

# The Rhetoric of Romanticism

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# 1

## Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image

IN THE history of Western literature, the importance of the image as a dimension of poetic language does not remain constant. One could conceive of an organization of this history in terms of the relative prominence and the changing structure of metaphor. French poetry of the sixteenth century is obviously richer and more varied in images than that of the seventeenth, and medieval poetry of the fifteenth century has a different kind of imagery than that of the thirteenth. The most recent change remote enough to be part of history takes place toward the end of the eighteenth century and coincides with the advent of romanticism. In a statement of which equivalences can be found in all European literatures, Wordsworth reproaches Pope for having abandoned the imaginative use of figural diction in favor of a merely decorative allegorization. Meanwhile the term *imagination* steadily grows in importance and complexity in the critical as well as in the poetic texts of the period. This evolution in poetic terminology—of which parallel instances could easily be found in France and in Germany—corresponds to a profound change

in the texture of poetic diction. The change often takes the form of a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects that restores to the language the material substantiality which had been partially lost. At the same time, in accordance with a dialectic that is more paradoxical than may appear at first sight, the structure of the language becomes increasingly metaphorical and the image—be it under the name of symbol or even of myth—comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style. This tendency is still prevalent today, among poets as well as among critics. We find it quite natural that theoretical studies such as, for example, those of Gaston Bachelard in France, of Northrop Frye in America, or of William Empson in England should take the metaphor as their starting point for an investigation of literature in general—an approach that would have been inconceivable for Boileau, for Pope, and even still for Diderot.

An abundant imagery coinciding with an equally abundant quantity of natural objects, the theme of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature, such is the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism. The tension between the two polarities never ceases to be problematic. We shall try to illustrate the structure of this latent tension as it appears in some selected poetic passages.

In a famous poem, Hölderlin speaks of a time at which "the gods" will again be an actual presence to man:

. . . nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes,  
Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen,  
entstehn.

("Brot und Wein," stanza 5)

Taken by itself, this passage is not necessarily a statement about the image: Hölderlin merely speaks of words ("Worte"), not of images ("Bilder"). But the lines themselves contain the image of the flower in the simplest and most explicit of all metaphorical structures, as a straightforward simile introduced by the conjunction *wie*. That the words referred to are not those of ordinary speech is clear from the verb: to origi-

nate ("entstehn"). In everyday use words are exchanged and put to a variety of tasks, but they are not supposed to originate anew; on the contrary, one wants them to be as well-known, as "common" as possible, to make certain that they will obtain for us what we want to obtain. They are used as established signs to confirm that something is recognized as being the same as before; and re-cognition excludes pure origination. But in poetic language words are not used as signs, not even as names, but in order to *name*: "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" (Mallarmé) or "erfand er für die Dinge eigene Namen" (Stefan George): poets know of the act of naming—"nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes"—as implying a return to the source, to the pure motion of experience at its beginning.

The word "entstehn" establishes another fundamental distinction. The two terms of the simile are not said to be identical with one another (the word = the flower), nor analogous in their general mode of being (the word is like the flower), but specifically in the way they originate (the word originates like the flower).<sup>1</sup> The similarity between the two terms does not reside in their essence (identity), or in their appearance (analogy), but in the manner in which both originate. And Hölderlin is not speaking of any poetic word taken at random, but of an authentic word that fulfills its highest function in naming being as a presence. We could infer, then, that the fundamental intent of the poetic word is to originate in the same manner as what Hölderlin here calls "flowers." The image is essentially a kinetic process: it does not dwell in a static state where the two terms could be separated and reunited by analysis; the first term of the simile (here, "words") has no independent existence, poetically speaking, prior to the metaphorical statement. It originates with the statement, in the manner suggested by the flower image, and its way of being is determined by the manner in which it originates. The metaphor requires that we begin by forgetting all we have previously known about "words"—"donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu"—and then informing the term with a dynamic existence

similar to that which animates the "flowers." The metaphor is not a combination of two entities or experiences more or less deliberately linked together, but one single and particular experience: that of origination.

How do flowers originate? They rise out of the earth without the assistance of imitation or analogy. They do not follow a model other than themselves which they copy or from which they derive the pattern of their growth. By calling them *natural* objects, we mean that their origin is determined by nothing but their own being. Their becoming coincides at all times with the mode of their origination: it is as flowers that their history is what it is, totally defined by their identity. There is no wavering in the status of their existence: existence and essence coincide in them at all times. Unlike words, which originate like something else ("like flowers"), flowers originate like themselves: they are literally what they are, definable without the assistance of metaphor. It would follow then, since the intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower, that it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal.

We can understand origin only in terms of difference: the source springs up because of the need to be somewhere or something else than what is now here. The word "entstehn," with its distancing prefix, equates origin with negation and difference. But the natural object, safe in its immediate being, seems to have no beginning and no end. Its permanence is carried by the stability of its being, whereas a beginning implies a negation of permanence, the discontinuity of a death in which an entity relinquishes its specificity and leaves it behind, like an empty shell. Entities engendered by consciousness originate in this fashion, but for natural entities like the flower, the process is entirely different. They originate out of a being which does not differ from them in essence but contains the totality of their individual manifestations within itself. All particular flowers can at all times establish an immediate identity with an original Flower, of which they are as many particular emanations. The original entity, which has to contain an infinity of manifestations of a common essence, in

an infinity of places and at an infinity of moments, is necessarily transcendental. Trying to conceive of the natural object in terms of origin leads to a transcendental concept of the Idea: the quest for the Idea that takes the natural object for its starting point begins with the incarnated "minute particular" and works its way upward to a transcendental essence. Beyond the Idea, it searches for Being as the category which contains essences in the same manner that the Idea contains particulars. Because they are natural objects, flowers originate as incarnations of a transcendental principle. "Wie Blumen entstehn" is to become present as a natural emanation of a transcendental principle, as an epiphany.

Strictly speaking, an epiphany cannot be a beginning, since it reveals and unveils what, by definition, could never have ceased to be there. Rather, it is the rediscovery of a permanent presence which has chosen to hide itself from us—unless it is we who have the power to hide from it:

So ist der Mensch; wenn da ist das Gut, und es sorget  
mit Gaaben

Selber ein Gott für ihn, kennet und sieht er es nicht.

("Brot und Wein," stanza 5)

Since the presence of a transcendental principle, in fact conceived as omnipresence (*parousia*), can be hidden from man by man's own volition, the epiphany appears in the guise of a beginning rather than a discovery. Hölderlin's phrase: "Wie Blumen entstehn" is in fact a paradox, since origination is inconceivable on the ontological level; the ease with which we nevertheless accept it is indicative of our desire to forget. Our eagerness to accept the statement, the "beauty" of the line, stems from the fact that it combines the poetic seduction of beginnings contained in the word "entstehn" with the ontological stability of the natural object—but this combination is made possible only by a deliberate forgetting of the transcendental nature of the source.

That this forgetting, this ignorance, is also painful becomes apparent from the strategic choice of the word "flower,"

an object that seems intrinsically desirable. The effect of the line would have been thoroughly modified if Hölderlin had written, for instance, "Steinen" instead of "Blumen," although the relevance of the comparison would have remained intact as long as human language was being compared to a natural thing. The obviously desirable sensory aspects of the flower express the ambivalent aspiration toward a forgotten presence that gave rise to the image, for it is in experiencing the material presence of the particular flower that the desire arises to be reborn in the manner of a natural creation. The image is inspired by a nostalgia for the natural object, expanding to become nostalgia for the origin of this object. Such a nostalgia can only exist when the transcendental presence is forgotten, as in the "dürftiger Zeit" of Hölderlin's poem which we are all too eager to circumscribe as if it were a specific historical "time" and not Time in general. The existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence.

It is clear that, in Hölderlin's own line, the words do *not* originate like flowers. They need to find the mode of their beginning in another entity; they originate out of nothing, in an attempt to be the first words that will arise as if they were natural objects, and, as such, they remain essentially distinct from natural entities. Hölderlin's statement is a perfect definition of what we call a natural image: the word that designates a desire for an epiphany but necessarily fails to be an epiphany, because it is pure origination. For it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness. The word is always a free presence to the mind, the means by which the permanence of natural entities can be put into question and thus negated, time and again, in the endlessly widening spiral of the dialectic.

An image of this type is indeed the simplest and most fundamental we can conceive of, the metaphorical expression most apt to gain our immediate acquiescence. During the long development that takes place in the nineteenth century, the poetic image remains predominantly of the same kind that in the Hölderlin passage we took for our starting point—and which, be it said in passing, far from exhausts Hölderlin's own conception of the poetic image. This type of imagery is grounded in the intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object. Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination. We saw that this movement is essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure. There can be flowers that "are" and poetic words that "originate," but no poetic words that "originate" as if they "were."

Nineteenth-century poetry reexperiences and represents the adventure of this failure in an infinite variety of forms and versions. It selects, for example, a variety of archetypal myths to serve as the dramatic pattern for the narration of this failure; a useful study could be made of the romantic and post-romantic versions of Hellenic myths such as the stories of Narcissus, of Prometheus, of the War of the Titans, of Adonis, Eros and Psyche, Proserpine, and many others; in each case, the tension and duality inherent in the mythological situation would be found to reflect the inherent tension that resides in the metaphorical language itself. At times, romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close to giving in completely to the nostalgia for the object that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language. This may well be the case in some passages of Wordsworth and Goethe, of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, where the vision almost seems to become a real landscape. Poetics of "unmediated vision," such as those implicit in Bergson and explicit in Bachelard, fuse matter and imagination by amalgamating perception and reverie, sacrificing, in

fact, the demands of consciousness to the realities of the object. Critics who speak of a "happy relationship" between matter and consciousness fail to realize that the very fact that the relationship has to be established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist in actuality.

At other times, the poet's loyalty toward his language appears so strongly that the object nearly vanishes under the impact of his words, in what Mallarmé called "sa presque disparition vibratoire." But even in as extreme a case as Mallarmé's, it would be a mistake to assume that the ontological priority of the object is being challenged. Mallarmé may well be the nineteenth-century poet who went further than any other in sacrificing the stability of the object to the demands of a lucid poetic awareness. Even some of his own disciples felt they had to react against him by reasserting the positivity of live and material substances against the annihilating power of his thought. Believing themselves to be in a situation where they had to begin their work at the point where Mallarmé had finished his, they took, like Claudel, the precise counterpart of his attitudes or, like Valéry, reversed systematically the meaning of some of his key images. Yet Mallarmé himself had always remained convinced of the essential priority of the natural object. The final image of his work, in *Un Coup de Dés*, is that of the poet drowned in the ubiquitous "sea" of natural substances against which his mind can only wage a meaningless battle, "tenter une chance oiseuse." It is true that, in Mallarmé's thought, the value emphasis of this priority has been reversed and the triumph of nature is being presented as the downfall of poetic defiance. But this does not alter the fundamental situation. The alternating feeling of attraction and repulsion that the romantic poet experiences toward nature becomes in Mallarmé the conscious dialectic of a reflective poetic consciousness. This dialectic, far from challenging the supremacy of the order of nature, in fact **reasserts** it at all times. "Nous savons, victimes d'une formule absolue, que certes n'est que ce qui est," writes Mallarmé, **and this absolute** identity is

rooted, for him, in "la première en date, la nature. Idée tangible pour intimer quelque réalité aux sens frustes. . . ."

Mallarmé's conception and use of imagery is entirely in agreement with this principle. His key symbols—sea, winged bird, night, the sun, constellations, and many others—are not primarily literary emblems but are taken, as he says, "au répertoire de la nature"; they receive their meaning and function from the fact that they belong initially to the natural world. In the poetry, they may seem disincarnate to the point of abstraction, generalized to the point of becoming pure ideas, yet they never entirely lose contact with the concrete reality from which they spring. The sea, the bird, and the constellation act and seduce in Mallarmé's poetry, like any earthly sea, bird, or star in nature; even the Platonic "oiseau qu'on n'ouït jamais" still has about it some of the warmth of the nest in which it was born. Mallarmé does not linger over the concrete and material details of his images, but he never ceases to interrogate, by means of a conscious poetic language, the natural world of which they are originally a part—while knowing that he could never reduce any part of this world to his own, conscious mode of being. If this is true of Mallarmé, the most self-conscious and anti-natural poet of the nineteenth century, it seems safe to assert that the priority of the natural object remains unchallenged among the inheritors of romanticism. The detailed study of Mallarmé bears this out; the same is true, with various nuances and reservations, of most Victorian and post-Victorian poets. For most of them, as for Mallarmé, the priority of nature is experienced as a feeling of failure and sterility, but nevertheless asserted. A similar feeling of threatening paralysis prevails among our own contemporaries and seems to grow with the depth of their poetic commitment. It may be that this threat could only be overcome when the status of poetic language or, more restrictively, of the poetic image, is again brought into question.

