ESSAYS IN EXPLANATION: W. B. YEATS'S DEFINITIONS OF ART AND CULTURE

A THESIS

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PREFACE

A COAT

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;[1]

Any study of William Butler Yeats is complicated. The complications arise, primarily, from the personal contrived elusiveness of the man, himself. When Yeats speaks of his song as a coat covered with embroideries he speaks with accuracy. The embroidery is elaborately stitched and while the style and the cut of the garment is always attractive, it is often confounding. Yeats developed a theory of personal expression which involved the use of poses and masks. It is this theory which has made many of the critics hesitate to take literally all that he says. Beyond this, the "old mythologies" which Yeats pursued often included strange traditions of occult practice which arrest one's credulity. Still, there is a great deal which Yeats has written which can be taken literally. These prose writings are a valuable source in understanding the man and his

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1 William Butler Yeats, Collected Poems (New York, Macmillan, 1956), p. 125.

definitions of art and culture.

The poetic techniques and methods of Ireland's national poet have been closely examined. Much has been written regarding Yeats's poetry. The essays, however, the most direct record of Yeats's theories, have received a rather meager measure of attention. The purpose of this study is to examine the work of Yeats the Essayist. The embroideries and the mythologies are in the essays, to be sure, but there they are not merely sung, rather, they are examined and explained. In the essays the mask is removed and the true face of Yeats's critical bias is revealed.

Ernest A. Boyd in Ireland's Literary Renaissance comments that "If 'style is the man', then, the essays, Ideas of Good and Evil is a perfect portrait of the author".[2] Boyd continues, "Ideas of Good and Evil is, in the main, a defence of Yeats's own ideas, and an exposition of the theories underlying the literature which he has helped by precept and example to create".[3]

The scope of this paper, then, is the close examination of the more important essays in Ideas of Good and Evil. Some of the essays from The Cutting of an Agate and

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2 Ernest A. Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (New York, Lane, 1916), p. 177.

3 Ibid., p. 180.

Per Amica Silentia Lunae will be considered also.[4] It will be necessary and helpful to comment on important influences of family and circumstance if we are to have a complete context, but this will be done briefly and only in relation to those influences which have contributed directly to Yeats's critical concepts.

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4 Ideas of Good and Evil, The Cutting of an Agate, and Per Amica Silentia Lunae were published in one volume under the title Essays (New York, Macmillan, 1924).

CHAPTER I

FAMILY BACKGROUND

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin on June 13, 1865. His father was John Butler Yeats the artist. His mother was Susan Pollexfen Yeats of County Sligo. The Yeatses and Pollexfens were descendants of early English settlers, old Protestant-Irish families who had lived in Ireland for generations. Since heredity and family background played so great a part in shaping Yeats's thought, his ancestors are of interest to us.

On the Yeats side of the family William's forebearers were clergymen, gentlemen-scholars who loved life, their friends, and life's entertainments. It is interesting to note that life's entertainments for Yeats's great grandfather, Parson Yeats of Drumcliffe, included two race horses in the stable and, in the estate debts, an unpaid wine bill of 400 pounds.[1]

The son of the Parson of Drumcliffe, Yeats's grandfather, was rector of the large parish of Tullylish. Joseph Hone describes him as an elequent preacher and an Irish

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1 Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats (New York, Macmillan, 1943), p. 4.

gentleman of the old school. Hone recounts an incident in which the rector's scholarly dedication was such that with the publication of Macaulay's History he threw his parish to the curate and went to bed with the volumes, to remain there until he had read them all.[2]

The artist and philosopher John Butler Yeats was born at Tullylish. He was the oldest of a family of handsome, high-spirited, and healthy children.[3] The rector sent his eldest son to school at the Atholl Academy on the Isle of Man and it was there that John met his future brother-in-law George Pollexfen of County Sligo. Hone selects a passage from J. B. Yeats's Autobiography which reveals not only something of the character of John Yeats, but also something of the contrast between the Pollexfen and Yeats tempers.

> George Pollexfen was melancholy as a boy and as a man. I think it was his melancholy that attracted me, who am a cheerful and perennially hopeful man. It always mortifies me to think how cheerful I am, for I am convinced it is a gift I share with all the villains; it is their unmistakable buoyancy that enables these unfortunates to go on from disaster to disaster and remain impenitent.[4]

It was intended that J. B. Yeats become a clergyman but he was not interested in a career in religion. It was not long, in fact, before he found himself without any

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2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

interest in religion itself. John was at Trinity College when his father died. As the eldest son he inherited the estate in Kildare and this inheritance gave him enough money to marry George Pollexfen's sister. The couple moved into a house in Dublin. It was in this house, located near a relative's castle, that their first child William Butler was born.

In 1866, the year after William's birth, the family moved from Dublin to London.[5] During the years of Yeats's boyhood the family traveled back and forth from London to Dublin and William and the other children spent many summers and sometimes a year at a time with their mother and her family in County Sligo.

The Pollexfens and their austere Sligo setting were much different from the gay and gentile qualities typical of the Yeatses. Susan Pollexfen was sensitive but undemonstrative. The thing she liked best was to exchange ghost and fairy stories with some fisherman's wife in the kitchen. She loved her birthplace and considered the romantic country of Sligo the most beautiful place in the world.[6] It is natural that the mother's love for Sligo was passed on to the children. The Sligo influence was one of the strongest in

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5 Richard Ellmann, Yeats - The Man and the Masks (New York, Macmillan, 1948), p. 11.

6 Ibid., p. 23.

William's life. Although Dublin was the city of his birth and the center for much of his work, still, it was Sligo, which by instinct and inheritance, he claimed as his home.

Lennox Robinson recalls the history of Sligo in his biography of Major Bryon Cooper. The county was settled by English soldiers and was destined to become a kind of island. It was bounded on the north by Ulster, on the south by the banished Irish, and on the east by the Irish of Roscommon. On the west was the wild Atlantic. The land which received the little colony was a country rich in Gaelic folklore, history, and tradition. Robinson comments, "There seems to be hardly a barony in County Sligo that is not linked with fairy legend or religion or ancient battle ..."[7] Young W. B. Yeats was a lonely and rather unhappy child and the legend and folklore of the area made a strong and lasting impression on him.

The opening pages of Yeats's Autobiography are filled with recollections of Sligo and the Pollexfen family. Mrs. Yeats's father, old William Pollexfen, is the great figure in Yeats's early Sligo memories. The old man was a legend in his own time, possessing a stern and grand reputation in the neighborhood. Yeats recalls that his grandfather was a shipping man who owned many sailing vessels.

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7 Lennox Robinson, Bryan Cooper (London, Constable, 1931), p. 5.

The family knew that he had sailed to many parts of the world and Yeats describes the great scar on his hand made by a whaling hook and the dining-room cabinent which contained "the bits of coral and the jar of water from the Jordon for the baptising of his children". There were Chinese pictures on rice-paper and an ivory walking-stick from India which went to young William after the grandfather's death.[8]

Accompanying the romantic family legends were the many folk legends of the county. The first fairy stories which Yeats heard were told in the cottages which surrounded his relative's houses.[9]

These few descriptive passages on the Yeats and Pollexfen families serve to illustrate Hone's comment on these words of John Butler Yeats:

> Once J. B. Yeats defined W. B. 's lyrical gift as Yeats, but his poetical heredity as Pollexfen. The Yeatses have 'knowledge of the art of life and enjoyment', but the Pollexfens are 'full of the materials of poetic thought and feeling. By marriage with the Pollexfens I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs'."[10]

Though the temperaments of the Yeats and Pollexfen families differed and were, perhaps, joined somehow in young

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8 William Butler Yeats, Autobiography (New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1958), pp. 2, 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Hone, W. B. Yeats, p. 18.

William, the backgrounds of the two families held obvious similarities. Storied Sligo sea cliffs and gay gentile clergyman-scholars were a part of an aristocratic tapestry which was fast fading.

William Butler's formal education, or the lack of it, is important. George Fraser comments that though Yeats read widely, his reading habits were never systematic.[11] Trinity College had seen the admission and the graduation of both Yeats's grand-father and his father. William did not attend Trinity, however, for he could not pass the examinations in mathematics and the classics. Since Trinity was not possible he entered a small art school on Kildare Street, Dublin and was taught there by his father. Yeats says of his painting, " ... for the most part I exaggerated all that my father did ... I do not believe that I worked well, for I wrote a great deal and that tired me, and the work I was set to bored me."[12]

Yeats describes himself at this time of his life. He pictures himself " ... sometimes walking with an artifical stride in memory of Hamlet and stopping at shop windows to look at [his] tie gathered into a loose sailor-knot and to regret that it could not be always blown out by the wind like Byron's ..."[13] This element of self-dramatization

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11 George Sutherland Fraser, W. B. Yeats (London, Longmans, Green, 1954), p. 11.

12 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 52, 53.

13 Ibid., p. 55.

was later at the basis of his theory of the Mask.

The ideas which concerned Yeats at this time and throughout his life were ideas centered on religion, philosophy, and art. Yeats recalls that even in his childhood his father's unbelief set him thinking about "the evidences of religion", and he says that he "weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety" for he did not think that he could live without religion.[14] In art school he was constantly troubled about philosophic questions, spending a week in anxiety over the problem; "do the arts made us happier, or more sensitive and therefore more unhappy?".[15]

Yeats spent a great deal of time reading and the direction which his reading habits took was certainly motivated by a desire to answer questions on religion and philosophy. While Yeats's later readings included acknowledged writers, Plato, Swedenborg, and Blake, his earlier readings were of more obscure material. His father was angered when he took up the study of psychical research and mystical philosophy, nevertheless he continued in the direction in which he had begun.[16] With friends he examined the Theosophical Society's manuals on time and reincarnation and he began to cultivate those who shared his interest in the occult. Eventually

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14 Ibid., p. 15.

15 Ibid., p. 57.

16 Ibid., p. 59.

Yeats joined the Theosophical Society.

