moment or a day.
> Love's pleasure drives his love away,
> The painter's brush consumes his dreams;

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[44] For example, the final words spoken by a character in the play, The Resurrection, except for the two songs of the chorus, are: "Your words are clear at last, O Heraclitus, God and man die each other's life, live each other's death" [Collected Plays 594]. The reference is to part of fragment XCII, which Kahn gives in full and translates as "Immortals are mortal, mortals immortal, living the others' death, dead in the others' life" [71].

> The herald's cry, the soldier's tread
> Exhaust his glory and his might:
> Whatever flames upon the night
> Man's own resinous heart has fed. [321][45]

But the Heraclitean trope of "death-in-life and life-in-death" transcends the fragment from Heraclitus that Yeats is fond of quoting. Mortal immortals and immortal mortals are equally caught on the round of a great wheel of life and death. But the purgative eloquence of Yeats's gnostic stance in "Byzantium" transfigures the Heraclitean fragment as an image of a great wheel. In the fire of "Byzantium" Yeats achieves a negative transcendence of both life and death. By negating each, he transcends both. As Bloom says about Shelley, he "burn[s] through . . . the context of precursors and of nature." To hail the superhuman is to hail neither the human nor the anti-human, but both at once. Neither natural "bird" nor anti-natural "golden handiwork," the Yeatsian askesis is a supernatural "miracle"--"More miracle than bird or handiwork" [363]. Like Bloom's "supermimesis" that is a negative transcendence, Yeats's hailing of the superhuman bows down neither to life as an idol nor to death as an (anti-) idol, nor even to the interpenetration of each; rather it engages in a troping that is like a fire from beyond the wheel, a circle divine whose circumference is its center.

Shelley, too, in The Triumph of Life, had seen a self-purifying vision of the precursor and surely The Triumph of Life is a crucial precursor-poem for "Byzantium." But from the perspective of "Byzantium," Shelley's poem gestures too ob-

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[45] This is a stanza from "Two Songs from a Play" (1926, 1931?), which Yeats also published as the final song of the chorus in The Resurrection.

sessively towards the spirit world, the world of the precursor, the shape that calls itself "Rousseau."[46] From the perspective of "Byzantium," The Triumph of Life is obsessed with death. "Byzantium" creatively corrects its Shelleyan precursor-poem by enacting a fiery negative transcendence. It curtails or narrows itself and the precursor by mounting flame upon flame, "flames begotten of flame." Shelley speaks of being in a "trance," a "waking dream": "a vision on my brain was rolled" [40-42]; Yeats speaks of "an agony of trance," and Shelley's figures in the triumph are "tortured by their agonizing pleasure" [143]; but the shape that Yeats confronts is "Shade more than man, more image than a shade." "Byzantium" evades repeating what it sees as an obsession with death in The Triumph of Life by troping beyond the deathly precursor to death-in-life and life-in-death. Of course, it is a delusion--the poem lying to itself and to us--that "Byzantium" actually corrects its precursor poem by purging both of them in a revisionary fire, but without such lying there would not be any new poems worth reading, remembering, repressing, or revising.

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[46] In his essay called "Shelley and His Precursors" in Poetry and Repression, Bloom brilliantly reads the "Rousseau" of the poem as Shelley's composite precursor, Wordsworth and Coleridge, who by 1821 were "living on with an extinguished poetic hearth and writing sparkless verses. . . . Rousseau might just as well be named Wordsworth or Coleridge in the poem, except that Shelley was too tactful and urbane to utilize those who were still, technically speaking, alive" [103-104].

6.10 Apophrades, the Final Wound

> Now that my ladder's gone
> I must lie down where all the ladders start,
> In the *foul rag and bone shop* of the heart.
> "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

As with the other five wounds that Yeats has inflicted upon himself in order to achieve the blessing of divination, the sixth wound will be inflicted several times over. Apophrades being the cradle of transumption, many of Yeats's late poems will belong to this phase. I speak here <u>not</u> of those late ranting poems that indulge violence as a perverse pleasure, for such poems retreat from the austere demands of a strong revisionary poetry by falling into worship of the idols of mimeticism or naturalism--

> Remember all those renowned generations,
> Remember all that have sunk in their blood,
> Remember all that have died on the scaffold,
> Remember all that have fled, that have stood
> Stood, took death like a tune
> On an old tambourine. [457][47]

Such lines read more like a position paper than a poem, attempting to hoodwink the reader into a certain politico-journalistic march. Furthermore, such poems fail to rise to the challenge of holding themselves open to white noise and transforming it. Instead they merely imitate, arguing that we should submit to the authority of blood and nature. But Yeats's poetry at its best never merely imitates. Rather it absorbs and resists both nature and the precursor, in order to achieve revisionary, canonical strength.