The direction that such a reconsideration might take can better be anticipated by a reading of the precursors of roman-

ticism than by the study of its inheritors. Assumptions that are irrevocably taken for granted in the course of the nineteenth century still appear, at an earlier date, as one among several alternative roads. This is why an effort to understand the present predicament of the poetic imagination takes us back to writers that belong to the earlier phases of romanticism such as, for example, Rousseau. The affinity of later poets with Rousseau—which can well be considered to be a valid definition of romanticism as a whole—can, in turn, be best understood in terms of their use and underlying concept of imagery. The juxtaposition of three famous passages can serve as an illustration of this point and suggest further developments.

The three passages we have selected each represent a moment of spiritual revelation; the use of semi-religious, "sacred," or outspokenly sublime language in all three makes this unquestionably clear. Rousseau is probably the only one to have some awareness of the literary tradition that stands behind the topos: his reference to Petrarch (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Part I, XXIII) suggests the all-important link with the Augustinian lesson contained in Petrarch's letter narrating his ascent of Mont Ventoux. A similar experience, in a more Northern Alpine setting, is related in the three passages. The Rousseau text is taken from the letter in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in which Saint-Preux reports on his sojourn in the Valais:

Ce n'était pas seulement le travail des hommes qui rendait ces pays étranges si bizarrement contrastés; la nature semblait encore prendre plaisir à s'y mettre en opposition avec elle-même, tant on la trouvait différente en un même lieu sous divers aspects. Au levant les fleurs du printemps, au midi les fruits de l'automne, au nord les glaces de l'hiver: elle réunissait toutes les saisons dans le même instant, tous les climats dans le même lieu, des terrains **contraires** sur le même sol, et formait l'accord inconnu partout ailleurs **des productions** des plaines et de celles des Alpes. . . . J'arrivai **ce jour là** sur des montagnes les moins élevées, et, parcourant **ensuite leurs** inégalités, sur celles des plus hautes qui étaient **à ma portée**. Après m'être promené dans les nuages, j'atteignis un **séjour plus serein**, d'où l'on voit

dans la saison le tonnerre et l'orage se former au-dessous de soi; image trop vaine de l'âme du sage, dont l'exemple n'exista jamais, ou n'existe qu'aux mêmes lieux d'où l'on en a tiré l'emblème.

Ce fut là que je démêlai sensiblement dans la pureté de l'air où je me trouvais la véritable cause du changement de mon humeur, et du retour de cette paix intérieure que j'avais perdue depuis si longtemps. En effet, c'est une impression générale qu'éprouvent tous les hommes, quoiqu'ils ne l'observent pas tous, que sur les hautes montagnes, où l'air est pur et subtil, on se sent plus de facilité dans la respiration, plus de légèreté dans le corps, plus de sérénité dans l'esprit; les plaisirs y sont moins ardents, les passions plus modérées. Les méditations y prennent je ne sais quel caractère grand et sublime, proportionné aux objets qui nous frappent, je ne sais quelle volupté tranquille qui n'a rien d'âcre et de sensuel. Il semble qu'en s'élevant au-dessus du séjour des hommes on y laisse des sentiments bas et terrestres, et qu'à mesure qu'on approche des régions éthérées, l'âme contracte quelque chose de leur inaltérable pureté. On y est grave sans mélancolie, paisible sans indolence, content d'être et de penser. . . . Imaginez la variété, la grandeur, la beauté de mille étonnants spectacles; le plaisir de ne voir autour de soi que des objets tout nouveaux, des oiseaux étranges, des plantes bizarres et inconnues, d'observer en quelque sorte une autre nature, et de se trouver dans un nouveau monde. Tout cela fait aux yeux un mélange inexprimable, dont le charme augmente encore par la subtilité de l'air qui rend les couleurs plus vives, les traits plus marqués, rapproche tous les points de vue; les distances paraissent moindres que dans les plaines, où l'épaisseur de l'air couvre la terre d'un voile, l'horizon présente aux yeux plus d'objets qu'il semble n'en pouvoir contenir: enfin le spectacle a je ne sais quoi de magique, de surnaturel, qui ravit l'esprit et les sens; on oublie tout, on s'oublie soi-même, on ne sait plus où l'on est . . .

Wordsworth's text is taken from Book VI of *The Prelude* and describes the poet's impressions in crossing the Alps, after having taken part in one of the celebrations that mark the triumph of the French Revolution. Wordsworth begins by praying for the safeguard of the Convent of the Grande Chartreuse, threatened with destruction at the hands of the insurrection; his prayer is first aimed at God, then "for humbler claim" at nature:

. . . and for humbler claim  
 Of that imaginative impulse sent  
 From these majestic floods, yon shining cliffs,  
 The untransmuted shapes of many worlds,  
 Cerulian ether's pure inhabitants,  
 These forests unapproachable by death,  
 That shall endure as long as man endures,  
 To think, to hope, to worship, and to feel,  
 To struggle, to be lost within himself  
 In trepidation, from the blank abyss  
 To look with bodily eyes, and be consoled.

(VI.461-71)

Somewhat later in the same section, Wordsworth describes the descent of the Simplon pass:

. . . The immeasurable height  
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,  
 And in the narrow rent at every turn  
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
 The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

(VI.624-40)

Hölderlin's poem "Heimkunft" begins with a description of a sunrise in the mountains, observed by the poet on his return from Switzerland to his native Swabia:

Drinn in den Alpen ists noch helle Nacht und die  
 Wolke,

Freudiges dichtend, sie dekt drinnen das gähnende  
 Thal.  
 Dahin, dorthin toset und stürzt die scherzende  
 Bergluft,  
 Schroff durch Tannen herab glänzet und schwindet  
 ein Stral.  
 Langsam eilt und kämpft das freudigschauernde  
 Chaos,  
 Jung an Gestalt, doch stark, feiert es liebenden Streit  
 Unter den Felsen, es gährt und wankt in den ewigen  
 Schranken,  
 Denn bacchantischer zieht drinnen der Morgen  
 herauf.  
 Denn es wächst unendlicher dort das Jahr und die  
 heiligen  
 Stunden, die Tage, sie sind kühner geordnet,  
 gemischt.  
 Dennoch merket die Zeit der Gewittervogel und  
 zwischen  
 Bergen, hoch in der Luft weilt er und rufet den Tag.  
 . . . . .  
 Ruhig glänzen indess die silbernen Höhen darüber,  
 Voll mit Rosen ist schon droben der leuchtende  
 Schnee.  
 Und noch höher hinauf wohnt über dem Lichte der  
 reine  
 Seelige Gott vom Spiel heiliger Stralen erfreut.  
 Stille wohnt er allein und hell erscheinet sein Antliz,  
 Der ätherische scheint Leben zu geben geneigt. . . .

("Heimkunft," stanzas 1 and 2)

Each of these texts describes the passage from a certain type of nature, earthly and material, to another nature which could be called mental and celestial, although the "Heaven" referred to is devoid of specific theological connotations. The common characteristic that concerns us most becomes apparent in the mixed, transitional type of landscape from which the three poets start out. The setting of each scene is located somewhere between the inaccessible mountain peaks and the humanized world of the plains; it is a deeply divided and par-



adoxical nature that, in Rousseau's terms, "seems to take pleasure in self-opposition." Radical contradictions abound in each of the passages. Rousseau deliberately mixes and blurs the order of the seasons and the laws of geography. The more condensed, less narrative diction of Wordsworth transposes similar contradictions into the complexity of a language that unites irreconcilable opposites; he creates a disorder so far-reaching that the respective position of heaven and earth are reversed: ". . . woods decaying, never to be decayed . . .," ". . . torrents shooting from the sky . . .," ". . . the stationary blast of waterfalls. . . ." Hölderlin's text also is particularly rich in oxymorons; every word combination, every motion expresses a contradiction: "helle Nacht," "langsam eilt," "liebenden Streit," "toset und stürzt," "geordnet, gemischt," "freudigschauernde," etc. One feels everywhere the pressure of an inner tension at the core of all earthly objects, powerful enough to bring them to explosion.

The violence of this turmoil is finally appeased by the ascending movement recorded in each of the texts, the movement by means of which the poetic imagination tears itself away, as it were, from a terrestrial nature and moves toward this "other nature" mentioned by Rousseau, associated with the diaphanous, limpid, and immaterial quality of a light that dwells nearer to the skies. Gaston Bachelard has described similar images of levitation very well, but he may not have stressed sufficiently that these reveries of flight not only express a desire to escape from earth-bound matter, to be relieved for a moment from the weight of gravity, but that they uncover a fundamentally new kind of relationship between nature and consciousness; it is significant, in this respect, that Bachelard classifies images of repose with earth and not with air, contrary to what happens in the three selected texts. The transparency of air represents the perfect fluidity of a mode of being that has moved beyond the power of earthly things and now dwells, like the God in Hölderlin's "Heimkunft," higher even than light ("über dem Licht"). Like the clouds described by Wordsworth, the poets become "Cerulean ether's

pure inhabitants." Unlike Mallarmé's "azur" or even the constellation at the end of *Un Coup de Dés* which are always seen from the point of view of the earth by a man about to sink away, their language has itself become a celestial entity, an inhabitant of the sky. Instead of being, like the "flower" in Hölderlin's "Brot und Wein," the fruit of the earth, the poetic word has become an offspring of the sky. The ontological priority, housed at first in the earthly and pastoral "flower," has been transposed into an entity that could still, if one wishes, be called "nature," but could no longer be equated with matter, objects, earth, stones, or flowers. The nostalgia for the object has become a nostalgia for an entity that could never, by its very nature, become a particularized presence.

The passages describe the ascent of a consciousness trapped within the contradictions of a half-earthly, half-heavenly nature "qui semblait prendre plaisir à (se) mettre en opposition avec elle-même," toward another level of consciousness, that has recovered "cette paix intérieure . . . perdue depuis si longtemps." (It goes without saying that the sequel of the three works from which the passages have been taken indicate that this tranquillity is far from having been definitively reconquered. Yet the existence of this moment of peace in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *The Prelude*, and in the poem "Heimkunft"—"Ruhig glänzen indes die silbernen Höhen darüber . . ."—determines the fate of the respective authors and marks it as being an essentially poetic destiny.) In the course of this movement, in a passage that comes between the two descriptions we have cited, Wordsworth praises the faculty that gives him access to this new insight, and he calls this faculty "Imagination":

Imagination!—lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my song  
 Like an unfathered vapour, . . .  
 . . . In such strength  
 Of usurpation, in such visitings  
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense  
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us  
 The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,

.....  
 The mind beneath such banners militant  
 Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught  
 That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts  
 That are their own perfection and reward—  
 Strong in itself, and in the access of joy  
 Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.

(VI.525-48)

But this "imagination" has little in common with the faculty that produces natural images born "as flowers originate." It marks instead a possibility for consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship with the outside world, without being moved by an intent aimed at a part of this world. Rousseau stressed that there was nothing sensuous ("rien d'âcre et de sensuel") in Saint-Preux's moment of illumination; Wordsworth, who goes so far as to designate the earth by the astonishing periphrase of "blank abyss," insists that the imagination can only come into full play when "the light of sense goes out" and when thought reaches a point at which it is "its own perfection and reward"—as when Rousseau, in the Fifth *Rêverie*, declares himself "content d'être" and "ne jouissant de rien d'extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence."

We know very little about the kind of images that such an imagination would produce, except that they would have little in common with what we have come to expect from familiar metaphorical figures. The works of the early romantics give us no actual examples, for they are, at most, *underway* toward renewed insights and inhabit the mixed and self-contradictory regions that we encountered in the three passages. Nor has their attempt been rightly interpreted by those who came after them, for literary history has generally labeled "primitivist," "naturalistic," or even pantheistic the first modern writers to have put into question, in the language of poetry, the ontological priority of the sensory object. We are only beginning to understand how this oscillation in the status of the image is

linked to the crisis that leaves the poetry of today under a steady threat of extinction, although, on the other hand, it remains the depository of hopes that no other activity of the mind seems able to offer.