All of Yeats's efforts at self-education were not confined to the occult, however, for it also was at this time that he became interested in the Irish Nationalist Cause. Although he was shy by nature Yeats forced himself to mix in company and in conversation. He says that he visited "strange houses" for "schooling sake".[17]

It was at one of these houses that Yeats met the Fenian John O'Leary. Through O'Leary he became acquainted with the Irish historian Douglas Hyde, and the poetess Katherine Tynan.[18] It was O'Leary and the others who made Yeats more keenly aware of Irish Nationalism. Yeats mentions one of O'Leary's comments. O'Leary said to him, "Neither Ireland nor England knows the good from the bad in any art, but Ireland unlike England does not hate the good when it is pointed out to her." Yeats says that he "began to plot and scheme how one might seal with the right image the soft wax before it began to harden."[19]

When Yeats was twenty-two the family moved from Dublin to London. Blenheim Road, Bedford Park was the family residence for nearly fourteen years. This neighborhood afforded Yeats the opportunity to meet many Pre-Raphaelite artists

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17 Ibid., p. 62.

18 Virginia Moore, The Unicorn: W. B. Yeats's Search for Reality (New York, Macmillan, 1954), p. 20.

19 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 68.

who were friends of John Butler's. Yeats speaks of beginning his education under W. E. Henley whom he met in London. He also met Oscar Wilde and saw him quite frequently. With Ernest Rhys, Yeats founded the Rhymers' Club. Lionel Johnson, Edwin Ellis, and Arthur Symons were, at one time or another, members of the Club.[20]

Yeats met Maud Gonne, the beautiful Irish Revolutionary leader, in London when he was twenty two. Her strength of bearing, her zeal for Ireland, and the fact that she too was a believer in the spiritual world attracted him to her immediately. Whenever they met during their brief courtship and long friendship they talked constantly of "Ireland's high destiny and the invisible world".[21]

In 1889 Yeats began a four-year collaboration with E. J. Ellis, painter and fellow occultist. Jointly they edited Blakes's works. Yeats was twenty-eight when the volumes appeared in 1893. For Yeats it had been a labor of love.

The Blake study strengthened Yeats's supernaturalism and, after an experiment attempting to raise up the ghost of a flower from its ashes, he was asked to resign from the Theosophical Society.[22] Yeats was not disturbed by this,

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20 Ibid., pp. 82, 83, 111.

21 Virginia Moore, p. 25.

22 Ibid., pp. 26, 27.

however, for he had already met MacGregor Mathers. Mathers was a Celt, a Scotchman of striking appearance and of considerable reputation in occult circles. When Yeats met him he was one of the guiding minds in the establishment of a newly formed Rosicrucian order in England.

Mathers told Yeats about the new society dedicated to the study and practice of Christian Cabalism, The Order of Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn.[23] In May or June of 1887 Yeats was initiated into the Hermetic Students and "being at a most receptive age [was] shaped and isolated".[24] Of the imprtance of Yeats's memberships in the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order, Ellmann says:

> Notwithstanding his final excommunication, five or six years of Theosophy, three of them years of active membership under the organization's founder, had left their mark on Yeats. He had been brought into contact with a system based on opposition to materialism and on support of secret and ancient wisdom, and was encouraged to believe that he would be able to bring together all the fairy tales and folklore he had heard in childhood, the poetry he had read in adolescence, the dreams he had been dreaming all his life ... through the Golden Dawn he had begun to satisfy his cravings for a religion.[25]

When Katherine Tynan met Yeats in Dublin in 1885 he

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23 Ibid.

24 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 124.

25 Ellmann, pp. 67, 95.

had seemed to her to be "all dreams and gentleness".[26] By 1888 the search for a belief amidst so many ideas and doubts had taken its toll. In 1888 Yeats describes himself as "going about on shoreless seas ..., nothing anywhere [had] clear outline. Everything [was] cloud and foam".[27]

Yeats's literary work during this period was no less cloud and dreamland. He had been strongly influenced by the early Pre-Raphaelite theories of his father and by the Pre-Raphaelite atmosphere of the time. "This Pre-Raphaelite notion of art was a belief in the 'life of the imagination', in an ideal dream world, which the [Pre-Raphaelites] sought in protest against the materialism of nineteenth-century England."[28]

While Yeats the occultist was beginning his long journey into the land of twilight and dream, Yeats the Irishman was wide awake and active in the political world of Irish Nationalism. Yeats worked hard as a propagandist for the Nationalist cause in Ireland. His respect for John O'Leary and his love for Maud Gonne were the links between his literary life and his political life, the life of the

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26 Moore, p. 27.

27 Ellmann, p. 40.

28 G. B. Harrison, B. H. Bronson, R. A. Brower, et. al., ed., Major British Writers (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1954), II p. 622.

Celtic twilight and the life of revolutionary awakenings.

Yeats's association with Lady Gregory and their establishment of the famous Abbey Players is well-known history. During their long friendship Lady Gregory offered immeasurable help to the young poet. She encouraged him in all of his ambitions and offered him her manor estate, Coole, as a frequent refuge. Yeats observed, "I doubt if I should have done much with my life but for her firmness and her care."[29]

Toward the end of the Century Yeats became a close associate of Ezra Pound. Pound, twenty years his junior, introduced him to the "modern" style in verse and directed him in rewriting some of his earlier poems. In the meantime Yeats continued his experiments in spiritualism and consulted with a medium. R. A. Brower comments, "However comic the means, the end - the achievement of the poet - is admirable. It is not often that a poet or any man of fifty can learn from the young (an event very nearly as remarkable as communicating with another world).[30]

In 1917 Yeats married Miss Georgie Hyde-Lees. Shortly after the marriage they began work rebuilding Thoor Ballylee, an old castle located on an estate near Coole. Yeats continued his attempts at communication with another world with Mrs. Yeats acting as medium. The communications he received

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29 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 251.

30 Harrison, et. al., p. 624.

in this elaborate experiment served as a basis for his system and his book of revelation, A Vision, which was published in 1925.[31]

In 1922 Yeats accepted an appointment to the Senate of the newly formed Irish Free State. In 1923 he journeyed to Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Yeats continued to write throughout the remainder of his life. He was working on poems up until the day before his death. He died in Cap Martin, France on January 28, 1939. When his body was returned to Ireland in 1945 thousands of people lined the Galway street to pay tribute to the man who has come to be known as Ireland's National Poet. Although the Dean of St. Patrick's offered interment in the Cathedral, the first such offer in a hundred years, it was decided that his body should be buried as he had requested in County Sligo. He was laid in Drumcliffe churchyard where his ancestor had once been rector. There "On limestone quarried near the spot/ By his command these words are cut:/

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!"[32]

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31 Ibid., p. 622, 623.

32 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, pp. 343, 344.

CHAPTER II

THE ESOTERIC MAGICIAN

"Cast a cold eye
On life, ... "[1]

The "cold eye" which Yeats cast on life around him has earned for him the titles of aesthetic and escapist.[2] Qualities of "weariness and vitality" which he possessed and which he shared with other writers of the "fin de siècle" lead readily to these labels.[3] In a civilization like ours, however, bent on the pursuit of tangibles, care should be taken that "escapism" is properly understood. It is not necessary to defend Yeats's escapism, or his belief in magic, but it is necessary to our purposes to try to understand it for it is a basic element in his concept of art and culture.

During his lifetime Yeats pursued a course which led him away from the main stream of contemporary activity.

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1 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 344.

2 James Hall and Martin Steinmann, ed., The Permanence of Yeats (New York, Macmillan, 1950), pp. 199, 200.

3 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties (Harmondsworth-Middlesex, Penguin, 1950), p. 8.

His "have done" with the rising new middle class and with other innovations which were a result of the industrial revolution lists him in the ranks of Ruskin. Yeats speaks of the middle class as a "class of the counting house ... their art without breeding and without ancestry".[4] He dismisses their world as a "pragmatical pig of a world".[5] Higgins comments that "the bloodlessness, the loose sentiment of middle minded verse, was to him an abhorrence."[6] Yeats's background offers ample evidence of influences which would lead him to such a position. His father had defined a gentleman as "a man not wholly occupied in getting on".[7] Also, the primitive Sligo community which was ever a strong influence was a community which "remembered a woman for her beauty and a man for his authority, his birth or his wildness". In this tradition "it was still impossible to buy either respect or ... reputation for cash down".[8] Yeats once said, "I am delighted with all that joins my life to

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4 William Butler Yeats, Essays (New York, Macmillan, 1924), p. 12.

5 William Butler Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 233.

6 Stephen Gwynn, ed., Scattering Branches (New York, Macmillan, 1940), p. 152.

7 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 59.

8 Gwynn, pp. 166, 167.

those who had power in Ireland or with those anywhere that were good servants and poor bargainers."[9] In using the word "power" it can safely be assumed that Yeats meant the power of aristocratic ascendancy not the power of material success. Still, there was one area of his life in which Yeats could hardly escape material involvement and that was the area of Irish Nationalism. Even here, however, his aristocratic and esoteric tendencies prevented him facing the immediate problems of the time. He lived in an Ireland of the past and had no desire to meet the present or look into the possibility of a modern Ireland of the future. Yeats was never a practical politician seeking political or material improvement for the nation. His patriotism was that of a chieftain for his tribe and his zeal was ever directed toward the preservation and protection of the tribe's symbols and ceremonies.

Interest and belief in symbols and ceremonies could be comforting for one living within a tribe, or for one within the ceremonial tradition of orthodox religion, but Yeats was in neither of these worlds. He was not living in tribal times but at the advent of the Twentieth Century, and though he had pursued religious belief from the time of young manhood he was not secure within the tradition of orthodox Christianity. While Yeats could not tolerate the coarseness

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9 Ibid.

of a commercial world and did not accept the cannons of an orthodox Christian one, he was at the same time not content with mere reaction against either. William Rothenstein states in his memoirs that Yeats agreed with him that reaction against what is sane and traditional is tiresome, that it is necessary to accept conditions at a given time, and that within these conditions and their discipline it is still possible to be free enough to be sincere and be yourself.[10]

Yeats as himself has been a problem for the critics. Rejection and reaction are more easily understood and classified than is an active and consistent personal pursuit of something which has frequently passed by the name "magic". The question arises, did Yeats really believe in the thing which he pursued or was it merely a system of thought? Wilson seems to summarize the response of many critics to Yeats's thought. "It has always seemed prudent to disparage Yeats as a thinker."[11] Yeats's attitudes have been described as "essentially static", as attitudes which fail to see meaning or purpose in everyday living.[12] He is

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10 William Rothenstein, Since Fifty: Men and Memories New York, Macmillan, 1940), p. 252.