In his final phase, Yeats's best poems take his own earlier fine poetry as the main precursor. Transumption, meaning the

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[47] This is the second stanza in the first poem of "Three Marching Songs."

troping upon a prior trope in a way that makes the earlier trope seem late and the later trope seem early, is the rhetorical stance of the phase of apophrades. Thus, poems like "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1937-1938)[48] and "Man and the Echo" (1938) allude to Yeats's earlier work with such fresh strength that the earlier work is made to seem as though it weakly imitated the later work. Similarly, in poems like "Lapis Lazuli" (1936)[49] and "Cuchulain Comforted" (1939) Yeats makes the Crossing of Identification.[50] From the volatility of the metaphor of fire he crosses to a new restitution of voice which aggressively introjects earliness despite the lateness or belatedness of the poet's hour. It is as if this new voice were actualizing the Nietzschean maxim--Try to live as though it were morning.[51]

In his discussion of apophrades from the perspective of the ephebe in The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom returns to the trope of "drowning" which was such a severe anxiety for Yeats in his Rose poems: "The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded" [154, my emphasis]. Bloom describes apophrades as "The Return of the Dead" because a bizarre reversal has taken place. Whereas in the phase of clinamen the ephebe strove to avoid drowning in the voice of the precursor, strove to gain a little rose-breath all his own, in the phase of apophrades the ephebe is now so strong that it is

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[48] Yeats's Poems, p. 641.

[49] Yeats's Poems, p. 621.

[50] Begun in December 1938, "Cuchulain Comforted" was completed on 13 January 1939, a few days before Yeats died.

[51] Quoted occasionally by Bloom, e.g., Vessels, p. 89 and Ruin, p. 82.

the precursor who appears to speak in and through the breath of the ephebe. Says Bloom, after quoting passages from Shelley,

> We feel, in reading The Witch of Atlas, that Shelley has read too deeply in Yeats, and is doomed never to get the tonal complexities of the Byzantium poems out of his mind. [153]

While early poems such as "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" enact a clinamen in relation to The Witch of Atlas, the Byzantium poems, in Bloom's view, exemplify the ratio of apophrades in relation to it. "The mighty dead return," says Bloom, "but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own" [141]. Despite the ephebe's dominance, the fear of death, which is fear in its purest form, remains. In making the Crossing of Identification, a poet re-enters the Scene of Instruction in order to confront the fear of death. As Bloom says in Wallace Stevens, the poet has a sense

> that the final internalization is the internalization of death. A Crossing of Identification defensively tropes against death, and also tropes toward it, confirming the ambivalence of Freud's hypothetical yet Romantically based "death instinct." [405]

With these descriptions to aid us, we can now read the final wound in Yeats's poetic career-as-crisis-poem, as seen in "Lapis Lazuli."

The startling magnificence of this poem is achieved through the transuming of Yeats's own prior voices, and through the return of Hamlet. As a whole, the poem takes a transumptive stance towards Yeats's work. Yet, like "Adam's Curse" which is one of its precursor-poems, "Lapis Lazuli" itself moves through the six-phased map of misprision. It begins in a bitter irony. It swerves away from the views of the "hysterical women" who want

to scapegoat poets and artists for the impending disaster of World War II, just as it also transumptively ironizes Yeats's many earlier poems which sought to save or redeem the world through visionary art.

> I have heard that hysterical women say
> They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
> Of poets that are always gay,
> For everybody knows or else should know
> That if nothing drastic is done
> Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
> Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
> Until the town lie beaten flat. [412]

It would be a tendentious error of weak misreading, though no doubt in fashion, to charge Yeats here with some kind of sexism, for the "hysterical women" are no more ironized than is Yeats himself. As we saw in (6.6) for example, the Yeats of "Adam's Curse" attempts to trope Love as a redemptive force in a fallen world. In fact, throughout much of Yeats's work there is a strong desire to turn poetic art into a messianic force. His swerve from the hysterical women is as much a swerve from the messianic voices of his own past poems which continue to impinge upon or influence him. In order to begin, in order to re-make himself, something drastic must be done. Here it is the drastic step of ironizing his own redemptive voices, voices which sang, in two of his greatest poems for example, that

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul . . . [325]

--or that

> We are blest by everything,
> Everything we look upon is blest. [351]

Stepping away from such transumptive irony, "Lapis Lazuli" enters the ratio of tessera in its second verse paragraph,

crossing from the ethos of irony to a pathos that attempts to fulfill the glory of Hamlet.

> All perform their tragic play,
> There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
> That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
> Yet they, should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
> All men have aimed at, found and lost;
> Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
> Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
> Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,
> And all the drop-scenes drop at once
> Upon a hundred thousand stages,
> It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.