# 7

## Symbolic Landscape in Wordsworth and Yeats

WORDSWORDH'S NARRATIVE poem *The Prelude* opens with an invocation to a "gentle breeze" blowing "from the green fields and from yon azure sky" and shows the poet guided in his work by ". . . nothing better than a wandering cloud." Very early in Book I—by line 60—one moves from general nature to a specific and "known Vale," the first in a series of landscapes that will recur to mark the main articulations of the narrative. Keats's epic *Hyperion* begins by introducing the fallen Titan Saturn with more attention given to the setting than to the figure—a setting that captures beautifully the sheltered quiet of a summer landscape. In both cases, where we would traditionally, in works of epic tonality, have expected an invocation to the muse, we are given a landscape instead. As so often in romantic poetry, the landscape replaces the muse; and just as the relationship between poet and muse can take on a variety of shades, the dramatic interaction between poet and landscape acquires a rich diversity in romantic writing.

In the case of a "natural" romantic like Wordsworth, who

urged "at all times, to look steadily at the subject," one might be tempted to think of the poet as a painter, whose language merely records and imitates sense perceptions. It is well-known, however, that this urge to keep the eye on the subject is only Wordsworth's starting point and that, perhaps more than any poet, he appreciates the complexity of what happens when eye and object meet. The delicate interplay between perception and imagination could nowhere be more intricate than in the representation of a natural scene, transmuted and recollected in the ordering form of Wordsworth's poetic language. The sonnet I have chosen for illustration is a typical instance: in the short span of its fourteen lines, one can observe the juxtaposition of two very different attitudes toward a landscape, held together by a dramatic progression which constitutes the key to the interpretation. Similar tensions can be shown to underlie the entire work.

Wide as the scope of Wordsworth's vision extends, it would never encompass Yeats's occasional claim of rejecting natural reality altogether, to ". . . scorn aloud / In glory of changeless metal / Common bird or petal." A considerable distance separates Wordsworth's involved but persistently reverent "look(ing) at the subject" from Yeats's intermittent contempt for "natural thing(s)"; one is not surprised to find Yeats much more reserved in his praise of Wordsworth than in his laudatory references to Blake and Shelley. Before venturing any speculation, historical or other, on the significance of this fundamental discrepancy between two poets both labeled "romantic," the nature of the difference needs to be clarified; one way of attempting this is by comparing a characteristic use of landscape in one of the later Yeats poems with an equally representative example from Wordsworth.

Our first example will be the sonnet by Wordsworth, "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake":

Clouds, lingering yet, extend in solid bars  
Through the grey West; and lo! these waters, steeled  
By breezeless air to smoothest polish, yield

A vivid repetition of the stars;  
Jove, Venus, and the ruddy crest of Mars  
Amid his fellows beautifully revealed  
At happy distance from earth's groaning field,  
Where ruthless mortals wage incessant wars.  
Is it a mirror?—or the nether Sphere  
Opening to view the abyss in which she feeds  
Her own calm fires?—But list! a voice is near;  
Great Pan himself low-whispering through the reeds.  
"Be thankful, thou; for, if unholy deeds  
Ravage the world, tranquillity is here!"

As so often in Wordsworth, the statement, the message of the poem is made explicit in the concluding lines. The poem names "tranquillity," and this alone would be a sufficient reason to single it out from the other words, since it is to convey a feeling that recurs in numberless places throughout the work of this writer, including his most famous definition of poetry as "taking its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." Of the three terms of that definition, "tranquillity" is perhaps the most subjective, and any text that conveys Wordsworth's particular feeling of tranquillity deserves full attention.

Although suggestion partly yields to assertion in the last two lines of the sonnet, the term "tranquillity" still appears in a dramatic setting, in the form of an appeasing promise spoken by "great Pan" himself. But the immediate context does not suffice for a full understanding of the feeling; it could even be misleading. That Pan, as the voice of nature echoed in the poet's own voice, should be the speaker here is no doubt important, but Pan can take on many forms, and the traditional connotations of the myth are perhaps more a hindrance than a help in this case. Wordsworth's "tranquillity" is not a pantheistic oneness with nature, not even the subtler adjustment between mind and object referred to in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*. One should perhaps forget the traditional Pan for the moment and ask instead what makes this landscape the place in which he would choose to appear.

Another element of indeterminateness keeps the final lines

in a state of suggestive suspense. Pan affirms that ". . . tranquillity is *here*," but such a complex set of spatial ambiguities have preceded this concluding assertion that one may well wonder where this "here" is located. The landscape makes us experience various kinds of quietness in various places, and the full impact of the final "here" depends entirely on the changing relationship between poet and landscape that develops in the main body of the sonnet.

We receive a first and literal impression of tranquillity from the near absence of wind in the "breezeless air," just enough stirred to allow for the slight motion and rustling of the reeds at the end. This absence of movement allows for the reflection, at sundown, of the brighter planets in the still surface of the lake. That this reflection will eventually convey the true meaning of "tranquillity" will become increasingly evident as the poem progresses, but not until we have been first led to believe in another, more obvious kind of peace. For in the lines

Jove, Venus, and the ruddy crest of Mars  
Amid his fellows beautifully revealed  
At happy distance from earth's groaning field,  
Where ruthless mortals wage incessant wars

the poet's eye rests not on the reflection, but on the actual planets in the sky. The word "field," in the singular, transforms the pastoral earth into the one huge battlefield of the Napoleonic wars, and in contrast to this turmoil, the order of the heavens exists in a peaceful serenity, at a safe and "happy distance" from all this strife. But this kind of tranquillity is certainly not to be found *here*, on this earth, but emphatically *there*, away from it and among the stars. It is not from "there," however, that Pan's voice finally reaches the poet's ear. Wordsworth's "tranquillity" does not dwell in the detached serenity of the stars.

In the temporal development of the poem, we first encounter the stars in line 4 as a "vivid repetition," a reflected presence on this earth. They are no random constellation, but three specific planets with obvious and commonly known mythological associations, so obvious that the least esoteri-

cally inclined of readers cannot fail to notice them. This simplicity of mythological allusion is important, especially in comparison with what we shall have to say later about Yeats, and also because it serves Wordsworth's overriding desire for simple concreteness, his genuine aversion for an elaborate use of mythology as a rhetorical device. Here Jupiter, Venus, and Mars are first and foremost the actual planets, observed by the poet at a definite time and place and participating in the poem as real, nonsymbolic presences. Yet as he looks, still with his outer eye, at their reflection, the mythological meaning begins to partake more and more in the action. The traditional couple of Love and War (Venus and Mars) plays an important part in the stormy destiny (Jupiter) of human passions and human history, and the relatively strong emphasis on the personified Mars with his ruddy crest "Amid his fellows beautifully revealed" establishes a mirrorlike correspondence between the order of the heavens and the realities of earth, where war also occupies a most untroubled prominence. The "happy distance" between earth and the stars is perhaps not so difficult to bridge as physical observation would tend to suggest. For if the opaque surface of the lake is indeed a mirror of celestial order, then this order is present on earth, albeit in a mediate, reflected form. It follows that the agitation of our loves and our wars mirrors in fact a turbulence that exists on a cosmic scale among heavenly bodies as well as on a human scale on this earth. There is a slight suggestion, perhaps more intuitive than conscious, of a correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, but the harmony of the spheres is jarred by "incessant wars" and Mars's persistent presence on earth would seem to ban tranquillity not only from this earth but from heaven as well. How then can Pan nevertheless make his final promise that "tranquillity is here"?

Up to the phrase "Is it a mirror?" in line 9, which marks the turning point of the poem, we have been using the outward eye of direct perception. The relationship between landscape and poet has been that of observer and thing observed, and consequently language has been mimetically descriptive throughout. After an entirely objective beginning:

Clouds, lingering yet, extend in sold bars  
Through the grey West . . .

a slight intensification of tone stresses the joyful surprise of discovery as the eye catches sight of the reflected stars:

. . . and lo! these waters, steeled  
By breezeless air to smoothest polish, yield  
A vivid repetition of the stars . . .

The increased liveliness of description, apparent in the somewhat unexpected verb "yield" and in the willed abstraction of "repetition," indicates the more active role played by the imagination in the visual description. This imaginative activity, however, is not yet strong enough to break through the surface of things. It could go so far as to conceive of human order as a reflection of cosmic order, and to make the connection between the planet Mars and Mars the God of War. But it remains firmly rooted in observation. It could never seriously ask the question in line 9: "Is it a mirror?" To a rational mind, fed by the observation of outward things, the question could not make sense; it knows without doubt that the light in the lake reflects the light of the stars above and that the lake acts like a mirror. The poem, however, suggests an alternative:

Is it a mirror?—or the nether Sphere  
Opening to view the abyss in which she feeds  
Her own calm fires?

"Nether Sphere" has an unmistakably Miltonic ring, and the presence of Miltonic diction in Wordsworth generally indicates a rise in the pitch of imaginative intensity. Up till now, the surface of the lake ". . . steeled / By breezeless air to smoothest polish" has been as opaque as a sheet of metal, its depth hidden from the poet's eye. But by suddenly allowing that the light may very well not emanate from the stars at all, but from fires burning in another sphere buried deep under the surface, a radical change of perspective has taken place. We have moved far beyond the borders of empirical observa-

tion. The careful observer is now able to reach beyond the surface and to penetrate into a realm that lies hidden from the light of day, well beyond the reach of earthly vision. The lake becomes a kind of gate to the underworld, mysterious and unfathomable enough to be called an "abyss." And it is difficult to escape the implication that the "fires" have some infernal quality, a slight hint of a passing beyond a line which it is unsafe to cross—although one must hasten to add that these fires nowise imply the moral torment and punishment of Hell. Wordsworth's "nether Sphere" seems to be a curious synthesis between a pagan Hades and a Christian Inferno, a world of fire that lies beyond life but which, strangely enough, brings calmness rather than turmoil to the soul. Whereas the poem has first taken us upward into the distant sky, it now discovers a corresponding "nether Sphere" and, paradoxically enough, it is in that realm that the final "tranquillity" seems to originate. As we have seen, the peace of the heavens was a mere illusion to a mind that refuses to separate human destiny from cosmic order. The word "calm" appears for the first time explicitly in association with the "nether Sphere," who feeds her "own calm fires" in contrast with the natural fires of earth. The latter are seen as the disquieting fires of love and war, and are not granted the attribute of calmness. There is tranquillity on this earth, the poem seems to be saying, but only for those who are *also* able to see, with the inward eye, beyond the surface, and discover the quiet that inhabits depths where no natural light could reach.

Is this calmness then the tranquillity of death, to which the victims of "incessant wars" are destined? It certainly contains elements of this kind of peace, but only as it also contains elements of the harmonious peace of planetary movements, or the natural peace of a breezeless evening. For the final tranquillity is to be found neither in the "nether Sphere" nor upward "at happy distance from earth's groaning field"—although the particular strategy of the poem stresses the elusive peacefulness of the underworld over the more obvious quiet of the heavens. Still, the dominant movement stems from

the return to earth, enriched by discoveries made in far-flung excursions; although the eye covers a very large scope, it finally comes to rest by the reeds at the side of the lake. Tranquillity is in *this* place on *this* earth, and it exists for the poet who can hear its voice, not because he is endowed with supernatural wisdom, or because he can dwell beyond the boundaries of space or of life, but because he possesses the kind of double vision that allows him to see landscapes as objects, as well as entrance gates to a world lying beyond visible nature. "Tranquillity," it seems, is the right balance between the literal and the symbolic vision, a balance reflected in a harmonious proportion between mimetic and symbolic language in the diction of the poem.

Perhaps we can now understand why the landscape should be as it appears in the opening lines:

Clouds, lingering yet, extend in solid bars  
Through the grey West . . .

The delicate balance between direct and imagined vision demands precisely this degree of twilight grayness—so different from the sunlit noonday landscape of Mediterranean poets—with just enough light to perceive shapes and contours but not so much that the brilliance of the surfaces would prevent the eye from penetrating beyond them. Nor should the sky be cloudless; in that case the eye would be irresistibly drawn upward, whereas the clouds force it to turn inward, from an open to an enclosed space, and thus prepare for the necessary descent into the underworld. And the emphasis on "solid bars" draws, at the beginning of the poem, the strong horizontal line which, in spite of subsequent ascents and descents, becomes the final level on which the resolved poem comes to rest. Finally, the reflected light in the lake reminds us that this rest does not exclude the awareness of a cosmic realm above and a supernatural realm beyond. Both have to be present in the final vision; Wordsworth's Pan—since this is how he chooses to call his god here—is by no means devoid of transcendental dimensions. But even those transcendental elements are first

revealed to sight before they can become an audible voice. All the action in the poem stems from visual events and obeys the logic of the eye. Wordsworth's landscape of tranquillity symbolizes in fact the complex act of pure vision.