11 F. Alexander Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition London, Gollancz, 1958), p. 25.

12 Hall and Steinman, pp. 199, 200.

the "literary theorist who professed to distain the humble preoccupations of humanity".[13] Henderson traces the causes of Yeats's remoteness to peculiar personal traits. He states that "the fact is that Yeats had a natural relish for all that is most recondite and obsure ..."[14] If Yeats deliberately sought the obscure, then it would most certainly lead him away from an involvement in what might be termed "everyday living". Yeats, himself, says that his " ... belief ... has set [him] all but unwilling among those lean and fierce minds who are at war with their time, who cannot accept the days as they pass, simply and gladly ... "[15] Yeats was not at one with his time and the critics have sifted the factors which might explain his motives and position.

General background, not only of the man but of the race which produced him, have figured in explanations. H. S. Krans see in the "melancholy Celt" a "passion for romance ..., for the intangible and evanescent,... a shrinking from the tumult of the world ..., characteristic of a race that has not greatly succeeded in dealing with the actualities of life."[16] Daiches sees Yeats primarily as a poet, and places him with other poets of his time:

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13 Boyd, p. 186.

14 Philip Henderson, The Poet and Society (London, Secker & Warburg, 1939), p. 138.

15 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 61.

16 H. S. Krans, William Butler Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival (New York, McClure, Philips, 1904), p. 189.

> Yeat's search was for a compensating tradition ..., for a system rather than ... for a set of beliefs. It was nostalgia for order and system in a world whose orthodox systems had ceased to ... provide them that led Yeats into ... esoteric paths. Yeats became an esoteric symbolist for the same reason that Eliot became an Anglican and W. H. Auden a Socialist: each was seeking a solution to the problem presented by a disintegrating tradition.[17]

Yeats's sincerity of belief is considered by Ussher, who observes that Yeats is "often called a charlatan ... ", and that "there was some plausibility [in this], still Yeats desired only to be a charlatan for the purposes of poetry. Anything that would rescue poetry from being a mere Victorian schoolgirl's album affair and make it again a Mystery - a Priesthood."[18]

Stating these appraisals so briefly and out of their general context is perhaps less than fair to the critics, but the chronicle, if brief, does give a sampling of reactions. Yeats does not lend himself readily to labels and most of the critics would probably agree with Ussher that "Yeats is so protean a character that almost any statement one may make about him calls for instant qualification."[19]

Qualifications not withstanding, Yeats, superficially viewed, appears often not only as a "static" and "obscure"

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17 Hall and Steinman, pp. 119, 137.

18 Arland Ussher, Three Great Irishmen (New York, New American Library, 1957), p. 57.

19 Ibid., p. 79 n. 1.

esoteric but also, at times, as a rather silly magician hovering over a ouija board. In her study, The Unicorn, Virginia Moore attempts to correct such a picture. She states rather pointedly that "no important writer has been treated more clumsily", and that "actually there exists an enormous misunderstanding as to what William Butler Yeats was, believed, and did."[20] Strong concurs with Miss Moore when he says that "the impatience of many critics for this side of Yeats's work and their reluctance to face it seems due to a failure to understand his central position."[21]

Actually, it was probably inevitiable that Yeats's position be misunderstood, that it be dealt with in an impatient and reluctant manner. Magic has never been an "open-air" subject. Even the "white magic" which Yeats pursued has always had its secrets and concealed procedures. Yeats, a member of the Golden Dawn, was a Rosicrucian and, as such, took an oath to silence regarding many of his beliefs. Yeats honored the oath, but this does not mean that he was silent about all of his beliefs, and that all must be surmise. In his essay "Magic", Yeats states these beliefs. He announces them frankly and illustrates them concretely. It is difficult to see how any appraisal of his thought could ignore his statements or question his seriousness and sincerity. Yeats's

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20 Moore, p. 2.

21 Gwynn, p. 209.

theories on magic are considered here because, apart from their own interesting aspects, they have definite bearing on his concepts of art and culture.

In the introductory paragraphs of the essay "Magic", Yeats states that he believes in the practice and philosophy of what it has been decided to call magic, but what he prefers to call " ... the avocation of spirits, ... the power of ... creating magical illusions, ... visions of truth in the depths of the mind ..."[22] He believes in three basic doctrines which have, as he thought, been handed down from early times. These doctrines are:

> 1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
>
> 2. That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
>
> 3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.[23]

In an explanation of how he came to such beliefs, Yeats discusses several of his own experiences. He says that some ten or twelve years before the essay was written he went with a friend to visit an evoker of spirits. The friend, who was a sceptic, wished to believe but "expected nothing

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22 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 33.

23 Ibid.

more than an air of romance." The evoker sat on a dais with his wife sitting between him and Yeats and his friend. Yeats said that "almost at once [his] imagination began to move of itself and to bring before [him] vivid images ... [which] had a motion of their own, a life [he] could not change or shape."[24] The vision unfolded as that of a doctor lecturing among his pupils. The doctor was a man "whose mind was absorbed in naturalism, whose imagination had been excited by stories of marvels wrought by magic in past times and who tried to copy them by naturalistic means." A Frankenstein tale follows, the doctor trying by natural means to bring life to dead matter. This vision was seen by Yeats, the evoker and the evoker's wife, but not by Yeats's naturalistic friend. Yeats says that when he spoke to his friend later, the man admitted to a desire to concoct supernatural life. The friend was the only one present during the vision who had read Frankenstein, yet he was "not allowed" to see the vision. Yeats says that perhaps he was not permitted to see the vision because, in a sense, it was his own life that was being told. Yeats comments that he could not believe that these visions were of "old lives, in an ordinary sense of the word life, but that they have almost always some quite definite relation to dominant moods and moulding events in this life."[25]

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24 Ibid., p. 35.

25 Ibid., p. 43.

Another incident which Yeats recalls occurred in Paris. Yeats was lost in one of those "long foolish tales which one tells only to oneself", musing how he might have come close to breaking his arm, imagining how the arm would look in a sling. A servant girl, "not long from the country", was in the room with him when he was thinking these thoughts. Yeats went out for a newspaper and when he returned his host and hostess met him at the door. When they saw him they asked if something had happened to him. The servant girl had told them that he had had his arm in a sling.[26]

Yeats recalls one afternoon, at about the same time, when he was thinking very intently of a student for whom he had a message. He says that in a few days he received a letter from a place some hundreds of miles away. The letter was from the student and it told that on the afternoon when Yeats had been thinking so intently of the student he, (Yeats), had suddenly appeared to the student, "solid as if in the flesh". He had talked with the student, and had vanished. He appeared again in the middle of the night and had given the student the message. Yeats says that he had no knowledge of either apparition.[27]

Not all of the magical events which Yeats mentions in this essay were personal experiences. Some were told to him,

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26 Ibid., pp. 44, 45.

27 Ibid., p. 45.

(these have been omitted here), and others he witnessed. He speaks of once seeing a young Irish woman, fresh from a convent school, who was "cast into a profound trance, though not by a method known to any hypnotist." The girl, "in her waking state believed that the apple of Eve was the kind of apple you can buy at the greengrocers". In her trance she saw the Tree of Life with "ever-sighing souls moving in its branches ... and among its leaves all the fowl of the air". After witnessing the trance, and hearing this description of the Tree of Life, Yeats went home. He took out an old Jewish book, Mather's translation of The Book of Concealed Mystery. On pages which he had not read before he came upon the passage, "The Tree, ... is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and of Evil ... in its branches the birds lodge and build their nests, the souls and the angels have their place".[28]

The usual evaluation of these events, providing that they are accepted as true, is that they are certainly interesting, somewhat unexplainable, but not wholly significant. Yeats's reaction was not the usual one, and considering his background in magical lore, it could hardly be expected to be. He evaluates these events, and other like ones, as being truly significant. He says:

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28 Ibid., pp. 53, 54.

> If all who have described events like these have not dreamed we should rewrite our histories, for all men, certainly all imaginative men, must be for ever casting forth enchantments ...; and all men especially tranquil men ... must be continually passing under their power. Our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven. The historian should remember should he not angels and devils not less than kings and soldiers and plotters and thinkers.[29]

Whatever the historian may think of such an elusive and dubious task as this, Yeats felt it to be important enough to arrest any chronologist's attention.

When Ussher speaks of Yeats's desire to elevate poetry to a "Mystery - a Priesthood," he supplies the link between Yeats's magical beliefs and his artistic ones. Yeats was a symbolist. His early belief in symbols saw them as agents of telepathy, as signs having the power to occasion certain moods or associations by the power of one imagination over another. He tells of an experiment in which he "imagined over the head of a person, who was a little of a seer, a combined symbol of elemental air and elemental water. This person, who did not know what symbol [he] was using saw a pigeon flying with a lobster in his bill."[30] In some of these early experiments Yeats would look at a symbol on a card and the seer not knowing the symbol would respond with

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29 Ibid., pp. 48, 49.

30 Ibid., p. 58.

the corresponding or correct vision. Yeats thought, as with telepathy, that since he knew the symbol the seer could, so to speak, take it from his mind, hence the power of one imagination over another. As he continued these experiments, however, Yeats found that he sometimes made mistakes and that if he gave the wrong card and wrong symbol to the person they would have a mixed vision, called up in part from the card symbol and in part from the other symbol which Yeats was imagining. In addition to this he found that if he did not, himself, imagine a symbol then it was the card symbol which he gave by mistake that produced the vision. He offers an explanation for this by reasoning that his "subconsciousness would know clairvoyantly what symbol [he] had really given and would respond to the associations of that symbol." He adds, however, that he is "certain that the main symbols (symbolic roots, as it were) draw upon associations which are beyond the reach of the individual subconsciousness."[31] Yeats came finally to a belief in an "inherent power in symbols." He says, "I cannot ... think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors the poet, the musician and the artist."[32]

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31 Ibid., p. 59 n. 1.