Fulfilling Shakespeare here, Yeats also transumes his own visionary voice. According to Bloom's map of misprision, in the phase of tessera we will find that the poem represents by substituting part for whole or whole for part. In this section of "Lapis Lazuli" the poet collapses any distinction between character and player. Part and whole become one thing. A play is not only something that happens on a stage, it is also our lives as we imagine and live them. We are Hamlet and Ophelia, drawn to the precipice of madness--"the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea." Whether or not we are drawn into madness, losing our sovereignty of reason, all of us are put to the test--not just the Hamlet and the Ophelia who seem to ramble on the theater stage. For we all must face death in its awful individuality. Hamlet and Ophelia thus instruct us on the depth of our own souls.

At the center of this passage, Yeats's completion of <u>Hamlet</u> merges with a transumption of his own poetry:

> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.
> All men have aimed at, found and lost;
> Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
> Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.

In "The Cold Heaven" Yeats spoke of being "Riddled with light" [227], but "Lapis Lazuli" and its lightning expose just how short of negative transcendence the earlier poem falls. Instead of being "riddled" or ignorant, the later poem achieves a gnosis of transfigurative gaiety, a negation of ignorance. Dread and loss, which are figures for death, are transformed in this new lightning, and a Heaven--no longer simply cold--blazes into the head. The question common to all of us, yet felt by each of us alone as uniquely our own, is the question that is asked when tragedy is wrought to its uttermost. And how each one answers the question makes all the difference between mere repetition of ethos (which would be the breaking up of our lines to weep) and self-transfiguration. Whatever figurative choice we make, as "all the drop scenes drop at once / Upon a hundred thousand stages," we all bear the same burden of utter defeat, for "It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce."

The third verse paragraph combines a crossing from the self-emptying voice of kenosis to the sublime voice of daemonization with a renewed attempt by Yeats to transume his precursor Hamlet.

> On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
> Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
> Old civilisations put to the sword.
> Then they and their wisdom went to rack:

These four lines empty the poet of his love for all things beautiful and fine, wise and true--all those things about human civilization that Yeats wishes to see as somehow immortal and even of his own making. Now all has gone to rack and ruin, for

like individuals, a civilization is powerless in the end against its own great defeat. Yet here the passage crosses over and rises to its daemonization by Hamlet:

> No handiwork of Callimachus,
> Who handled marble as if it were bronze,
> Made draperies that seemed to rise
> When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
> His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
> Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
> All things fall and are built again,
> And those that build them again are gay. [412-413]

While Claudius, who is a regicide, is cynical and arrogant enough to comment that

> There's such divinity doth hedge a king
> That treason can but peep to what it would,
> Acts little of his will . . . [IV, v, 125-127; p. 166]

--Hamlet sees divinity in a humane if austere light:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> *Rough-hew them how we will.* [V, ii, 10-11; p. 189]

But for Yeats it is the very voice of Hamlet itself that is divinity, and it is Hamlet's discussion of providence and the fall of a sparrow that daemonizes the Yeats passage in "Lapis Lazuli." When Horatio pleads that Hamlet should cancel the contest, should act on his intuition that the imminent duel with Laertes will be for more than mere sport, Hamlet answers:

> Not a whit. We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.
> [V, ii, 213-218; p. 195]

Yeats's lines concerning the artistic heroism of Callimachus are daemonized by the utter equanimity of Hamlet's tragic heroism, for the fall of a sparrow or of a man is like the fall of a long lamp chimney shaped like the stem of a slender palm. Each is an

achieved beauty, beauty that must die, as Keats says in the "Ode on Melancholy." Similarly, the two lines that comment on the tragic case of Callimachus transume "The Second Coming." Instead of the terrible beauty of "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" [294], we have the transumptive lines troping upon this earlier trope, and telling us that there must be more than the center not holding--

> All things fall and are built again
> And those that build them again are gay.

To fall again and again is inevitable, but to build anew despite the inevitable is heroic vitalism.

For Yeats to see this and to write it, is for him to enlarge the earlier trope by transuming it, but with the fourth section, "Lapis Lazuli" returns to a new contraction, this time the phase of askesis with its perspectivizing reliance on the metaphor of the stone carved by an artist.

> Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
> Are carved in lapis lazuli,
> Over them flies a long-legged bird,
> A symbol of longevity:
> The third, doubtless a serving-man,
> Carries a musical instrument. [413]

In this brief askesis, the poet concentrates or narrows all his meaning to a single metaphor: the spatial image of a carved stone. It is as if the circumference of all of the poet's meanings were now reduced--like the God of Empedocles, Augustine, and Emerson--to the center of a circle, the circle of a precious and fragile lapis lazuli. According to this perspective, all that is inside the circle of the metaphor, the images on the stone, is meaningful, while all that is outside it is not. But as Bloom's map of misreading shows, such perspectivizing

metaphors soon undergo a new breaking of the vessels, as a poem moves dialectically from its fifth to its sixth phase.