During his later years, Yeats wrote several poems of tribute to the aged or deceased friends and companions of his literary life, in which he officiates somewhat like the Poet Laureate of a small court ruled over by Lady Gregory. In those "official" poems, he frequently bewails the passing of a gracious world of aristocratic refinement, brought to ruin by "this filthy modern tide." Because these poems appeal to a very public and readily comprehensible kind of emotion, and are bound to provoke a very direct response in the reader (favorable or unfavorable, depending on the strength of his own conservative leanings), they have contributed greatly to the picture of Yeats as the courtier of a bygone age—although numerous unsettling poems of the same period create a very different impression.

One of the most successful poems in this manner is "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" (a text which has been recorded in part as read by Yeats himself):

- 1 Under my window-ledge the waters race,  
Otters below and moor-hens on the top,  
Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face  
Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar'  
drop,
- 5 Run underground, rise in a rocky place  
In Coole demesne, and there to finish up  
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.  
What's water but the generated soul?

Upon the border of that lake's a wood  
10 Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,  
And in a copse of beeches there I stood,  
For Nature's pulled her tragic buskin on  
And all the rant's a mirror of my mood:  
At sudden thunder of the mounting swan

- 15 I turned about and looked where branches break  
 The glittering reaches of the flooded lake.  
 Another emblem there! That stormy white  
 But seems a concentration of the sky;  
 And, like the soul, it sails into the sight
- 20 And in the morning's gone, no man knows why;  
 And is so lovely that it sets to right  
 What knowledge or its lack had set awry,  
 So arrogantly pure, a child might think  
 It can be murdered with a spot of ink.
- 25 Sound of a stick upon the floor, a sound  
 From somebody that toils from chair to chair;  
 Beloved books that famous hands have bound,  
 Old marble heads, old pictures everywhere;  
 Great rooms where travelled men and children  
 found
- 30 Content or joy; a last inheritor  
 Where none has reigned that lacked a name and  
 fame  
 Or out of folly into folly came.  
 A spot whereon the founders lived and died  
 Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees,
- 35 Or gardens rich in memory glorified  
 Marriages, alliances and families,  
 And every bride's ambition satisfied.  
 Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees  
 We shift about—all that great glory spent—
- 40 Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.  
 We were the last romantics—chose for theme  
 Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
 Whatever's written in what poets name  
 The book of the people; whatever most can bless
- 45 The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;  
 But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
 Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
 Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

Several of Yeats's poems, at all periods, contain or sometimes begin with landscapes, and it has often been observed

that, as the style gains in maturity and control, they become more and more concrete and specific. The river at the beginning of "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," certainly seems as "real" as can be, its course described in circumstantial and matter-of-fact detail, with almost geographical precision. And the general unity of the poem is brought about by equally natural means: the single locale of the lake in Coole Park, to which Yeats takes us in the first stanza, following the course of the river that connects his house, at Thoor Ballylee, with Lady Gregory's estate at Coole.

Beyond this first unifying principle, the question remains as to the experience conveyed by the juxtaposition of the three scenes: the stream, the swan in the woods, and finally Lady Gregory, her house, and all they have come to stand for in Yeats's life. At first sight, the poem seems to be built on a broad system of analogies between a natural, a semimythical, and a personal event, the last having overtones of a more general historical significance. The pattern is most concretely shown by the movements of the river in stanza 1: after running alternately through phases of light and darkness, it loses itself in the shapeless anonymity of the lake and "drops into a hole" (l. 7). The presence of realistic detail (the otters and the moorhens) and of specific place names helps to make this description as literal as possible; one is not tempted to read it as still another version of the recurrent romantic metaphor likening the course of human existence to that of a river. It merely defines a pattern of motion, from a charted and controlled course to the final "drop" into nothingness. The landscape seems as "natural" as Wordsworth's, and although we may be somewhat taken aback by the sudden leap into total generality in line 8,

What's water but the generated soul?

we could still interpret this as a transition to the next scene.

Within another analogical setting—the autumnal landscape suggestive of old age and decay—the swan suddenly appears. It is still a natural, real swan; the reader can well



imagine such swans inhabiting Coole Park, and he may remember having met them before in an earlier poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole." But this time Yeats's language makes it clear that the swan is more than a mere natural bird: it is called an "emblem" in line 17; in line 19 it is explicitly likened to the soul, and although the terms "loveliness" and "purity" fit the physical characteristics of the swan, it is clear from the development in stanza 4 that they are primarily intended as attributes of the "soul." The reference is without doubt to the passage in the *Phaedo* where Plato likens the human soul to a swan. The general effect of the stanza, however, remains pictorial and concrete rather than speculative—and this is due, in large measure, to the analogy between the movement of the swan and that of the stream of stanza 1, both departing from this earth irresistibly drawn into another realm, the river "drop(ping) into a hole," the swan disappearing "no man knows why."

In this reading of the poem, the two first episodes are a preparation for the second half: the homage to Lady Gregory's world, in sharp contrast to the homeless, uprooted condition of modern man. The more general considerations in the final stanza lead to the picture of Lady Gregory and Yeats, allied in a vast historical perspective as the last representatives of a tradition about to disappear into chaos—as the swan and the river both disappeared into a void. The swan and the lake recur in the recapitulating last line to mark Coole Park as the place where no lesser poetic spirit than Homer's was for the last time manifest:

Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

It is well-known that Yeats compared Lady Gregory's rather pedestrian collection of folk tales to Homer, and called it the "greatest book to come out of Ireland in our times"—a fact that James Joyce was all too eager to record for posterity by making it the object of one of his relatively few open allusions to Yeats in *Ulysses*.

Read in this manner, the poem's main theme becomes the

decadence "of a time / Half dead at the top," treated not "In mockery . . ." (as, for instance, in "Blood and the Moon") but in an elegiac confrontation between the splendors of the past and the uncertainties of a shapeless future. The landscapes in the first two stanzas function as natural images, enriching by their concreteness the abstract analogous movement of history evoked in the concluding part. Although the relationship between landscape and statement is no doubt less intimate and more rhetorical than in Wordsworth's sonnet, it does not seem to be essentially different; the symbolic action springs naturally from a perceived scene, the starting point for the imagination as it grows from natural to historical and mythical vision.

The only weakness of this reading is that it makes "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" into a rather recondite and not very tightly organized poem. Perhaps one can attribute to overgenerosity the somewhat embarrassing comparison between Lady Gregory and Homer, and forget, too, Yeats's pomposity in heralding himself, linked to Lady Gregory as the river links Ballylee to Coole Park, as one of the last representatives of heroic grandeur in a decaying world. Such considerations are, after all, extraneous to the poem—as is the rather trite definition of romanticism as a union between nobility and the true "people." But—always assuming that our proposed reading is the correct one—the economy of the poem is open to criticism on purely formal and intrinsic grounds; a great deal of superfluous detail in the descriptive passages rather seems to blur the movement which they are to convey; the development on the "soul" and the reference to the *Phaedo* may appear like a very elaborate windup to deliver a rather weak pitch; the link between the natural stream and the myth of the swan, though outwardly motivated by real incident, is not organically necessary, nor does it enrich the meaning of the poem as much as could be expected from such a striking and authoritative symbol. One could also quarrel with a discrepancy between tone and statement: this would indeed be a poem of rather grim despair, predicting no less than the end of a civilization with

which Yeats has entirely identified himself. Yet the poem does not sound desperate, not even elegiac. The river and the swan do not behave as if they were symbols of destruction, although the text leaves no doubt that they have forever departed from this earth. They could easily have been made into poignant death symbols and made to utter the "swan-song" of a vanishing world, but they appear instead as a welcome relief to the eye among the tragically barren trees of the wood. On the whole, the poem renders a decidedly heroic ring, which makes even the final stanza appear altogether plausible. This supposes an assertive assurance which nothing that is being said would seem to warrant.

Before thus censoring Yeats, as poet or as courtier, one should remember that this reading is founded on a literal interpretation of the opening landscape. We assumed the stream to be a description of an actual scene in nature; it gains symbolic significance later in the poem by analogy with other events, but it was a natural fact *prior* to becoming symbolic. This was certainly also the case for Wordsworth's landscape. Everything in "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake" grows directly out of the landscape; the sonnet is entirely self-contained, and no need exists to bring other texts, whether by Wordsworth or someone else, to bear on the interpretation (unless, of course, one wanted to show that the poem is typical of Wordsworth in general). Nor does the reader have to possess any special knowledge beyond the most commonplace mythological information. Even this is less essential than the careful attention which Wordsworth demands for his natural setting. Coming from this kind of romantic nature poetry, one is inclined to expect a similar primacy of the natural landscape in Yeats.

There can be no doubt, however, that a richer reading of a poem like "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" can only be obtained by giving up the illusion of natural realism. Yeats's landscapes have a symbolic meaning prior to their natural appearance, and act as predetermined emblems embedded in a more or less fixed symbolic system which is not derived from

the observation of nature. One therefore has to go outside the poem to find the "key" to such symbols. The point is, of course, still highly controversial in the interpretation of Yeats, and this is certainly not the place to argue it more extensively. I merely want to give some indication of what happens to this poem if one extends the perspective in this manner.

The concluding line of the first stanza "What's water but the generated soul?" marks the sudden intrusion of expository language into pure description. It acts as a signal to the reader that a more elaborate kind of symbol is being used. The theme of "generation" is a very frequent one in Yeats, who likes to treat it in Platonic terms, as a descent of the immortal and divine soul into the finite world of nature and matter. The recurrent emblem for this process is described at length in the early volume of prose essays *Ideas of Good and Evil*—a much richer source of information on Yeats's symbolism, be it said in passing, than the later and much more devious *A Vision*. It derives from Porphyry's esoteric interpretation of the Homeric ode "The Cave of the Nymphs," in which the Cave is said to represent the descent of the soul into matter by means of the act of generation. (Other uses of this myth occur in several of Yeats's major poems, for instance in "Among School Children"—where it is explicitly referred to in a footnote—in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and so on.) Alerted by line 8, we recognize the description of the river to be a modified and personal version of Porphyry's Cave: the "'dark' cellar" corresponds to the obscurity of the cavern" (*Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 119); the underground course of the water corresponds to the actual Cave, bounded by the gates of generation and of death. The successive stages of the river above and below ground mark the different incarnations which according to Yeats's poetic mythology extend the existence of the individual soul over several lives; the subterranean stretches correspond to life on earth, the others presumably to a partly immaterial, purgatorial state. In its final return to the divine principle, the ultimate death of the body, the soul drops into the "hole" of the lake. The "moor-hens on the top" are the

divine principle, which Yeats generally associates with birds, while the "otters below" are the animal principle, indicating the composite nature of the generated world. The entire construction is not more or less fantastic than, for instance, Spenser's Garden of Adonis in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* (with which it shares Platonic sources), except for the fact that it is presented as a reality and not as a fiction.

If one grants the identity of the river scene with the Cave of the Nymphs, a new dimension is introduced into the poem. For it marks Yeats's allegiance (whether real or apparent cannot concern us at this point) to a body of doctrine that considers the incarnate state of the soul as a relative degradation, and looks upon death as a return to its divine origin and, consequently, as a positive act. The allusion to the *Phaedo*, one of the main sources of esoteric Neoplatonism, now becomes altogether understandable. In opposition to the generated "water" of stanza 1, the swan "But seems a concentration of the sky"—air being an element closer to the divine than water—joyously "mounting" from the decaying wood of matter toward its true abode. Its purity and its loveliness are due to the desire for the eternal that inhabits the swan's breast, and make it impervious to those who think that divine essence can be found on this natural earth.

After this, the second half of the poem takes on a very different significance. The "great glory" (l. 39) of the historical world created by a successful culture is bound to become an ambiguous compliment, since we now must assume that no earthly achievement, no matter how impressive, can have absolute value. The passing of the Irish gentry, Yeats's most closely personal experience of the mortality of civilizations, becomes a much less momentous and definitive event when any death, whether individual or collective, marks in fact a desirable escape from earthly embroilments. Like all earthbound civilizations, the Irish aristocracy made the mistake of imagining that its world of marriages, houses, and "generations" was "more dear than life" (l. 34), whereas the only thing

dearer than life can be the immortal and immaterial soul, loosened from earthly fetters. Faced with the tragic decay of history, the man of true wisdom can only cry out, as Yeats proclaims in another poem, "Let all things pass away" ("Vacillation"). Here, in a *poème de circonstance*, written in homage to his benefactor and her class, the reservations are of course expressed in a much more oblique and allusive way. They are tacitly implied by the values established in the first three stanzas. Moreover, in a poet who makes deliberate ironic use of the technique of repetition, it is revealing that the two ear-striking words "stick" and "spot," when they appear in reference to Lady Gregory and her kind (ll. 25 and 33), have previously been given derogatory connotations associated with the decaying and misleading world of matter (ll. 10 and 24).