32 Ibid., p. 60.

In his experiments with symbols Yeats found a supporter in his elderly uncle. George Pollexfen had come to believe in the supernatural world through a long association with Mary Battle - a "second sighted servant girl". For some time Yeats, his uncle, and Mary Battle carried on experiments at Rosses Point, Sligo. Yeats, using cabalistic symbols, would imagine the symbol; his uncle walking at some distance from him would, in a short time, receive the appropriate vision. Yeats reports that Mary Battle in her sleep at night would receive their thoughts, "though coarsened and turned to caricature."[33] Yeats asks:

> ... do not the thoughts of the scholar or the hermit, though they speak no word, or something of their shape and impulse, pass into the general mind? Does not the emotion of some woman of fashion, caught in the subtle torture of self-analysing passion, pass down to Joan with her Pot, Jill with her Pail and it may be, with one knows not what nightmare melancholy, to Tom the Fool?[34]

"The Uncomfortable Facts About Extrasensory Perception" is the title of a lead article in a recent issue of Harper's Magazine. While the article draws no conclusions as to the E S P consequences to Joan, Jill or Tom the Fool, the similarity in material is striking. It is reported that quite recently a clergyman underwent an operation. Although he had been "clearly anesthetized and ostensibly unconscious"

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33 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 176.

34 Ibid.

during the operation, he afterwards reported in detail what had happened. He knew that the surgeon had left the room for another instrument and reported the details of conversations of those in the operating room.[35]

The author of the article notes that "sometimes ... 'out of the body' experiences, as they are called, occur when several persons simultaneously observe another person whose physical body is actually elsewhere. The case of a man named Wilmot is cited. The occurence described happened in the Nineteenth Century. Wilmot was crossing the ocean and dreamed one night that his wife appeared to him in his stateroom. The next morning the man who shared the cabin with him, and was a stranger to him, upbraided him for having a woman visit him in the cabin. When the ship docked Wilmot's wife met him and told him of a dream that she had, a dream in which she visited him in his cabin. She described the cabin to him in some detail. The night on which she had had this dream was the same night on which she had appeared to him.[36]

The "ESP" article which draws few conclusions does make several interesting observations, observations which Yeats would endorse wholeheartedly.

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35 Ian Stevenson, "The Uncomfortable Facts About Extrasensory Perception", Harper's Magazine, 219, v 1310. (July, 1959), p. 21.

36 Ibid.

> 1) Both enthusiasts and skeptics sometimes state that the acceptance of parapsychology implies an overthrow of the present scientific view of the universe.
>
> 2) (These studies) will ... revolutionize our view of man. It is perhaps not more surprising that a man should influence the fall of dice thrown by a machine than that he should activate his own hand to throw the dice. In either case a man's mind acts on a physical object ... we do not know how mind acts on matter - whether part of the same organism or outside it.[37]

In a November, 1958, issue of the New York Herald Tribune it was reported that the Westinghouse Corporation scientists were "seriously studying the possibility of harnessing mental telepathy and other forms of extrasensory perception for long distance communications systems ..."[38] If Yeats sought an escape he is rapidly being overtaken. It is ironic that his world of symbol and ceremony is today real enough, in its practical aspects at least, to interest the other world of commerce which he so despised.

Yeats was a supernaturalist. His experiments proved, to his own satisfaction, at least, that "reality could not be facilely explained as the perceptions of five senses and that scientific rationalism had ignored or superficially dismissed many important matters."[39] The experiences which

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37 Ibid., p. 25.

38 Quoted by Ian Stevenson, p. 24.

39 Ellmann, p. 69.

Yeats describes in his essay "Magic" contributed together with his other interests in Irish folklore and occultism toward the development of this unique brand of supernaturalism. Yeats's doctrine of the great mind and great memory of Nature and his belief in the power of symbols to evoke this mind and memory is the basis for his critical attitudes. Magic is the mould which receives and forms Yeats's concepts of art and culture.

CHAPTER III

ART AND CULTURE

THE IMAGINATION

We passed by woods, and lawns of clover,
. . . . . .
And wrapped in dreams rode out again
. . . . . .
Under the golden evening light,
The Imortals moved among the fountains
. . . . . .
Or sat in dreams on the pale strand
. . . . . .
And sang, and with a dreamy gaze
. . . . . .
Like drops of honey came their words [1]

Douglas Bush observes, "To the romantically minded ever since Coleridge and Keats and Poe, modern science ... has appeared hostile to the spirit of wonder and mystery. Mr. Yeats ... was loth to be disenchanted ..."[2]

Yeats rejected Arnold's concept of literature as a criticism of life and instead "favored romance as a revelation of hidden life".[3] Yeats's belief in magic, in the hidden

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1 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, pp. 361, 362.

2 Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 463.

3 John W. Gunliffe, English Literature in the Twentieth Century (New York, Macmillan, 1933), p. 113.

life of the spirit, was basic in his disposition toward romanticism. Yeats credited the life of the spirit with a validity equal to the validity which the scientific movement claimed for material occurences. Indeed, he felt that the hidden life was a subject whose fitness for art greatly transcended anything that the materialism of the realists could produce. In his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry" Yeats stated that the scientific movement brought with it a literature which was always tending to center itself in externalities, in opinion, statement and picturesquesness.[4] Yeats believed that this "age of criticism" would soon pass and that an age of the imagination, of mood and emotion, and of revelation would come in its place.[5]

An immortal dreaming "dreams on the pale strand" was a wonder which Yeats refused to relinguish. Yet Yeats the artist realized that dreamy "woods and lawns of clover" must be planted within the view of mortal man, that "drops of honey" must touch the taste, and that even the songs of the immortals must be sung in a tempo which men could trace. For Yeats, as for Blake and Shelley, imagination was the all important element in art. Yeats, however, seems to be more aware of the need to reach the emotions of individual men. In his theory of art, imagination is the bridge between what

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4 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 190.

5 Ibid., p. 242.

appears to be two extremes, the idealism of the concept of the great mind and memory and the material actuality of a living experiencing man.

> All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotion.[6]

Yeats believed that an emotion did not exist, or at least, was not perceptible and active until it had found expression in colour or sound or form. For this reason, poets, musicians and painters were "continually making and unmaking mankind".[7]

> It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, ... modes of government, speculations of the reason would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion and shaped sounds or colours or forms that the emotion might live in other minds.[8]

Yeats was never certain, when he heard of some great event, of war, religious excitment, some new manufacture, "or anything that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something a boy piped in Thessaly".[9]

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6 Ibid., pp. 192, 193.

7 Ibid., p. 193.

8 Ibid., pp. 193, 194.

9 Ibid., p. 194.

In rejecting the concept of art as a criticism of life Yeats does not remove art from the arena of the world's happenings. Art is a hidden motivating and shaping power. Although his theories can be pushed to such conclusions, nowhere does he deny the realness of human experience. He seems to be adding another dimension to human experience and he considers it no less real than the common publicized dimension of everyday living. The link between this twilight dimension and daylight man is the imagination and the symbol.

Yeats was a symbolist and believed that the symbol was the instrument which could awaken a correspondance between the hidden life, the immortal memory, and the memory of man.[10] The artist and the poet were the craftsmen who work with symbols and were, therefore, capable and true to his vocation, however, only if he was free from involvement in the binding and restraining machinery of everyday living.

Freedom is a basic concept in Yeats. The freedom which he demands of the artist is not a political or ethical freedom such as might be found in Godwin or in Shelley. Yeats's freedom seems to be an inner psychological freedom which rejects the binding powers of opinion, creedism, and the analitical faculty. It rejects anything that would lead to an egotistical intellectual life. In this aspect of Yeats's thinking the influence of John Butler Yeats is prominate.

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10 Boyd, p. 185.

J. B. Yeats felt that art had to do with sustaining and invigorating personality and that in this task emotion was the first and last thing. Personality was to be individual, indifferent to law, creed or convention.[11] In a letter written to his son in 1914 John Butler Yeats stated:

> The chief thing to know and never forget is that art is dreamland and that the moment a poet meddles with ethics and moral uplift or thinking scientifically, he leaves dreamland, loses all his music and ceases to be a poet.[12]

The influence of Yeats's father on his thinking was great and this concept of freedom is at the basis of many of Yeats's critical judgements. It also has bearing on his own evaluation of personality and contributes to his later development of the theory of the Mask or Image as an element of personality.

Among the essays which deal with critical appraisals is an essay treating Spenser. Yeats saw Spenser as among the first of many poets who would surrender their freedom. Yeats's critical concepts dictated his sympathies and he had little regard for the English poet. He probably never would have considered Spenser at all had the man not lived in Ireland. Of Spenser's lack of self possession Yeats says,

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11 Ellmann, pp. 14, 15.

12 John Butler Yeats, Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, 1869-1922, ed. Joseph Hone, (New York, Dutton, 1946), p. 198.

"Spenser had learned to look to the State not only as the rewarder of virtue but as the maker of right and wrong, and had begun to love and hate as it bid him."[13] Commenting on Spenser's poetic use of allegory Yeats admits to a love of symbolism which is fitting speech for the spiritual life, but finds himself bored by allegory which is created as Blake says, "by the daughters of memory ..., coldly, with no wizard frenzy".[14]

The bias of Yeats's nationalism asserts itself when he says of Spenser, "... he wrote of Ireland ... as an official, and out of thoughts and emotions that had been organized by the State."[15]

THE MASK

'Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.'[16]

If Yeats was critical of Spenser's lack of creative thinking he took steps to protect his own freedom. Yeats's development of the concept of the Mask symbol is, in some of its aspects, such a protection. The Mask had many meanings for Yeats; in its most simplified meaning it is a

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13 W. B. Yeats, Essays, pp. 461, 462.

14 Ibid., p. 474.

15 Ibid., p. 462.

16 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 93.

social self, a defensive armour which is shown to the world.[17] This is perhaps the least important of its meanings; as Yeats developed the Mask symbol the concept came to mean much more. The Mask represents an internal discipline. Yeats expresses it:

> ... if we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask....[18]

This concept of the Mask is bound up in Yeats's theory of the self and the anti-self and the Mask is sometimes the inner self and it is sometimes the daily self; there is a form of the Mask or the Image which comes from life and this is fated, but there is also a form which is chosen and this might be the very opposite of the daily self.[19] Yeats says that he has noticed in very active men the tendency to pose, or if the pose has become a second self, then a preoccupation with the effect that they are producing. Wordsworth is often "flat and heavy partly because his moral sense has no theatrical element, it is an obedience to a discipline which he has not created".[20] Yeats comments:

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17 Ellmann, pp. 175, 176.