Crossing from askesis to apophrades, the poem moves out of contraction and into a new restitution of voice, as the circle of meaning contained within the carved stone is cracked or shattered, offering new meaning beyond the narrowing limits of a metaphor.

> Every discoloration of the stone,
> Every accidental crack or dent,
> Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
> Or lofty slope where it still snows
> Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
> Sweetens the little half-way house
> Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
> Delight to imagine them seated there;
> There, on the mountain and the sky,
> On all the tragic scene they stare.
> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.
> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay. [413]

The poem here turns from metaphor to transumption first by troping on its own trope of the carved stone, and then by troping on the penultimate line of "Among School Children." As "discolouration" and "crack or den" become "a water-course or an avalanche, / Or lofty slope where it still snows," the transumptive imagination of the poet expands in pathos. Soon the carved stone itself has disappeared as the sweet enticements of "plum or cherry-branch" further our movement away from the stone and into the visionary world invoked by the poet's negative transcendence of the stone. The passage continues to expand its transumptive power as imagination and image appear to coalesce. The Chinamen climb the mountain, "and I / Delight to imagine them seated there." Mountain, sky, and tragic scene exclude nothing that is and nothing that is not. The poet's vision seems so

comprehensive here that it achieves the earliness of a first vision, the vision of the first morning after the fall. Mountain, sky, and tragic scene, three Chinamen and their music--it is the first creation out of or after catastrophe. In what Bloom would call a "metaleptic reversal" of Yeats's old age as well as his poetic belatedness, the poet here writes the vision of a new primal scene that presents itself with such freshness that it is as if this were the first or only vision of a fall that always is, and is exactly as it is here seen.

The final four lines of the poem return us transumptively to "Among School Children," where Pythagorean music was so crucial:

> World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
> Fingered upon a fiddle stick or strings
> What a star sang and careless Muses heard. [325]

Such divine music is only a source of poetic frustration and longing to overcome the dualism of worldly body and heavenly soul, but when metaleptically reversed by "Lapis Lazuli," the music of Pythagoras becomes a music that is fallen and mournful but that also invokes the poem's final transumption. "Among School Children" had asked of the "body swayed to music" and of the "brightening glance" the ambiguous unanswerable question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"--the question upon which Paul de Man based his theory of aporia or linguistic bewilderment, discussed in (1.3) and (2.5). But "Lapis Lazuli" shows Yeats's visionary impatience with "Among School Children" by transuming its "brightening glance," troping on this trope anew, to make it feel late and weak in relation to the earliness and strength of his new trope:

> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes are gay.

With the help of his three Chinamen, the aging poet is yet able to lie against time once more, to invoke the glory and the freshness of an imaginative dream by returning to an earlier trope--one that felt strong and fresh in its own day. "Lapis Lazuli," like other canonical poems written in the twilight of Yeats's career, restitutes that career by taking it into the sixth and final cradle of the dialectic of revisionism.

O rocky voice
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place?
"Man and the Echo"

Conclusion

Yeats's life-long contest with the internalized voices of Hamlet and Shelley created poems that, along with the poems of Wallace Stevens, must surely be the best of this century in this language. Such a conjecture can only be made by trying to measure or assess the relative strength with which poets enter the agon of poets, the Scene of Instruction which for each is a battle with the internalized dead, and by trying to read the influence of their work on those who come after. In this dissertation I have not focused on Yeats's poetic progeny--an investigation that would have to deal with the revision of Yeats by many great imaginations, including James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Dylan Thomas, Seamus Heaney, and a sizeable group of American poets. But I have highlighted his influence upon some great critics and theorists, including Edward Said, George Steiner, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and especially Harold Bloom whose theory of poetry could be said to be the dark double of Yeats's own poetry, its antithetical soul. By performing my

own practical misreading of Bloom's theory of misreading, I have argued how Yeats's canonical place in the tradition that gave him breath is a result of his having built into his poems his agon with that tradition. I have also argued the importance of gnosis and negative transcendence to any critical approach to Yeats that must be dissatisfied with prevalent historicizing, Platonizing, or even anti-Platonizing approaches to Yeats. Finally, I have argued that Bloom's theory itself can be creatively corrected, using tropes from Yeats and my own trope of white noise to read more strongly the negative dialectics that transfigures history into the making of a soul:

> Now shall I make my soul,
> Compelling it to study
> In a learned school
> Till the wreck of body,
> Slow decay of blood,
> Testy delirium
> Or dull decrepitude,
> Or what worse evil come--
> The death of friends, or death
> Of every brilliant eye
> That made a catch in the breath--
> Seem but the clouds of the sky
> When the horizon fades,
> Or a bird's sleepy cry
> Among the deepening shades.
> [from "The Tower"]

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