But it is in the last stanza that the esoteric symbolism makes its greatest contribution to an enriched complexity of statement. On a first level, the passage indeed expresses the extravagant compliment of Yeats to his patron and fellow writer, and his apocalyptic pessimism about the decadence of the Western world. Much is added, however, to complicate Yeats's own attitude toward this assertion. Two verbal echoes from the earlier stanzas help to give access to a difficult section. The "last romantics"—and nothing in the syntax indicates that "we," in line 41, necessarily refers to Yeats and Lady Gregory—are said to have chosen ". . . for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness." The adjective "lovely" has been prominently used before as an attribute of the liberated soul (l. 21), in opposition to the earthbound, natural beauty of the woods and the waters. Those who glorify the beauty of the soul are called "romantics," and "traditional sanctity" surely indicates the wisdom of the esoteric tradition to which Yeats claims allegiance. The "romantics" are those initiated in that tradition or spontaneously attracted to it, not the "natural" romantics like Wordsworth or Keats. The true "romantics" know "Whatever's written in what poets name / The book of the people . . ." and from Yeats's essays on folklore we know that what he and

other "poets" find there is precisely the esoteric tradition in a particularly otherworldly form—so otherworldly, in fact, that it rejects much of Plato himself as too earthbound.

The final line, "Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood," echoes the "darkening" of line 4 (" . . . darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop") and takes us back, closing the cycle, to Homer, whose ode "The Cave of the Nymphs" actually began the poem in a disguised version. The swan drifting on a "darkening flood" refers to a soul still imprisoned in generated matter (water) (unlike the "mounting swan" in line 14), and Yeats is suggesting that ever since men have been willing to found their values upon the incarnate world and to praise the act of generation, Pegasus has been riderless—there has been no truly great poetry. This came about with Homer, a transitional figure who, in his esoteric aspects (as in "The Cave of the Nymphs") still belongs to an uncorrupted past, but in his exoteric aspects stands at the dawn of a literature which will get increasingly enmeshed in the servitudes of original sin. The passage repeats what Yeats had explicitly been saying about Homer in an early essay, "The Autumn of the Body" (*Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 301ff.); it now uses symbolic language to mask a direct statement on which Yeats has not changed his mind over the years. Homer is in fact the real "last romantic," the last representative of a tradition that nearly died with him, and Yeats pretends to see himself in a somewhat similar situation, as one of the few to have kept contact with "traditional sanctity." In a sense, the "we" in "We were the last romantics . . ." refers to Homer and Yeats, whereas the statement that follows "But all is changed . . ." (l. 46) points not so much to the present, the 1931 of the poem, as to the entire time span of Hellenic and Christian civilization. Tragic as it is, the threatening destruction of the West can be contemplated with the kind of heroic gaiety for which Yeats is striving—perhaps in vain—in the *Last Poems*. For if ever since "all is changed" (that is, ever since Homer) the "high horse" of poetry has been "riderless," a poetic rebirth can only be expected in an altogether new type of civilization. We have moved

a long way beyond Lady Gregory into speculations for which this very practical lady would have had little sympathy but which, for poetic reasons, obsessed Yeats during his entire life.

Two distinct readings thus become apparent. They do not necessarily cancel each other out, but represent very different attitudes toward a common situation. Each of these readings, however, depends on altogether divergent uses of imagery, as epitomized in the role played by the opening landscape; in the first interpretation it acts as a natural analogical image, in the second as an emblematic "key." The descriptive, mimetic use of landscape remains quite similar to Wordsworth's first kind of vision, in which nature is seen as an exterior object. But Yeats's symbolism has nothing in common with Wordsworth's second or symbolic kind of language. The emblematic landscape, in which a familiar river is used to mask an esoteric text, differs entirely from Wordsworth's transcendental vision, as we encountered it in the first poem. Both, it is true, lead from material to spiritual insights, but whereas Wordsworth's imagination remains patterned throughout on the physical process of sight, Yeats's frame of reference, by the very nature of his statement, originates from experiences without earthly equivalence. The texture of his language, in the poetry written after 1900, thus depends on an altogether composite style, held together by almost miraculous skill. On the one hand, the poems seduce by the sensuous "loveliness" of their natural landscapes and images, while gaining their deeper structural unity and most of their intellectual content from nonnatural or even antinatural uses of language. The juxtaposition of two truly incompatible conceptions of style is much more precarious even than Wordsworth's delicate balance between perception and imagination. In Yeats, the imagination in fact scorns the perception, but seems unable to do without it; stripped of its natural attributes the poem would become a lifeless skeleton. The result, in Yeats's masterful hands, can be intensely dramatic, but it could certainly never end, like Wordsworth's sonnet, in a promise of "tranquillity."

## 8 Image and Emblem in Yeats

WITH STRIKING critical insight, Yeats has described his own poetic development by opposing it to the concept of *Bildung*, as it appears in the German romantic tradition. He knew this tradition only through Goethe, one of his father's favorite authors, but the reference to *Wilhelm Meister* is singularly apt: "I still think that in a species of man, wherein I count myself, nothing so much matters as Unity of Being, but if I seek it as Goethe sought, who was not of that species, I but combine in myself, and perhaps as it now seems, looking backward, in others also, incompatibles. Goethe, in whom objectivity and subjectivity were intermixed . . . could but seek it as Wilhelm Meister seeks it, intellectually, critically, and through a multitude of deliberately chosen experiences; events and forms of skill gathered as if for a collector's cabinet; whereas true Unity of Being, where all the nature murmurs in response if but a single note be touched, is found emotionally, instinctively, by the rejection of all experience not of the right quality, and by the limitation of its quantity."<sup>1</sup>

It is well to bear this in mind when trying to impress a framework of order on Yeats's work. We cannot expect the gradual development of a Mallarmé, a consciousness which

comes to know itself by observing the reflections of its own experiences, but rather an *a priori* commitment that maintains itself in the face of all attacks and temptations. The movement of *Bildung* is one of repeated defeats, never altogether wasteful because, no matter how tragic the damage to individuals, they result in an enrichment of the spirit. Blind hope rushes into action to meet disaster; Faust embarks forcefully on the impossible, causes ruin and destruction to others and to himself, with no gain but some increased wisdom of his limitations. The impossibility of the quest unveils gradually, and an awareness of the ultimate absurdity of the enterprise appears as the crowning achievement, at the end of the drama. The pattern of Yeats's poetic development, however, is Quixotic rather than Faustian. The irrevocable commitment seems to be made from the start, absurdity and all, and the subsequent test is merely one of loyalty and perseverance.

Such a pattern could be simple enough, much simpler, in fact, than the succession of assertions and denials that characterize a movement of becoming. But in Yeats's case, the original commitment is particularly elusive. There is bound to be a fundamental complication associated with an ideal which is persistently referred to as Unity of Being, but most frequently expressed, as in the above quotation, by such terms as "to reject" or "to limit"—terms that suggest plurality rather than unity. And there may well be true incoherence at the core of a system which, like *A Vision*, claims to be both cyclical, a mere repetition of a movement resulting from tensions between irreconcilable opposites, and dialectical, a progression of antinomies toward their ultimate reconciliation. A "Unity of Being" which has to be understood in opposition to another "Unity of Being" is certainly not of a kind which can easily be defined. Behind the term "Unity of Being" is hidden a long history of conflicts and contradictions; when Yeats uses it to describe his poetry, an interpretation of the entire work is needed to know why he chooses to state it in this manner.

Yeats's actual commitment, which determines the intricate verbal strategy of his poetry, cannot be deduced, as was

the case for Mallarmé, from his own explicit statements. Mallarmé's obligation is to the *truth* of his language; therefore, the complication of his intention is always exactly equal to the complication of his statement: this makes him, in spite of so many opinions to the contrary, into the very opposite of an "obscure" poet—although it certainly does not make him into a simple one. Yeats is very articulate about his poetic theories and discourses eloquently and abundantly on the subject, but his statements, whether they appear in the poetry or in his dramatic or critical writing, always have to be considered in the light of an intent that reaches beyond their particular meaning. His language is not the language of truth; it is determined by an intent which uses language and in which language is deeply involved, but which nevertheless finds its ultimate justification in a meta-logical and, at times, anti-logical realm.

In the case of a poet of this type, when no works or passages can be singled out and given true exegetic value, the best way to gain access to their true meaning is often to observe local accidents and anomalies of language by means of which actual intentions or commitments, hidden behind the statement, are revealed. By far the most conspicuous of such accidents are the several stylistic changes and incessant revisions that mark Yeats's career. His avowed opinions and convictions, as well as his public conception of his role as a poet, remain remarkably stable, but his poetry keeps varying in texture and in tone until the very last poems. These changes are not primarily thematic, even though they sometimes seem to be: Yeats's themes are in fact much less varied than his styles, and it is not always possible to establish a correlation between thematic and stylistic shifts. A strong feeling exists among commentators that if it were possible to account for the changes in manner, true insight would be gained in Yeats's fundamental hopes and preoccupations. The stylistic experimentations are prompted by his deepest concern; themes, declarations of purpose, aesthetic or pseudo-philosophical theories are subsidiary to this concern, put to use in its service. The key to a

real understanding of Yeats's poetic enterprise, as well as of his place in the tradition of nineteenth-century poetry, is to be found in his stylistic evolution. This is true of all poets, to some extent, but it is true in a special sense for Yeats. In some—and Mallarmé is a case in point—the distinction between theme and style is not apparent, and one is free to move from stylistic to thematic considerations without encountering discontinuities; Yeats, on the other hand, consciously uses and exploits this very distinction for strategic purposes. By ignoring the formal aspects of his language, one allows oneself to be deliberately misled by the author's own devices.

Critics have been well aware of the importance of the stylistic element in Yeats, and most attempts at a general interpretation have actually been interpretations of the stylistic changes. Although no systematic study of the problem is as yet available, the more or less fragmentary and intuitive descriptions of the changes stress similar elements: the contrast between the vocabulary of the early and the later poetry; the passage from a purely lyrical to a more dramatic medium; the difference between the esoteric, hieratic imagery of the early and the much more concrete and natural imagery of the later poetry; the change from repetitive and incantatory rhythms to intricately varied and abrupt metrical patterns; the increased use of irony and ambiguity; the passage from a neoromantic Victorian "poetic" diction to a hardened "modern" form of address often said to be close to actual speech. There is at least some measure of agreement as to the general trend of these changes, although the findings are based, in general, on quick impressions rather than on exhaustive analysis.<sup>2</sup> Stylistic criticism of Yeats would complicate this relatively simple picture a great deal.

Beyond this point, agreement vanishes. When it comes to an interpretation of the changes, opinions vary widely, quantitatively, qualitatively, and historically. Some see a total contrast between the early and the late Yeats,<sup>3</sup> others maintain that it ". . . is a development rather than a conversion, a technical change rather than a substantial one."<sup>4</sup> Some, a majority, see

it as a movement toward a more "realistic," socially responsible, publicly committed poetry,<sup>5</sup> while others stress the increased esotericism and hermeticism of the later poetry, less conventionally "literary" and more avowedly occult and initiatory.<sup>6</sup> Some consider Yeats as the culmination and fulfillment of the romantic tradition,<sup>7</sup> others as moving definitely outside of this tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Before any other consideration, it should be pointed out that the change cannot be so easily observed as its obvious existence may lead one to believe. There is not one single change but several, and it is not certain that they tend in the same direction. Neither is it certain that objective characteristics of style (assuming even—which is not the case—that they had been accurately defined and described) can be easily and immediately translated in terms of poetic intent; that the prevalence of a more or less colloquial vocabulary, for instance, necessarily indicates a poetry closer to earth than conventionally "poetic" word choice; or that the frequent presence of natural imagery necessarily implies a concretization of experience; or that a dramatic syntax and structure is necessarily more socially concerned than a lyrical one. All such outward characteristics of style have to be placed within a highly complex network of motives and intentions before their tentative significance can be stated with some chance of accuracy.