18 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 497.

19 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 184.

20 Ibid., pp. 317, 318.

> This increases his [Wordsworth] popularity with the better sort of journalists, writers in the Spectator, ... with all who are part of the machine and yet care for poetry.[21]

Finally, Yeats sees the Mask as the means by which the artist, particularly the shy artist, can know the world. With the mask he can disguise himself as a peasant to wander through the west of Ireland or as a sailor ready to ship out to sea. Yeats says:

> Some day setting out to find knowledge, like some pilgrim to the Holy Land, he will become the most romantic of characters. He will play all masks.[22]

In some small way the young Yeats, playing at being Byron, wishing his tie to the wind, was assuming another dramatic self. This concept of the Mask and the practice of its theory in his own personality is an important factor which makes the character of Yeats difficult to penetrate.

ART AND RELIGION

> Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
> And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
> The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.[23]

When John Butler Yeats wrote his son, " ... art is

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21 Ibid., p. 318.

22 Ibid.

23 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 195.

dreamland ... ", he included in the letter this further instruction: " ... the poet is a magician, his vocation is to incessantly evoke dreams ... ", but the elder Yeats also cautioned his son; "Yet here is a curious thing, the poet and we his dupes know that they are only dreams - otherwise we lose them ... ".[24] William Butler did not heed the cautioning. In his personal individualization of the Pre-Raphaelite concept Yeats endeavored to go beyond the phantasms of dream to some ancient religious tradition which extended back through centuries of Christianity to ancient Oriental, Hebrew, and Indian beliefs. Yeats assumed the role of magician willingly and he endowed it with a religious ardor. He says, "We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith."[25]

Yeats defended this faith zealously:

> ... surely, at whatever risk, we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and patterns in that great Mind and that great Memory. Can there be anything so important as to cry out that what we call romance, poetry, intellectual beauty, is the only signal that the supreme Enchanter is speaking of what has been, and shall be again, in the consummation of time?[26]

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24 J. B. Yeats, Letters, 1869-1922, p. 198.

25 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 250.

26 Ibid., p. 63.

There are many passages throughout the essays which refer to the religious function of the arts. If Yeats saw art touching life, it was the life of the spirit which he sought to reach, not the life of material envolvements. He says:

> The arts by brooding upon their own intensity, have become religious and are seeking ... create a sacred book ...[27]

> [They] are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things and not with things.[28]

Yeats was quite extravagant in his appraisal of the function of the arts. This extravagance has earned much adverse critical comment.[29] These theories, however, as with so many of Yeats's theories, are elastic and have a balancing counterpart. A consideration of William Blake as an influence offers them a background and a line of definition which Yeats's prose style rarely gives them.

William Blake is one of the strongest and most consistent influences in Yeats's thought.[30] Yeats devoted

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27 Ibid., p. 231.

28 Ibid., p. 237.

29 T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 133.

30 Margaret Rudd, Divided Image (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953), p. 2.

one of his longest essays to a defense of Blake's work. He sees Blake as a man crying in the wilderness of his time. Yeats says that Blake lived in a time when educated people believed that they amused themselves with books of imagination but that they "made their souls" by listening to sermons. Blake announced the religion of art. The arts are religious because the imaginative arts awaken "sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike and that sympathy is the forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ."[31] In Yeats's explanation of Blake's doctrine of the imagination, the imagination frees man from the mortality of mere sense knowledge and opens to him the immortality of beauty. Imagination binds men to one another by opening the secret doors of all hearts.[32]

Yeats believed that in the "Prophetic Works" Blake spoke "confusedly and obscurely because he spoke of things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world about him".[33]

> [Blake] was a symbolist who had to invent his symbols ... He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand. Had he been a Catholic of Dante's time he would have been well content with Mary and the angels.[34]

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31 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 138.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., pp. 139, 140.

34 Ibid.,p. 140.

Yeats's own statements elevating the artist to a "priesthood", proposing the imagination as an instrument for the remaking of the world, take on a more definite line and lineament when they are seen against the Blakean background.

In Blake the imaginative arts were " ... the greatest of Divine revelations".[35] In Yeats they were almost endowed with the character of a religious sect. Yeats seems to see the imagination as a guiding spirit, filling the emotions of an artistic priesthood with divine revelations. Yeats saw in Blake the beginnings of an age which would seek to establish a tradition and a ritual. He looks to a time when the artist, as he purifies his mind with elaborate art, will become, " ... as all the great mystics have believed, a vessel of the creative power of God".[36]

SHELLEY

Yeats's attitudes toward art were his bias, a bias which generally welcomed its friends and ignored its foes. Shelley's emphasis on the imagination and his ardor for reform were undoubtedly factors which attracted Yeats to the ethereal zealot. Yeats devoted an essay to an analysis of Shelley's philosophy of poetry. He discusses Shelley's portrayal of regeneration in "Prometheus Unbound".

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35 Ibid., p. 138.

36 Ibid., pp. 248, 249.

Regeneration is considered in terms of Yeats's own theories. He believed that Shelley's meaning went much deeper than the reform of a political dreamer, that it had higher destinies than Godwin's Political Justice could contain. Yeats sees Shelley's concept of liberty as dependant upon a state of intellectual beauty, a state which would not come to its perfection until Time was laid to its grave in eternity.[37]

Shelley's concept of the poet's vision of the future is reviewed by Yeats. The poet was a prophet who could defy Time's limitations. The poet, in beholding the present intensely, could foresee the future in the present. The poet's thoughts were the germs of the flowers and the fruits of a latter day. Modern England had not seen the flowering of these germs because it had forgotten that first principles belong to the imagination. The efforts of the mechanist and the political economist are efforts which flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty and, therefore, exasperate justice. Yeats comments on his summary by saying that the speaker of these things "might almost be Blake, who held that the Reason not only created Ugliness, but all other evils".[38]

As Yeats develops his essay on Shelley's philosophy, he includes Shelley among those who receive their creative

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37 Ibid., pp. 81, 82.

38 Ibid., pp. 82, 83.

impulses from the revelations of the great mind. Yeats does not merely imply that Shelley was somehow involved just as other imaginative men were involved. He attempts to draw from Shelley's philosophy a direct connection with his own system of the great mind and the great memory. In a brief and rather strained explanation Yeats uncovers in Shelley a belief that his spirit of Intellectual Beauty eventually finds its way to the great memory. There, "not merely happy souls, but all beautiful places and movements and gestures and events, when we think they have ceased to be, have become portions of the eternal".[39]

Yeats believed that Shelley "seems in his speculations to have lit on that memory of nature that the visionaries claim for the foundation of their knowledge".[40] Yeats finds evidence in support of this appraisal in Shelley's work "Queen Mab". He says:

> The passage where Queen Mab awakes 'all knowledge of the past', and the good and evil 'events of old and wonderous times', was no more doubtless than a part of the machinery of the poem, but all the machineries of poetry are parts of the convictions of antiquity, and readily become again convictions in minds that brood over them with visionary intensity.[41]

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39 Ibid., p. 89.

40 Ibid., p. 90.

41 Ibid., pp. 90, 91.

Yeats sees the ministering spirits who attend Intellectual Beauty as corresponding to the Elemental Spirits of mediaeval Europe or the Sidhe of ancient Ireland. These spirits change continually in Shelley's poetry as they change in the visions of the mystics or in the imaginings of the common people. Yeats mentions a number of Shelley's images, the "gleams of a remoter world", the "visions swift and sweet and quaint", and the "golden genii who spoke to the poets of Greece in dreams". Others he mentions are:

> ...'the phantoms' which become the forms of the arts when 'the mind, arising bright from the embrace of beauty', 'casts on them the gathered rays which are reality'; 'the guardians' who move in 'the atmosphere of human thought', as 'the birds within the wind, or the fish within the wave,' ...[42]

It is immediately apparent that these phrases in Shelley would appeal to Yeats and it seemed to Yeats that these ministers of beauty and ugliness in Shelley's poetry were much more than mere metaphors or picturesque phrases. Yeats states that it was perhaps Shelley's ignorance of the more traditional forms of the spirits which gave Shelley's poetry its "air of rootless phantasy".[43] Yet Shelley was not completely without some background in magic. Yeats speaks of Shelley's early interest in its traditions and

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42 Ibid., pp. 91, 92.

43 Ibid., p. 93.

philosophy. Yeats concludes that Shelley was a poet working under the power of the subconcious, allowing " ... the subconcious life to lay its hands so firmly upon the rudder of his imagination that he was little concious of the abstract meaning of the images that rose in what seemed the idleness of his mind".[44] Yeats's summary of the philosophy of Shelley's poetry is a reassertion of Yeats's own theory of the imagination receiving symbols, as it were, through the subconcious.

The similarities in the thought of Blake, Shelley, and Yeats are pointed out by Yeats himself. They each exault the imagination. All three look toward the remaking of the world. In Shelley and Blake the boldness of assertion, the great claims which were made for the powers of the imagination were strongly linked with reforming zeal.[45] In Yeats the zeal became, after the adolescence of his early essays, a quiet hope.

UNITY

> Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far
> away from land;
> Romantic fish swam in nets coming to
> the hand
> What are all those fish that lie gasping
> on the strand?[46]

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44 Ibid., p. 96.

45 B. Ifor Evans, Tradition and Romanticism (London, Methuen, 1940), p. 205.

46 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 236.

Unity was a main concern in much of Yeats's later work. He saw it as an ideal for individuals and for peoples. Yeats found this unity of personality, or Unity of Being as he called it, embodied principally in the men of the Renaissance or in the characters of Chaucer. The men of these times combined within themselves blends of art and effortlessness, intellect and physical vigar and grace, humanity and sensitivity to the supernatural. Yeats believed that individuals attain Unity of Being in a society which possesses a similar balance of values, a society in which all social levels share inherited traditions and beliefs.[47] Reuben Brower expresses it:

> Unity of Being implies Unity of Culture. The enemy of Unity is 'abstraction', the overdevelopment of one aspect of personality, or - in society - excessive specialization.[48]

Yeats expressed his concept of personal unity, the balancing of one aspect of personality with the development of its dramatic counterpart, through the symbol of the Mask. His concept of social becoming, social movement, was expressed through a system which used the symbols of the phases of the moon and the gyre.

In his Autobiography Yeats discusses that time,

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47 Harrison, p. 627.

48 Ibid.

"somewhere about 1450", when men attained to Unity of Being. He saw this period in history as a time when men achieved personality in great numbers. There was a balance within society, the prince and the ploughman sharing thought and feeling.[49] This balance was disturbed, however, and Yeats mentions the effects of the disturbance:

> Then the scattering came, the seeding of the poppy ... and for a time personality seemed but the stronger for it. Shakespeare's people make all things serve their passion, and that passion is for the moment the whole energy of their being, ... the mind is a dark well, no surface, depth only.[50]

Illustrating this point and tracing effects to our own time, Yeats recalls two portraits which hung in the Dublin National Gallery. The one was a portrait of some Venetian gentleman by Strozzi, the other was Mr. Sargent's painting of President Wilson. The Venetian gentleman's thought draws life from his whole body. Whatever thought that broods in his dark eyes feeds as a flame feeds upon a candle - " ... should that thought be changed the pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks".[51] "President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are steady and intent ...", all else, the flesh around the mouth, the

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49 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 193.

50 Ibid., pp. 193, 194.

51 Ibid., p. 194.

hands, are dead. The clothes suggest no movement except the brushed and folded mechanical routine of the valet. Yeats sees the Venetian gentleman and the American president as representative of their time. For the Venetian, "... all was an energy flowing outward from nature itself, ... there man's mind and body were predominantly subjective". In Wilson " ... all is the anxious study and slight deflection of external force, all is objective".[52]

Yeats elaborated on the theme of the subjective and objective mind. In his symbolism, which involved the symbol of the phases of the moon, Yeats uses the full moon, the "bright part of the moon's disk", to represent the subjective mind living in all aspects of its being. The dark side of the moon symbolizes the objective mind. Yeats worked this symbol into a system which embraced the individual and history.[53]

In this system, the mid-renaissance was approximate to the time of the full moon. As time passes, and the moon passes through its phases, the dark side of the moon is toward earth; this phase approaches Yeats's own time and " ... typical men have grown more ugly and more argumentative, ... the fatal face has faded before Cromwell's warty opinionated

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52 Ibid.

53 Harrison, p. 628.

head".[54] Reason, the argumentative faculty, the faculty of opinion, then causes man to be objective, or in Yeats's understanding of the term, to be external. Men today are unlike the Venetian gentleman whose fatal face reveals the life and the movings of his entire being.

According to Yeats's system it is now the twenty-third night and history is moving in the darkness of the moon.[55]

The metaphor of the gyre is also a part of Yeats's system. It represents a cone-like spiral which moves from subjectivity to objectivity. Reuben Brower describes the movement of the symbol:

> Like the phases of the moon, it represents movement from subjectivity (the point) to objectivity (the base), or vice versa. In history, progress in one direction is immediately followed by its opposite ... in the Greco-Roman cycle ending with Christ's birth, men and their culture became more and more 'objective' until the single personality scarecely mattered. The coming of Christ initiated a movement of increasing emphasis on the self that reached its climax in the Renaissance.[56]

A more detailed statement of this system belongs to a study of Yeats's Vision. It is sufficient to observe that with this, as with so much else in his thought, Yeats's solutions were symbolic and they were individual.

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54 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 194, 195.

55 Harrison, p. 628.

56 Ibid.

TRADITION

> Sing the peasantry, and then
> Hard riding country gentlemen,
> The holiness of monks, and after
> Porter-drinkers' randy laughter
> . . . . . .
> Cast your mind on other days[57]

While Yeats worked on the elaboration of a private system of symbols, his more general concepts were always settled in the traditional past. B. Ifor Evans says, "One may sometimes suspect that he would have preferred to be a poet in the days when Christendom was united".[58] Yeats himself instructs:

> If we, [the artists] would find a company of our own way of thinking, we must go backward to turreted walls, to courts, to high rocky places, to little walled towns, to jesters ... to all those who understood that life is not lived, if not lived for contemplation or excitment.[59]

Yeats discusses the kinds of men who would hold to tradition. He mentions three types who have made beautiful things. The aristocracy has made beautiful manners because "their place in the world puts them above the fear of life". The people of the country have made beautiful stories and beliefs because "they have nothing to lose and so do not

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57 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 343.

58 B. Ifor Evans, p. 203.

59 W. B. Yeats, Essays, pp. 311, 312.

fear. The artists have made all the rest because Providence has filled them with recklessness." These three all look backward to tradition for "being without fear they have held to whatever has pleased them".[60]

In his Autobiography Yeats makes a passing reference to the poet's possession of the past, "A great lady is as simple as a good poet. Neither possesses anything that is not ancient and their own."[61]

Forrest Reid compares Yeats to Milton. He says that he is closer to Milton than to any other poet. "With both, poetry is sacred, something more than life, a faith, an enthusiasm, a passionate religion."[62]

Yeats certainly considered art more than a craft. He had Milton's dedication to art as a sublime vocation. Yeats saw the poet in possession of an ancient and regal authority. He writes:

> ... [the poet] alone can know the ancient records and be like some mystic courtier who has stolen the keys from the girdle of time and can wander where it please him amid the splendours of ancient courts.
>
> Sometimes, it may be, he is permitted the licence of cap and bell, or even the madman's bunch of straws, but he never forgets or leaves at home the seal and the signature.[63]

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60 Ibid., p.310.

61 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 312.

62 Forrest Reid, W. B. Yeats: A Critical Study, (New York, Dodd Mead, 1915), p. 251.

63 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 313.

Yeats felt that in the Middle Ages, and in more ancient times the village lay within the walls of the court and the ploughman was united with the courtiers in a recognition of the artist's seal and signature. He says:

> I delighted in every age where poet and artist confined themselves gladly to some inherited subject matter known to the whole people, for ... in man and race alike there is something called Unity of Being.[64]

Yeats referred to these earlier ages of cultural unity as the "unbroken days". He says that a poet in these days could possess "all the subtlety of a Shelley, and yet use no image unknown among the common people".[65] In an art that was brought out of true personality, whether from the business of the day or from the adventure of religion, there was little separation between sacred and common things. The arts moved from passion to contemplation, from the daily conversation of the ploughman to that of the prince.[66]

Yeats found his models of unity in the past, where the energies of those who made beautiful things were blended, where the imagining of the country people and the authority of the aristocracy harmonized in a culture whose traditions were captured and sung by an artist who could celebrate the

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64 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 128.

65 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 366.

66 Ibid.

IRELAND

'I am of Ireland
And the Holy Land of Ireland
. . . . . .
Come dance with me in Ireland'[67]

Yeats was not interested in an international art. He says, in fact, that he could not endure it. He believed that a nation's unity came from its tradition, from a shared mythology that bound the nation to rock and hill. Ireland, Yeats held, had within itself the sources and the means to create a great national literature. Ireland's literary traditions, its imaginative stories, were known among the uneducated classes and Yeats hoped that they might be made current among the educated. In this way Ireland might live in cultural unity. The political passion of the nation could then be so deepened that all, poet and artist, day-labourer and craftsman, would accept a common design.[68]

Yeats believed that his common design could come in the Ireland of his time for in his time an aloof proud aristocracy and an imaginative storied country people were well defined and colorful elements in the Irish scene. Yeats accepted these elements as the remnents of a glorious past and he hoped somehow to weave them into a festive garment for future wear.

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67 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 262.

68 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 131.

Yeats was in his early twenties when he began to scheme for Ireland's art. He hoped to seal the soft wax with the right image.[69] In the beginning, however, Yeats was less than certain just what the right image would be.

At first Yeats consciously sought a popular Irish style. He says he set himself to the task with a deliberateness that surprised him, for he was never certain that even patriotism was more than an impure desire for an artist.[70] Still, Yeats had had his mind and heart filled with the romantic Irish political ballads, and though he knew the authors wrote poorly, still he honored these Irishmen.[71] He thought that if someone brought music and colour to the ballads others might "catch fire from him" and there would be a great school of ballad poetry in Ireland.[72]

For a period Yeats rejected the deliberate and planned poetry of the coteries; he wanted to write 'popular poetry' like those Irish poets whom he had loved. He thought he should write "without care" and he trusted that this art would come with "a gusty energy ... out of the right heart".[73] Intentions notwithstanding, a careless and gusty energy was

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69 Ibid., p. 68.

70 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 4.

71 Ibid., p. 3.

72 Ibid., p. 4.

73 Ibid., p. 5.

not a part of Yeats's makeup. He soon rejected the course he had chosen. He says that it was an illusion which he might have maintained only if he had been a believer in that straight-forward logic of newspaper articles.[74] Yeats explains this decision with the lack of straight-forwardness which is characteristic of him:

> ... I always knew that the line of Nature is crooked, that, though we dig the canal beds as straight as we can, the rivers run hither and thither in their wildness.[75]

In the end Yeats dismissed popular Irish art because he saw it as an art attempting to make its way without the benefit of either written or unwritten tradition.[76]

For Yeats, good poetry, whether it be the poetry of the coteries or the true poetry of the people, presupposed a tradition. The written traditions of the coteries and the unwritten tradition of the people, alike, were strange and obscure. They did not possess that "manifest logic, that clear rhetoric of the 'popular', [they] glimmer with thoughts and images whose 'ancestors were stout and wise', anigh to Paradise".[77]

The seal, then, which Yeats sought for Ireland was not

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74 Ibid., p. 6.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., pp. 7, 8, 9.

77 Ibid., p. 10.

to be the popular seal. Popular poetry was of a journalistic sort and he was content finally to leave it with those who wished to cultivate the middle class. The unwritten tradition of the people which was found in the fable and the written tradition of the coteries was the right image which Yeats hoped to set upon the soft wax of Ireland. He comments:

> ... all the great Masters have understood that there cannot be great art without the little limited life of the fable, ... and the rich far wandering imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it.[78]

Tradition, then, was necessary for great art. This concept, and others mentioned above were contained in the essay "What is Popular Poetry". In his essay "The Celtic Element" Yeats discusses that fabled belief in the half-seen world as one of the basic elements of Irish tradition.