For instance, to take a simple and well-studied example, Yeats's style underwent a considerable transformation between 1889, the date when his first volume of verse was published, and 1895, when he revised his early poems for a new edition (*Poems*, London, 1895); the alterations offer excellent material for a study of the development at that point. The conclusions are clear; the changes are attempts to eliminate the remnants of conventional romantic diction: inflected verb forms, partially elided prepositions, inversions, etc.<sup>9</sup> In a way, this makes the language more natural and brings it closer to ordinary speech; words such as "you," "the," "always," "no," "from" are certainly closer to ordinary speech than "ye," "thy," "ever," "nay" "o'er," etc. But it could hardly be argued that

this shift from conventionally "poetic" language to normal usage was accompanied by a parallel thematic change from an otherworldly realm back to earth; whatever the difference between the 1889 and the 1901 versions of a poem like "The Indian to His Love,"<sup>10</sup> they hardly make it less ethereal, though they make it a great deal less ridiculous. As for the new poems which Yeats is writing around 1895 and which will be printed in book form in 1899 under the title of *The Wind among the Reeds*, they are certainly not to be called earth-bound or realistic. This change, although it is doubtlessly oriented toward "natural" diction, occurs at a moment when the "substantial" evolution, as revealed by the imagery, moves more and more radically away from nature. We understand, then, that this particular change in diction (not in imagery) between the 1889 edition of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* and the 1895 edition of *Poems*, marks a development in technical skill. Yeats has come into contact in London with his English fellow poets<sup>11</sup> and he is "learning his trade" with (not from) them, following a trend which was generally prevalent among his contemporaries; a similar difference exists between the diction of Swinburne and that of Dowson and Symons (both great admirers of Verlaine) or between that of Tennyson and Lionel Johnson. This is indeed a "technical change rather than a substantial one," but it is complicated by the fact that at the same time a "substantial" development has taken place (between *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* of 1889 and *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* of 1891) that tends in the direction opposite from the evolution in technique.

Later, when the major change occurs which is generally mentioned in speaking of the transition from Yeats's early to his mature period (between *The Shadowy Waters*, 1900, and *In the Seven Woods*, 1903), the hardening of texture, the introduction of contemporary, topical allusions, a new abundance of natural imagery all have prompted the prevalent interpretation of a definitive return to a certain form of realism. The stylistic equivalence of this return is found in a parallel return to a syntax and diction that imitate natural speech. So oversim-

plified are our notions of style, and so strongly influenced by loose historical categories, that we tend to call "realistic" any diction which is no longer Victorian. One commentator, at least, has been curious enough to take a closer look,<sup>12</sup> and drawn attention to the fact that Yeats's mature diction is anything but mimetic, that it introduces again many of the more "literary" forms of style which the early revisions had been eager to eliminate, especially archaisms and inversions. Of course, they are not the same kind of archaisms or inversions and they fulfill a different expressive function, but their fundamental characteristic remains: they accentuate the distinction between spoken and written language and widen the gap between mimetic and expressive diction.<sup>13</sup> In the middle and the later Yeats, one is very far removed indeed from the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The vocabulary and syntax of the poetry after 1904 is certainly not sufficient proof that the change ought to be interpreted as a return to reality.

Our point is merely that if the study of stylistic changes is indeed the best way of access to the interpretation of Yeats, it is a key that should be used with great caution and with a steady awareness of the intentional principle that determined stylistic peculiarities. It is this pattern of intentions (which, in Yeats, differs from the thematic structure) which we want to observe. And, as in all romantic poetry, the most revealing stylistic unit will be the image.

Yeats's early poetry is, in his own words, "covered with embroideries," and much of its imagery is purely decorative. It is often similar in texture to this passage from *The Wanderings of Oisín*:

A citron colour gloomed in her hair,  
But down to her feet white vesture flowed,  
And with the glimmering crimson glowed  
Of many a figured embroidery;  
And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell  
That wavered like the summer streams,  
As her soft bosom rose and fell.

(Var., pp. 3-4)<sup>14</sup>



This is pictorial, Pre-Raphaelite writing, with a picture-book delight in colors that exist merely for the color's sake; citron, white, and crimson, all in the span of three lines. In this context, the "pearl-pale shell" seems hardly more than another picturesque detail—although it could be more than this. Niamh, who is being described, is something of a siren, a water creature who rides the waves, and the decorative shell could point to her elemental nature. Very early in the poem, we are perhaps already dealing with an image which belongs to a much more complicated species; it refers, by means of a traditional pictorial emblem to a complex experience (the sea, and its dark attraction on Oisín); it contains mythological elements (the siren); and it refers to a specific natural element (water). But it appears among so much descriptive detail, devoid of metaphorical or emblematic depth, that it escapes notice in the crowded picture.

A little further along in the poem, the image of the shell reappears, when Niamh and Oisín are about to land on the first of their three islands:

. . . we rode on,  
Where many a trumpet-twisted shell  
That in immortal silence sleeps  
Dreaming of her own melting hues,  
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,  
Pierced with soft light the shallowing deeps.

(Var., p. 13)<sup>15</sup>

This image starts from the perception of an actual thing, the eye catching sight of the shells as the water grows shallow. The late version (which dates from a 1933 edition) still strengthens this effect by means of the exact visual detail "trumpet-twisted," but it is clear from the unaltered line, "Pierced with soft light the shallowing deeps," that the encounter with the natural, outward world has always been an essential part of the image. It grows, however, into much more than a descriptive or decorative detail. The transfer of the material attributes of shape and color into consciousness, which

makes up the perception, is accompanied by a symmetrical transfer of acts of consciousness into the object: the shell is said to be "dreaming" and the verb "pierced" changes the passive process of being perceived into an act of volition; by then, the shell has both imagination and will, the main faculties of a conscious mind, and it has received them from a mere figure of speech.

This kind of image is very frequent in the early Yeats.<sup>16</sup> It differs from mere personification, which has primarily a descriptive purpose and is based on mimetic devices; to say that the wind howls or that the sun smiles is to say something about the wind and the sun, but to write of shells "dreaming of their own hues" is to say something about the act of dreaming, not to describe the shells. Or rather, it is to say something about the power of symbolic language, which is able to cross the gap between subject and object without apparent effort, and to unite them within the single unit of the natural image. Behind such imagery stands the conception of fundamental unity of mind and matter, expanding from the particular oneness of the single image into universal unity, the "*ténébreuse et profonde unité . . . Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies*" of Baudelaire's famous sonnet "Correspondances."

Baudelaire can be mentioned with relevance at this point, certainly not as a source (for whatever contact Yeats had with French symbolism occurred later and even then Baudelaire was not the major influence), but because the conception of imagery, at the beginning of Yeats's work, places him so clearly within the general European tradition of symbolism. None of Yeats's immediate predecessors or contemporaries in England, even those, like Symonds or Dowson, who came into much closer contact with France, is as closely akin to the symbolic language of Baudelaire and his successors. This becomes more apparent still in the lines

. . . a trumpet-twisted shell . . .  
Dreaming of her own melting hues,  
Her gold, her ambers, and her blues . . .

The verb "dreaming" transfers attributes of consciousness into the natural object and establishes the unity of a correspondence, but the content of the dream is itself of great importance for the structure of image: the shell is dreaming, not only of itself, but of its own most striking formal, material features: the very colors by which it was originally perceived. The movement of the image, which started in perception, then fused the perceived object and the perceiving consciousness into one by means of a verbal transfer, now returns to the original perception, making the object itself into the perceiver. From purely perceptual, then metaphorical (or symbolic), the image has become one of self-reflection, using the material properties of the object (the colors) as a means to allow a self-reflective consciousness to originate. In the process, the center of interest, which first resided in the colors as the qualities by which the object was perceived, has shifted: the idea of a shell endowed with the highest form of human consciousness (self-reflection) is in itself so striking that the colors have lost most of their prominence; what arrests the mind, no doubt, are no longer the "melting hues" but the shell dreaming of its own beauty. The structure of the image has become that of self-reflection. The poet is no longer contemplating a thing in nature, but the workings of his own mind; the outside world is used as a pretext and a mirror, and it loses all its substance. Imagery by "correspondences" ends up in self-reflection, and the dominant mood of Yeats's earliest poetry is one of narcissistic self-contemplation:

. . . they are always listening,  
The dewdrops, for the sound of their own dropping.  
(*"The Sad Shepherd," Var., p. 68*)

A parrot sways upon a tree,  
Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea.  
(*"The Indian to His Love," Var., p. 77*)<sup>17</sup>

One could speculate at length how a young poet, living in the peripheral, eccentric atmosphere of Dublin and the J. E. Yeats family,<sup>18</sup> came to write as by instinct in a style which

has no immediate antecedent in the English poetry of his day. It was natural enough for Mallarmé to think of himself as one who had to begin where Baudelaire left off,<sup>19</sup> but much more difficult to explain how Yeats found himself unknowingly in the same predicament. His early poetic manner bears the obvious marks of the English romantic and post-romantic tradition, of Tennyson and Swinburne, of the romantic conception of Spenserian sensual imagery as it appears in Keats and in the Pre-Raphaelites, of Shelley's near-emblematic symbolism.<sup>20</sup> None of these influences, however, can account for the combination of imagery founded on correspondences between mind and matter, with conscious self-contemplation, a combination which characterizes French rather than English poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century. Later, Yeats will discover his affinities with the *symbolistes*, but his poetry is never closer to theirs than before 1885, when he had little or no knowledge of their work.

The answer lies for the main part in the universal nature of the poetic consciousness, which is bound to encounter similar problems and to attempt similar stylistic devices, regardless of actual contact or influence. Some very general common sources exist, however, which, if they do not explain the deeper affinity, give it at least some basis in historical fact. The speculations of the Dublin Theosophical Society, even before Yeats's initiation to the *Prophetic Books* of Blake,<sup>21</sup> were his means of access to the Neoplatonic and occult tradition (and, indirectly, to the poetry of the Renaissance), a tradition which had acted deeply on late French romanticism and on symbolism, but found few adepts among the English poets of the same period. The current, it seems, was strong enough to steer Yeats closer to a French movement which he did not know than to the English tradition in which he was raised. Theosophy led to Blake and his Swedenborgian origins, and Yeats's theoretical justifications for his early style sound remarkably like Baudelaire's often quoted statement on Swedenborg:

. . . D'ailleurs Swedenborg, qui possédait une âme bien plus grande (que Fourier), nous avait déjà enseigné que *le ciel est un très grand*

homme; que tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum, dans le *spirituel* comme dans le *naturel*, est significatif, réciproque, converse, *correspondant*. Lavater, limitant au visage de l'homme la démonstration de l'universelle vérité, nous avait traduit le sens *spirituel* du contour, de la forme, de la dimension. Si nous étendons la démonstration . . . nous arrivons à cette vérité que tout est hiéroglyphique, et nous savons que les symboles ne sont obscurs que d'une manière relative, c'est-à-dire selon la pureté, la bonne volonté ou la clairvoyance native des âmes. Or, qu'est-ce qu'un poète (je prends le mot dans son acception la plus large), si ce n'est un traducteur, un déchiffreur? Chez les excellents poètes, il n'y a pas de métaphore, de comparaison ou d'épithète qui ne soit d'une adaptation mathématiquement exacte dans la circonstance actuelle, parce que ces comparaisons, ces métaphores et ces épithètes sont puisées dans l'inépuisable fonds de l'*universelle analogie*, et qu'elles ne peuvent être puisées ailleurs.

(*"Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains: Victor Hugo"*)

Yeats's defense of his style dates from 1900, but it fits his earliest manner, before 1885, better than his writing at the turn of the century:

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 emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us.

(*Ideas of Good and Evil, "The Symbolism of Poetry,"* p. 243)

The formal elements mentioned as the starting point of the image appear as the most striking similarity between the two quotations: "All sounds, all colours, all forms" in Yeats, "forme,

mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum" and later "contour, forme, dimension" in Baudelaire. As the image of the shell started with an actual perception of a natural shell

Not such as are in Newton's metaphor,  
But actual shells of Rosses' level shore

—as Yeats will put it in a much later poem—so the deciphering of the poet starts in his "reading" of *nature* as the direct emanation of the divine, leading, from analogy to analogy, to the revealed unity of the epiphany, "the god it calls among us." Such images are natural images in the sense stated by Hölderlin's line, images which originate "like flowers" originate, as emulators of nature. It remains problematic how analogies between sensual, material elements (as in synaesthesia) can expand to become analogies between the material and the spiritual. Baudelaire speaks of "*traduire le sens spirituel du contour*" and of correspondences "*dans le spirituel comme dans le naturel*," but he does not mention the much more problematic analogy "*du spirituel au naturel*" which is to make the translation possible. In "*Correspondances*," for instance, the analogy remains confined between properties of finite matter, "*Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent*," until the transition to the spiritual is made by the word "*infini*" in the line, "*Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies*."

"*Infini*" is an ambiguous term in this context; it has, of course, strong transcendental connotations but, in the material reality of the poem, it refers to the tenuous, volatile nature of "parfums." One could say that the presence of the divine is discovered by the material imagination meditating on the experience of "parfums." A sensibility which operates in this manner is perfectly consistent as long as it remains pantheistic and admits to the ontological supremacy of the natural object. From the moment, however, that it transfers the power of epiphany into words, into the constitutive rather than the mimetic power of language, it necessarily becomes ambivalent—like the phrase "*choses infinies*" in this poem. The experience, as such, is altogether coherent, but its linguistic equivalence

falls prey to the logical discontinuity that disrupts the natural image.