Yeats begins his essay by reviewing Ernest Renan's assessment of the Celtic element in literature. According to Yeats's commentary, Renan saw the Celt communing intimately with lower creation and possessing a "realistic naturalism, a love of nature for herself". The Celt has a history of belief in the infinite, a history which is a long lament of exile and flight.[79] Yeats admits to these

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78 Ibid., pp. 266, 267.

79 Ibid., p. 213.

as Celtic characteristics and he also accepts Mathew Arnold's comments on the Celt. Yeats says that Arnold agreed Ernest Renan's views and elaborated on them. Arnold also held the notion of the Celtic passion for nature. He traced it to a sense of nature's mystery rather than her beauty. Yeats summarizes Arnold:

> ... Celtic imaginativeness and melancholy are alike, 'a passionate, turbulent, indomintable reaction against the despotism of fact'. The Celt is not melancholy ... from 'a perfectly definite motive', but because of something about him, 'unaccountable, defiant and titanic'.[80]

Though Yeats does not seem to disagree with these summaries, he does feel that they might be restated a little, to see "where they are helpful and where they are hurtful".[81]

Yeats speculated that the traits mentioned by both Renan and Arnold should not be so confined to the Celt; Yeats saw them a qualities common to any ancient people. He submits that once every people in the world believed in the mystery of nature. Once trees, foxes, wolves, bears, clouds, pools, almost all things under the sun and moon were thought to be changeable and filled with mystery, were, indeed, thought to be divine. All old literatures were full of these

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80 Ibid., p. 214.

81 Ibid., pp. 214, 215.

or like imaginings. The ancient folk tradition delighted in unbounded and immortal things.[82] This delight sprang from the fountain of passion and belief. Yeats concludes:

> 'The Celtic movement', as I understand it, is principally the opening of this fountain and none can measure of how great importance it may be to coming times. ... It comes at a time when the imagination of the world is as ready, as it was at the coming of the tales of Arthur and of the Grail, for a new intoxication. The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century. ... The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, ... They must, as all religious thought has always done, utter themselves through legends ... [83]

Yeats, then, saw the Celtic element as an ancient impulse which united the pagan sense of the mystery of nature with the artistic folk tradition of the people. Aquainted with ancient culture through reading he had done, Yeats accepted the evidences which proposed that ancient peoples worshiped nature and that the ceremonies of this worship were expressed in their artistic and cultural works.

Yeats had the support of historians in this basic premise. Christopher Dawson writes " ... the study of primitive culture is intimately bound up with that of primitive religion".[84]

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82 Ibid., pp. 215, 220.

83 Ibid., pp. 230, 231

84 As quoted by Daniel A. O'Connor, The Relation Between Religion and Culture According to Christopher Dawson, (Montreal, Librairie Saint-Viateur, 1952), p. 3.

Yeats, in his early readings, had probed into the cultural life of ancient India, Japan, and Greece. If his studies had not been systematic, they were, at least, intense. Unity was always the important goal for Yeats. He sought it in his own thought, trying to forge all of his concepts into the ideal of a total culture which would embrace nation, religion, and art. Ireland, he hoped, was ready for such a total unity.

It is true Ireland still clung to the things of antiquity. Rural Ireland, in particular, possessed a sense of village community living. Yeats believed that the west of Ireland, Galway, Sligo, and the Aran Islands housed the Celt in the circumstances of communal unity. Yeats says:

> There is in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions ... . One could still, if one had genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece.[85]

Yeats had high hope; he saw the Celtic element creating a truly national literature which would be rooted in the people's tradition. Beyond this he saw the Celt contributing a new mythology to the literature of the English speaking world. It was to be "a new intoxication for the imagination of the world", to come at a time when the world was ready.[86] Neither the world, nor Ireland, however, were

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85 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 263.

86 Ibid., p. 230.

ready. The image came too late, or, perhaps, too soon. In the end it was not as he hoped. Ireland's Catholism, the faith of its people, held no hidden desire to experiment with an ancient pagan mythology. The energies of the educated aristocracy, those few who might have understood his meaning, were claimed by the demands of the political struggle. Yeats continued to love Ireland and to praise her before the world, but gradually he less and less expected the success of the artistic plot that he had schemed. Randal Jarrell commented that Yeats wanted to make "a romantic Utopia out of a legendary past".[87] The Utopia never came into being. Still, T. S. Eliot recognizes that in his " ... literary nationalism ... Yeats ... performed a great service to the English language".[88]

When he began his planning for Ireland, Yeats had questioned the purity of his desire. He thought that perhaps even patriotism might have no place with the artist. Yeats returned to this position for he says:

> ... life is greater than any cause ... we artists, who are the servants not of any cause but of mere naked life ... became ... protesting individual voices. Ireland's great moment had passed and she had filled no roomy vessels with strong sweet wine ...[89]

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87 Randal Jarrell, "The Development of Yeats's Sense of Reality", Southern Review, VII, 3 (Winter, 1942), p. 663.

88 T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary", Criterion, XIV, 57 (July, 1935), p. 612.

89 W. B. Yeats, Essays, pp. 321, 322.

MARKET CARTS

> Although I shelter from the rain
> Under a broken tree
> My chair was nearest to the fire
> In every company
> That talked of love or politics ...[90]

In Yeats is seen the paradox of a man who admired and praised Blake and Shelley and yet who prayed that he might somehow be rescued from idealism and abstraction, that he might become like Chaucer, his imagination preoccupied with the drama life.[91] In "Discoveries", one of the later groupings of essays in the 1924 edition, Yeats approaches more closely than ever before to that preoccupation with life which he says that he sought.

Yeats saw two ways open to literature. He discusses these:

> There are two ways before literature - upward into ever-growing subtlety, ... until at last, it may be, a new agreement among refined and studious men gives birth to a new passion, and what seems literature becomes religion; or downward, taking the soul with us until all is simplified and solidified again.[92]

Yeats considered the choice before literature to be a choice between the way of the bird, going upward until

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90 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 45.

91 W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 127.

92 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 330.

common eyes have lost sight of it, or the way of the market carts. He cautions that if the choice is for the market the artist must see to it that the soul is tight within him for he must remember that the bird's song is beautiful. If the artist finds that the soul begins to slip away he must pursue it. "Shelley's Chapel of the Morning Star is better than Burns's beer-house."[93] Yeats admits, however, that the beer-house has its place. We go to it at the end of a weary day and surely it is always better than "that uncomfortable place where there is no beer, the machine shop of the realists.[94]

As much as he loves the song of the bird and the Chapel of the Morning Star, Yeats does bring himself to acknowledge that he wearies a bit and feels the need to compensate his imagination for the historical and geographical facts of reality. He analyses the factors which would make art impersonal:

> An art may become impersonal because it has too much circumstance or too little, because the world is too little or too much with it, because it is too near the ground or too far up among the branches.[95]

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93 Ibid., p. 331.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., p. 337.

In his discourses in "Discoveries" Yeats seems to be attempting to root the tree in the earth of experience and yet at the same time to nest with the bird in its branches. One of the poetic devices for following the flight of the bird, for obtaining the effect of loftiness, has been the use of strange and far-a-way places. This use grew bitter to Yeats and he admits to moments when he could no longer believe in the reality of imaginings that were not set in the "minute life of long familiar things".[96]

There is a passage in "Discoveries which seems to unite Yeats's two choices for art. The world of lofty ideals and the world of daily experiences achieve a unity in Yeats's expression of a personal religious belief. He writes:

> I am orthodox and pray for the resurrection of the body, and am certain that a man should find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor, and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so gradual a change that he may never discover, no, not even in ecstasy itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from Primum Mobile, Supernal Eden ... over all.[97]

In his entire concept of art Yeats scarcely separated art and religion; religious belief was necessary for true culture and the soul found its rest amid the long familiar things of the body. Yeats was both a religious seeker and a poet. He did not assume either of these roles casually, nor

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96 Ibid., p. 367.

97 Ibid., p. 368.

did he live them separately. His theories of art and culture are theories which continually strive to unite the perfections of art with the perfections of eternity. For him it was all one.

> ... for there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection, and it sometimes has the form of religious life and sometimes of the artistic life.[98]

98 Ibid., p. 255.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROSE STYLE

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries[1]

A consideration of Yeats's prose style is fitting in any study of the man as an essayist. The thoughts and interests of a writer naturally modify his style of expression. In this regard Yeats is the rule, not the exception, for in Yeats the style of the prose is the style of the man. Yeats's interests reached back in time to other ages and his prose style is characterized by qualities more typical of other times. Yeats's style is reminiscent of the seventeenth century, suggestive of Dryden's Prefaces. It is like a "garment worn in the old fashioned personal manner with a combination of elegance and ease".[2] Yeats's style was like his person. It has been described as "supple, mannered, and stately".[3] It has also been said that when Yeats was in personal sympathy with the subject he was quite

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1 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 125.

2 Hall and Steinmann, p. 30.

3 Gwynn, p. 220.

illuminating.[4] While the above mentioned traits are basic elements of Yeats's style, it cannot but be noticed that the illuminating qualities are sometimes half hidden by the embroidery.

In his philosophy of art and letters Yeats had little use for logic. There is little evidence of it in his work. When he is illuminating it is not with the direct illuminations of a logician and the manner is not always one which could be characterized by ease. Consider:

> Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone, - and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight as fully, away from rhythm and pattern, - there are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions; and outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols. Most things belong to one or another kind, according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them, for symbols, associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the playthings of the allegorist or the pendant, and soon pass away.[5]

This passage does not strike one with its illuminative quality. It is true that in later passages Yeats develops these ideas with concrete illustrations of colours and the emotions often associated with them, but the initial

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4 Forrest Reid, W. B. Yeats: A Critical Study, (New York, Dodd Mead, 1915), p. 233.

5 William Butler Yeats, Essays (New York, Macmillan, 1924), pp. 197, 198.

introduction to the concepts is vague and confusing. The one trait which the passage seems to lack is that of ease. Certainly the reader is not at ease with it.