This discontinuity, often concealed within the image itself, becomes explicit on the thematic level, in the complicated attitude of such poets toward nature. One does not have to go beyond the first two of Yeats's collected poems to observe this discrepancy in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" and its counterpiece "The Sad Shepherd."<sup>22</sup> The first poem is a complex juxtaposition of themes, but in terms of material imagery it has a very clear programmatic purpose: it states the superiority of the self-reflective, "symbolist" image over its romantic forerunner. The latter is Arcadian, pastoral, a song "of old earth's dreamy youth,"<sup>23</sup> the expression of a nostalgic pantheism in a mimetic image of earth, flowers, and woods. Yeats opposed the image of the "shell" to the pastoral symbols of wood and earth; the superiority of the shell resides in its echo-harboring structure; it is no longer sheer nature, impressing itself upon a passively receptive, awe-inspired consciousness, but the nature-as-mirror which appears in the formerly quoted passage from *Oisín*. Echo suggests Narcissus and "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" can serve as a poetically successful statement of Yeats's earliest, narcissistic conception of the image. The shell is only a mirror for a dream which is no longer that of nature, but the subjective dream of a human imagination; consequently the interest has shifted from the shell to the human words spoken to the shell by the shepherd-poet. Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent replacement of the object by its reflection, the image remains altogether conditioned by the existence of this object and the poem has to be presented as a natural scene:

Go gather by the humming sea  
Some twisted, echo-harboring shell,  
And to its lips thy story tell . . .

(*Var.*, p. 66)

We are *told* about the miracle of reflection, but what we *see* is a scene by the seashore. To the extent that the shell is a thing

in nature, the image remains in essence natural, although it is mediated by reflection and thus at least once removed from nature. "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" still remains a pastoral poem in praise of nature.

It is also an ironic poem, since shells are not likely to reword "in melodious guile" stories told to their lips. The juxtaposition of a natural setting with a supernatural event (the shell's replying) is self-defeating and the poem reveals the inner absurdity of the natural image in its unwarranted assertion

Go gather by the humming sea  
Some twisted, echo-harboring shell,  
And to its lips thy story tell,  
And they thy comforters will be,  
Reworking in melodious guile  
Thy fretful words a little while . . .

The failure is made explicit in "The Sad Shepherd" where the same shell behaves as a natural shell would behave, and shatters the "song" of consciousness into confusion:

Then he sang softly nigh the pearly rim;  
But the sad dweller by the sea-ways lone  
Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan . . .

(*Var.*, p. 69)

Taken together, the two songs constitute an exact retelling of the Narcissus myth: the reflection can be left to exist as a mere phantom of the self without substantial existence, but when reached for as if it were a material thing it dissolves into chaos:

Mais ne vous flattez pas de le changer d'empire.  
Ce cristal est son vrai séjour;  
Les efforts mêmes de l'amour!  
Ne le sauraient de l'onde extraire qu'il n'expire . . .

(Paul Valéry, "Fragment du Narcisse")

The treatment of nature remains contradictory: as the necessary starting point of the image, "la première en date, la nature . . ." (Mallarmé, "Bucolique,"), it is indispensable, but

as the entity which, by its mere presence, voids the poet's hope to find permanence in words, it is his worst enemy. It throws him back upon himself, in sterile self-contemplation, "Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea."

The same paradoxical combination occurs in Baudelaire: a unity founded on a problematic analogy between matter and spirit: praise of the artifice and of reflected *forms* in a language whose poetic tenor is conditioned by material and tactile sensations. The resulting equilibrium is a paralysis rather than a resolution, as if the author of "Correspondances" were bound to become, by the same token, also the author of "L'Irrémédiable":

Un navire pris dans le pôle,  
Comme en un piège de cristal,  
Cherchant par quel détroit fatal  
Il est tombé dans cette geôle;

. . .  
Tête-à-tête sombre et limpide  
Qu'un coeur devenu son miroir!  
Puits de Vérité, clair et noir,  
Où tremble une étoile livide, . . .

The contradiction is spelled out as a conscious theme in a famous Baudelaire poem much admired by Valéry, "L'Homme et la Mer":

Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!  
La mer est ton miroir; tu contemples ton âme  
Dans le déroulement infini de sa lame,  
Et ton esprit n'est pas un gouffre moins amer.  
Tu te plais à plonger au sein de ton image;  
Tu l'embrasses des yeux et des bras, et ton coeur  
Se distrait quelquefois de ta propre rumeur  
Au bruit de cette plainte indomptable et sauvage.  
Vous êtes tous les deux ténébreux et discrets:  
Homme, nul n'a sondé le fond de tes abîmes;  
Ô mer, nul ne connaît tes richesses intimes,  
Tant vous êtes jaloux de garder vos secrets!

Et cependant voilà des siècles innombrables  
Que vous vous combattez sans pitié ni remord,  
Tellement vous aimez le carnage et la mort,  
Ô lutteurs éternels, ô frères implacables!

Yeats stresses the struggle with nature rather than the brotherhood, the "lutteurs éternels" rather than the "frères implacables." One does not expect pantheistic bliss from a poet who deliberately made his collected poems start with two lines that are like the epitaph of romantic pastoralism:

The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy . . .<sup>24</sup>

(Var., p. 64)

Allusions to natural harmony occur only in the youthful correspondence: as early as 1888, Yeats already looks back nostalgically toward the time when he was writing *The Island of Statues*: "I was then living a quite harmonious poetic life. Never thinking out of my depth. Always harmonious, narrow, calm. Taking small interest in people but most ardently moved by the more minute kinds of natural beauty . . . The 'Island' was the last. Since I have left the 'Island,' I have been going about on shoreless seas . . ." <sup>25</sup> The predominant mood of the early poems is a combination of an unwanted tranquillity, very different from the peaceful, simple harmony with nature alluded to in this letter, and the restlessness that forces all Yeats's early heroes out on aimless wanderings, "made / To wander by their melancholy minds" (Var., p. 72) in order to escape, no doubt, from their narcissistic predicament. The first five lines of "The Indian to His Love" summarizes this mood:

The island dreams under the dawn  
And great boughs drop tranquillity;  
The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,  
A parrot sways upon a tree,  
Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea.<sup>26</sup>

To set out on a poetic career with a style that is so hyper-conscious, so obviously "late" or even decadent, might well

have led to total paralysis, to the conviction that little was left to discover although the existing predicament was well-nigh intolerable. Whether inherited by way of his followers, by direct contact with the work, or intuitively rediscovered, Baudelaire's situation is a difficult legacy to bear. Mallarmé's "solution," regardless of whether it can be called successful, allows for no imitation. The works of most modern poets—Valéry, Claudel, Rilke, George, Hofmannsthal—are instances of the struggle to escape from the narcissistic imagery ingrained in symbolism, and the difficulty of their poetry reflects, often enough, the failure of their attempt. Yeats's second and third volumes of poetry, *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), represent his attempt to overcome the contradiction inherent in the natural image, a contradiction of which symbolist imagery is well aware but which it cannot resolve.

So little change in general theme, tone, and rhythm separates Yeats's first from his second volume of poetry that both are often linked together, with *The Wind among the Reeds*, under the general heading of his "early manner," in contrast to the poems written after 1900. However, the change in image structure that occurs at this point is perhaps more important than any other stylistic change in Yeats's development. Some of the most important characteristics of the entire work are determined by the transformation that takes place at this time; it is the first clear appearance of a problem which will never be overcome.

At first sight, it might seem as if many of the images from the first volume are simply carried over to the second. Two poems like "Ephemera" (from the 1889 volume) and "The White Birds" (from the 1892 volume) are not only strikingly similar in theme—earthly love first destroyed by time, then transcended by a promise of eternal love in some other, supernatural realm—but they have some of the main images in common. Stars and meteors appear in both:

How far away the stars seem, and how far  
Is our first kiss . . .

(*Var.*, p. 80, "Ephemera," ll. 8–9)

The woods were round them, and the yellow leaves  
Fell like faint meteors in the gloom, and once  
A rabbit old and lame limped down the path . . .

(*Ibid.*, ll. 13–15)

As in the other instances from the earliest poetry, the images of stars and meteors appear here, among several other natural things (leaves, rabbits, woods, etc.), as details in a landscape. The meteor is used as the second term of a simile to make a certain detail more vivid, more picturesque, and the entire poem is set up as a visible scene, organized in terms of the graphic reality of a picture.

Consider now the following passage from "The White Birds":

I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on  
the foam of the sea!  
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it can fade  
and flee;  
And the flame of the blue star of twilight, hung low  
on the rim of the sky,  
Has awaked in our hearts, my beloved, a sadness that  
may not die.

A weariness comes from those dreamers, dew-  
dabbled, the lily and rose;  
Ah, dream not of them, my beloved, the flame of the  
meteor that goes,  
Or the flame of the blue star that lingers hung low  
in the fall of the dew:  
For I would we were changed to white birds on the  
wandering foam; I and you!

(*Var.*, p. 121–22)

The poem is inspired by a remark made by Maud Gonne at a specific time and place,<sup>27</sup> but nothing of the concrete circum-

stance remains. "Meteor," "star," "lily," "rose," "white birds," etc. are still names of objects in nature, but no suggestion is made that the poet or his beloved are actually seeing any of them. The original perception of the object is entirely lacking. Nor is the poem organized in terms of a concrete and natural arrangement of things, as is the case for the landscape of "Ephemera"; instead, the structure is determined by a pattern of relationships between the key images themselves. The meteor and the blue star are associated as both partaking of the elemental nature of fire; they seem to correspond to the rose and the lily respectively, and are transcended by the white birds, whose elemental nature is that of water as opposed to fire:

Soon far from the rose and the lily and fret of the  
flames would we be,  
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out  
on the foam of the sea!

(Var., p. 122)

Subtler shades are conveyed by the properties of the images; the nature of the distinction between the realm of the meteor and that of the star is never stated, but one is led to believe that the second is closer to the final reconciliation than the first. The star "lingers . . . in the fall of the dew," and is thus clearly of a less fiery nature than the meteor; it also corresponds to the lily, which is white like the birds, and thus in all respects closer to the ultimate fulfillment. The autobiographical pretext for the poem bears this out; the plea for the rejection of passionate and sensual love in favor of platonic contemplation is a continuing obsession in Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne.

A remarkable new element appears here; a functional and structural difference distinguishes words like "star" and "meteor" as they appear in "Ephemera" from those same words in "The White Birds." In "Ephemera," they are mimetic nouns referring to natural objects which the poet claims to present to us as perceived by him. In "The White Birds," the same nouns

have no mimetic referent whatever; in no way can it be said that the poem is "about" actual stars or actual meteors; the images have given up all pretense at being natural objects and have become something else. They are taken from the literary tradition and receive their meaning from traditional or personal, but not from natural associations—in the same way that the colors of a national banner are determined, not by analogy with nature, but by the decree of an independent will. Since this distinction is of crucial importance in an interpretation of Yeats, we need a word to discriminate the natural image from the kind of image that appears in "The White Birds." Yeats himself, groping for a term, sometimes uses "symbols" or "profound symbols" or "images that are living souls" before settling, quite consistently, for "emblems." In Yeats's vocabulary—and we do not have to inquire here as to whether this usage is in conformity with the history of the word—an emblem is defined as "having its meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right"<sup>28</sup>—to which must be added that, in this context, "traditional" is synonymous with "divine." I will henceforth use the term "emblem" in this particular sense, which is Yeats's own.

Literary associations are obvious in the case of the lily and the rose, hackneyed emblems that abound in the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>29</sup> But the meteor comes from Shelley, who uses it not as an emblem, but as a natural image often associated with the sun:

The sanguine Sunrise, with his meteor eyes,  
And his burning plumes outspread,  
Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,  
When the morning star shines dead;

("The Cloud")

Association of the meteor with the sun implies association of the blue star with the moon; such emblematic patterns receive added meaning from related passages in Yeats's early prose: "In ancient times, it seems to me that Blake, who for all his protest was glad to be alive, and ever spoke of his gladness,

would have worshipped in some chapel of the Sun, and that Keats, who accepted life gladly though with 'a delicious diligent indolence,' would have worshipped in some chapel of the Moon, but that Shelley, who hated life because he sought 'more in life than any understood,' would have wandered, lost in a ceaseless reverie, in some chapel of the Star of infinite desire" (*IoGE*, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," p. 137). The same thematic and emblematic pattern that is in "The White Birds" is repeated and one becomes aware that such a conventional appearing poem is linked to an intricate cluster of emblems: fire and water, lily and rose, meteor and star transcended by the white birds, sun and moon transcended by the "star of infinite desire," red and blue by white, Blake and Keats by Shelley, etc. Those associations remain far from constant, but they always remain in existence, even when they change or diversify their meaning. The sun-moon opposition undergoes baffling, but highly revealing, variations; Keats appears in *A Vision* associated, as he would be here, with beautiful women; and the birds, an early appearance of a central emblem, recur in an infinite variety of forms until the very last poems. One is tempted to organize and interpret Yeats's poetry in terms of his manipulation of emblems.