Yeats's extravagance had been commented upon in a preceeding Chapter.[6] If he was often extravagant, he was hardly ever general. He modified and expanded his thought continually and this modification is another characteristic of his prose style. By modifying Yeats avoids that "straight forward logic" of the journalists and follows along in that "crooked line of nature".[7] The reader must follow closely or his own line of comprehension is lost in a maze of qualifying clauses. An example is taken from Yeats's essay on the philosophy of Shelley's poetry. Yeats discusses Shelley's moon symbolism and contrasts it with Blake's choice of the sun symbol:

> It was therefore natural that Blake, who was always praising energy, and all exalted overflowing of oneself, and who thought art an impassioned labour to keep men from doubt and despondency, and womans's love an evil when it would trammel man's will, should see the poetic genius not a woman star but in the Sun, ...[8]

The above two quotations were taken from essays which dealt in some way with mystic subjects. There are other

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6 See Chapter III.

7 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 6.

8 Ibid., p. 114.

passages in these same essays which are quite clear and are concise. Often, however, when first reading one of Yeats's essays which deals somehow with mysticism, the general impression is that of a rather forced and strained style, a style burdened by the task of giving flesh to an all ellusive spiritualism.

While Yeats seems guilty of obscurity in his essays dealing with spiritualistic subjects, he is direct and commanding when his subject is one of artistic criticism. Ernest Boyd comments, "When [Yeats] speaks of literature he is clear and convincing."[9] The essays "What is Popular Poetry", "Ireland and the Arts", and "The Celtic Element in Literature" contain many passages which possess clarity as well as beauty. Consider this passage from "The Celtic Element":

> Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine ... that ... almost all things under the sun and the moon, and the sun and the moon, were ... divine and changeable. They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water-jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels, ... while they dreamed of so great a mystery in little things they believed that the waving of a hand, or of a bough, enough to trouble far-off hearts, or hood the moon with darkness.[10]

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9 Boyd, p. 185.

10 W. B. Yeats, Essays, p. 215.

In "What is Popular Poetry" Yeats practices a direct and marshalled style. He gives example after example to illustrate his points. He speaks of his own verses being "too full of the reds and yellows Shelley gathered in Italy".[11] Burns sprang up from farmers who had created "a little tradition of their own, less a tradition of ideas than of speech".[12] Longfellow was popular because he told a story whose understanding required nothing but his verses.[13] Yeats moves through this essay easily and his style advances illustration after illustration to develop and support his belief in tradition as an essential element of literature.

In "Art and Ideas" Yeats is almost conversational in tone. He has vacated the podium and the reader is invited to join him in the conversation of the drawing room. He is the artist-historian, relaxed in an apparent security of conviction. Considering his Anglo-Irish background, the conversation is quite remarkable:

> I think that before the religious change that followed on the Renaissance men were greatly preoccupied with their sins, and that today they are troubled by other men's sins, and that this trouble has created a moral enthusiasm so full of illusion that art, knowing itself for sanctity's scapegrace brother, cannot be of the party. We have but held

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11 Ibid., p. 5.

12 Ibid., p. 7.

13 Ibid.

> to our ancient Church, where there is an altar and no pulpit ... and turned away from the too great vigour of those, who, living for mutual improvement, have a pulpit and no altar.[14]

The prose style of this passage has a simple and suggestive quality about it and yet it builds a sure structure for the rather casual unfolding of the thought.

H. S. Krans felt that Yeats's prose was characterized by a vocal quality, flexable and easy moving, having the "breathing-places of living speech".[15] "Living speech" is an excellant characterization; it allows for Yeats's habit of continual thought development within the sentence. With the exception of his work on mysticism, this appraisal can be applied to the greater portion of his prose. The other possible exception might be those passages in which Yeats deals with the spirit of his age. Here the breathing sometimes becomes heavy and labored. Irritation with the counting house harressed Yeats. The bargainer's coin was always at hand. He refused to bank the currency, but neither would he bury it, returning repeatedly to the subject in an effort to spend or bankrupt its powers.

The sum of Yeats's prose style is no less difficult to tabulate than is the sum of his thought. The style responds always to the thought. If the style is sometimes involved

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14 Ibid., p. 435.

15 Krans, p. 186.

and elaborate, it is because the thought is so. In way of summary, however, it can be said that the total quality of Yeats's prose shows a belief in , and a reverence for words. The words, themselves, are never toyed with, abused, or handled carelessly. They are used as an honorable vehicle of expression and are given due respect by one who believed that through the word unseen reality was allowed utterance. Yeats will probably never be considered a master of prose but he was a high-minded masterful gentleman and his prose possesses those same mannerly traits of self-possession and selfless intention, of exhuberance and restraint which were so much a part of his person. Allowed the bias of his concepts and interests, Yeats's appeal is the universal appeal of taste and tact.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> Poet and sculptor do the work
> Nor let the modish painter shirk
> What his great forefathers did,
> Bring the soul of man to God. [1]

The above lines are taken from the poem, "Under Ben Bulben". It is one of the last poems Yeats wrote before his death in 1939. As such it may be taken as a final statement of his beliefs.

One of the major objections to Yeats's thought and to his theories of art has been the repeated criticism that he allows no room for the "edifying function" of literature. It was John Eglinton who phrased it so and who added that edification could not, "... with impunity be entirely neglected as it was by Yeats".[2] T. S. Eliot was also critical of Yeats on this score. He felt that Mr. Yeats's "'supernatural world' was the wrong supernatural world. It was not a world of spiritual significance, not a world of real good and evil, of holiness or sin, but a highly sophisticated

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1 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 342.

2 John Eglinton, Irish Literary Portraits (London, Macmillan, 1935), p. 9.

lower mythology."[3] Forrest Reid speaks of the "flame and spiritual ardour" which characterizes Yeats's work. Reid has reservations, however. He says:

> One is carried away by its power and beauty, by the unfailing felicity of its expression, its splendid poetry, its magnificant imagery and it is only gradually that one becomes aware of something that is lacking in it. That something ... is largely ethical.[4]

These criticisms were written several years prior to 1939. Yet the line "Bring the soul of man to God", in the poem "Under Ben Bulben" does not introduce a new note in Yeats's work. The essays contain many passages which agree with this evaluation of the artist's role. Still it was to these very concepts in the essays that the critics were directing their objections. Yeats saw the artist leading the soul of man to God and yet, at the same time, Yeats is, in a sense, amoral. Ethics and edification have no portion in his theory. Actually Yeats is consistent. Within the framework of his own thought, a rejection of the ethical function of literature is the natural development of his rejection of the "criticism of life" theory of art. Man is edified by virtues and by ideals portrayed through the characterization of the life of a mortal man. Ethics is the science of mortal life.

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3 T. S. Eliot, After Strange Gods (London, Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 46.

4 Reid, p. 217.

In Yeats's theory, art should not be a criticism of mortal life but instead should be a revelation of divine life. Yeats's fit subjects were not the successes and the failures of the finite life; they were the truths and the beauties of the infinite. Yeats would lead the soul of man to God not by instructing man but by revealing God.

Throughout his work Yeats expressed an interest in common people. The interest was not pretended. Yet, here again, the interest was not centered on the daily mortal experiences of these people. It was centered on their timeless immortal imaginings. Yeats saw the country people as he saw the primitive peoples, each shared somehow in those imaginative impulses which were the movements of the great Mind and Memory.

Imagination was the center of Yeats's theory of art. It was the instrument and the means through which people, particularly simple, unegotistical people, received ancient beauty, truth, and wisdom. Yeats searched his own country and the histories of other countries for peoples and places which celebrated a unity of imaginative possessions and, in the beginning, he hoped that he might see a renewal of that unity in the Celtic Revivial.

Yeats defies summary just as he defied classification. Certainly, in the strictest philosophical sense, he was an idealist, Platonic in his concepts. Though he loved to trace the worn tracks of the market carts and to warm himself

by the old peasant's hearth, he was more at home in a world of ideas, in Plato's world or in Shelley's Chapel of the Morning Star. His energies were spent in pursuit of the flight of the bird. A synthesis of these two elements of literature, the folk and the ideal, was Yeats's critical goal.

In politics, too, Yeats was an idealist. He stands with those who envisioned a utopia. For Yeats, however, the utopian values were largely aesthetic. His hope was for a nation dedicated to the highest level of intellectual endeavor and delight. His was a utopia made of dream and dream's signs and symbols. Yet, if Yeats's world was often clothed in shadows, it was not without substance and some elements of astute prediction. Many of Yeats's censures have gained a latter day support. Realism, while it has achieved its bleak victory, has, in its very directions, spoken eloquently for Yeats's abhorrence.

Yeats was no fool, taken in their entirety, with their qualifications and extentions, his theories are a great deal less than foolish. His obvious sincerity and the basic good will of his intentions do much to gain him a sympathic hearing. Yeats's esoteric flight took him far, but he was never lost beyond the clouds. Friends observe that he was never quite the distracted romantic. Edmund Dulac comments that he never blundered in dress or gesture, never missed

a train, never fell into a pond, nor lost a precious thing.[5] F. R. Higgins recalls fifteen years of acquaintance with Yeats and views him a close and loyal friend, generous, frank, " ... full of jest and humour, a magnetic personality, always arrogantly the Irish poet."[6] Yeats the Irish Poet is secure. The merit of his poetry has assured him a position of permanence. Certainly Yeats the Essayist, also, deserves some measure of permanence. Yeats's concepts live well with time. His manner of speech compliments readers of times other than his own. While these are not the sole measures of an author's worth, they are stern ones.

Basically Yeats was a supernaturalist and a religious seeker. The paths which he chose for travel were remote and commonly unknown; yet, they too, had their own ancient tradition. It is true that he often dwelt in a tower and that the tower stood isolated when viewed in the noon day sun when business talked and lunched. The modern reader must take a holiday. He must journey to Sligo and he must wait there until the sun softens and twilight casts the tower's shadow toward village and farm. If the scene seems less than real it might be remembered that twilight has touched it. The day has its seasons. Man lives through them all, twilight no less than noon.

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5 Gwynn, p. 143.

6 Ibid., p. 154.

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