In so doing, however, one would not reach the central intent out of which this poetry originates. Yeats's work, seen in its entirety, is not a closed system of emblems that gain in meaning and depth as he meditates on their mythological or religious universality. He often claims this to be the case, and in *The Wind among the Reeds* as well as in essays written around the same time and gathered in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, he comes very close to practicing what he advocates. A certain image born as by chance out of a natural perception, or a literary reminiscence, or an arbitrary act of the imagination becomes meaningful when its universality is revealed, either because it recurs, like a Jungian archetype, in a variety of separate traditions, or because its association with a certain experience is sanctioned by a supernatural vision; in both cases, the "meaning" of the emblem is determined by a divine decision and it ap-

pears as the means of access to an understanding of the will of God. The natural images of the earliest volume are transformed into emblems which claim to be the divine *logos*. The natural image is in fact an emblem which the poet has not yet deciphered and identified as such. Shelley, for instance, was writing in terms of emblems without being altogether aware of it, still half deluded in his belief that his divinely inspired, recurrent symbols were natural images:

One finds in his [Shelley's] poetry, besides innumerable images that have not the definiteness of symbols, many images that are certainly symbols, and as the years went by he began to use these with a more and more deliberately symbolic purpose. I imagine that, when he wrote his earlier poems, he allowed the subconscious life to lay its hands so firmly upon the rudder of his imagination, that he was little conscious of the abstract meaning of the images that rose in what seemed the idleness of his mind. Any one who has any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning, if indeed they do not delude one into the dream that they are meaningless, one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has any one, who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day in some old book or on some old monument, a strange or intricate image, that had floated up before him, and grown perhaps dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but a part of some great memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age . . . Shelley understood this . . . but whether he understood that the great memory is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell.

(*IoGE*, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," pp. 112-14)

Yeats sees himself, at that time,<sup>30</sup> as a more conscious Shelley who would be well aware that his spontaneous images are signals that reach him from a divine realm, and that the task of his poetry consists in recording those signals and using them as the key to decipher the ordered system of which they are the visible part. In 1908, he describes the genesis of *The Wind among the Reeds* in the same manner: "When I wrote these poems I had so meditated over the images that came to me in



writing 'Ballads and Lyrics,' 'The Rose,' and 'The Wanderings of Oisín,' and other images from Irish folk-lore, that they had become true symbols. I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very unlike dreaming, when these images took upon themselves what seemed an independent life and became part of a mystic language, which seemed always as if it would bring me some strange revelation" (from a note in vol. 1 of the Stratford edition, p. 227, also in *Var.*, p. 800).

Images of this kind differ radically from the Baudelairian symbol. The use of emblems is alien to French symbolism; Baudelaire is persistently obsessed with the texture of matter and of sensation; as for Mallarmé's highly intellectualized images, they are still founded on the ontological priority of natural things, and his conception of the work as a historical reality is aimed primarily toward the future, with no consideration of the tradition except as a record of failures. He represents even such an obviously emblematic object as a tombstone as if it were a natural thing: "Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur . . ." ("Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe,"). With the exception of Gérard de Nerval, who is an isolated and very special case,<sup>31</sup> the symbolists use emblems only as ornament and decoration, while their original inventions always stem from the domain of the image.

It may seem a minor matter when Yeats calls natural images nothing but disguised, not yet understood emblems, but it represents a radical departure from one of the main tenets of the Western poetic tradition. This tradition conceives of the *logos* as incarnate and locates divine essence in the object, not in the unmediated *word* of God. Romanticism and symbolism, with their avowed or occult pantheistic overtones and nostalgias, belong in that tradition. But when nature itself is considered a mere sign, or a mouthpiece without actual substance, then one has left the mainstream of the tradition and embarked "on strange seas of thought." We can understand and share in Hölderlin's nostalgia for a time when words will originate like flowers; but it is much more difficult to under-

stand a conception of the emblem which reverses the process and wants flowers to originate as if they were words. "*Aussi peut-être un jour,*" writes Balzac in *Louis Lambert*, "*le sens inverse de l'Et verbum caro factum est sera-t-il le résumé d'un nouvel évangile qui dira: Et la chair se fera le Verbe, elle deviendra la Parole de Dieu.*" This would indeed require a "nouvel évangile" and it would lead to a very different poetry from the one we know at present. It is not surprising that Yeats has to go far afield and make ample use of his imagination in order to find examples and antecedents for this kind of imagery. When Western art made extensive use of emblems, during the Middle Ages, it was to illustrate a dogma which states the withdrawal of the divine from anything but matter; afterward, poets could only celebrate the divine in natural images of earth and light. The Renaissance poets of the sixteenth century try in vain to keep their emblems from turning into pantheistic, Hellenic images—a predominant tension from Spenser to Milton, from Ronsard to Racine—and romanticism, experiencing divine absence in the form of an alienation from nature, makes the natural image into its foremost stylistic device. Yeats's return to the emblem would seem to represent a very radical reaction.

He had, of course, the very recent example of the Pre-Raphaelites behind him, who had been writing emblematic poetry of a kind. But, as one would expect from a group so closely related to the plastic arts, their neo-medieval emblems are predominantly decorative and inspired by a concern for graphic values. It is one of the ironies of Yeats's situation that when, in *The Wind among the Reeds* and in the poetic drama *The Shadowy Waters*, he is experimenting with a very different and new kind of poetry, he appears more derivative, more conventionally Pre-Raphaelite than before. His claims for the emblem, however, go far beyond anything dreamed of by his predecessors; he intends to write divine voices into existence and to rediscover the long-lost unity between man and the gods, of which traces have been preserved in the literary tradition: "If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen plough-

ing by its margin, or the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings,<sup>32</sup> I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality . . ." (*IoGE*, "The Symbolism of Poetry," p. 251). This is no longer an epiphany, for it substitutes "names and meanings" for the thing itself and, in gnostic fashion, searches for Being not in the divinely created thing, but in language as the vessel of divine intellect. Because he is aware of the ontological assumptions that stand behind emblematic imagery, Yeats reaches out far beyond his Pre-Raphaelite forerunners.

It is important to remember that Yeats's emblematic style was preceded, in his development, by a kind of imagery more in keeping with the romantic and symbolist tradition. This casts a different light on the reasons that may have prompted the change; instead of being the result of an irresistible command similar to a divine annunciation or, at the very least, a spiritual exercise leading up to such an annunciation, the evolution from image to emblem might well be Yeats's strategic attempt to disentangle himself from the predicament reflected in his earliest style. Hence the effort, in the later work, to bridge or, rather, to conceal the gap that separates the emblem from the natural image. Apparently, Yeats's "conversion" to an emblematic conception of language is never complete. In the last analysis, he remains loyal to natural things and to the poetic tradition of which he is the heir, although he fully realizes that it can only lead him to a narcissistic paralysis. The resulting conflict determines the subsequent development of his poetry.

Evidence of this conflict appears already during the period of *The Wind among the Reeds* in certain hesitations and dissatisfactions expressed in the critical essays. The articles from *Ideas of Good and Evil* do not openly make the distinction between the two kinds of imagery; the previous quotation from "The Symbolism of Poetry," for instance, contains a claim of unity rooted in the experience of matter, but the essay as a whole states the superiority of emblems over images, without apparent awareness of the contradiction between the two at-

titudes. A revealing passage from "Symbolism in Painting" however, shows that Yeats is aware of the problem: ". . . the other day, . . . I sat for my portrait to a German Symbolist in Paris, whose talk was all for his love for Symbolism and his hatred for Allegory . . . The only symbols he cared for were the shapes and motions of the body; ears hidden by the hair, to make one think of a mind busy with inner voices; and a head so bent that back and neck made the one curve, as in Blake's 'Vision of Bloodthirstiness,' to call up an emotion of bodily strength; and he would not even put a lily, or a rose, or a poppy into a picture to express purity, or love, or sleep, because he thought such emblems were allegorical, and had their meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right" (*IoGE*, pp. 227ff.). This puts the case of image versus emblem very clearly, and indicates some impatience on Yeats's behalf with what is still, in 1898, his dominant manner. He goes on to offer an equally revealing defense of the emblem: "I said that the rose, and the lily, and the poppy were so married, by their colour and their odour, and their use, to love and purity and sleep, or to other symbols of love and purity and sleep, and had been so long part of the imagination of the world, that a symbolist might use them to help out his meaning without becoming an allegorist. . . ."

A very characteristic shift occurs in this argument: if the image of the lily suggests purity because of its whiteness, then the imagination will create the metaphor by meditating on the particular texture of whiteness proper to the lily, and expand this material perception until it becomes linked with a certain experience of consciousness, such as purity. What matters is the connection between whiteness and purity and, to be successful, the metaphor has to discover the link anew, make it originate at this moment, purity originating "as flowers originate." The distortion in Yeats's argument is introduced by putting the "use" of the symbol lily on the same plane with its odor and color, when both belong to altogether different realms. The permanence of the odor and the color resides in the thing itself, while that of the use resides in the will of man,

or of a god acting through man. The former leads to a (problematic) vision of unity that transcends the opposition between object and subject, while the latter finds unity preserved in language as the carrier of a divine, and therefore permanently repeated, pattern of experience; it postulates as an act of faith that the divine is immediately and audibly present to human consciousness in the very entity—language—that is the distinctive attribute of this consciousness.

A poetics based on this faith will, like most medieval art, be allegorical without being in the least apologetic about it: the meaning of the emblem is revealed by a key and this key is given *a priori*, as the divine order itself. It may be realistic, as much allegorical art is realistic, not because it desires to equal nature by imitation, but in order to make certain that the emblems will be easily recognized and read, like a clear handwriting; medieval realism is a form of calligraphy. But it will not be metaphorical like Hölderlin's "words," or Baudelaire's "parfums" or Yeats's "shells." Therefore, Yeats soon wearies of a purely emblematic style, dismisses it as allegory or more "embroideries" and returns, after 1900, to what seems to be a more natural kind of image. This would suffice to indicate that, although he is conscious of the redeeming power that the emblem might possess for him, it cannot satisfy him; his real torment remains that of the romantic alienation from matter. *The Wind among the Reeds* failed to bring to its author the exhilaration of self-renewal: the style is not really new because the underlying problem has not changed and because the emblems are in reality pseudo-emblems, dead allegories that cover up the defeat of the natural image.

The conflict between image and emblem leads to the development of a thematic pattern which comes into full view around this time. From *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* on, there prevails an almost obsessive recurrence of the theme of apocalyptic death as the climactic dénouement of almost all poems. This thematic development reflects what is in reality a stylistic tension—keeping in mind that style, as well and often more candidly than theme, is shaped by intent.

In the earliest work, the theme of death appeared in close association with that of stillness and repose. "The Island of Statues" has to do with death as the price one has to pay to move from a natural, Arcadian world into another realm, very dimly and vaguely characterized in some of the most promising bad verse since Keats's early "I stood tip-toe . . ." or "Sleep and Poetry."<sup>33</sup> Among the rewards of the supernatural world, the most specific is a form of eternal peace:

hast thou never heard  
Mid bubbling leaves a wandering song-rapt bird  
Going the forest through, with flutings weak;  
Or hast thou never seen, with visage meek,  
A hoary hunter leaning on his bow,  
To watch thee pass? Yet deeper than men know  
These are at peace.

(Var., p. 672, ll. 153ff.)<sup>34</sup>

This quiet is a counterpart for the restlessness which makes Yeats's early heroes embark on impossible quests, passively lured away, as by a supernatural temptation, from their own selves or their own countries, longing for what they never really had to leave, though refusing to accept as their own what is immediately accessible. They are voluntary exiles, whose eagerness to leave is only surpassed by their desire to return, and who remain condemned to aimless "wanderings." Their restlessness is accompanied, naturally enough, by a simultaneous longing for the exact opposite: total quiet and repose. The theme of quiet is abundantly present in Yeats's earliest poetry, both explicitly designating the ideal mood to which he aspires, and implicitly, in the repetitive, lilting rhythms and sound of several—though by no means all—among his early poems.<sup>35</sup> Answering a friend who had asked for an explanation of one of the poems in this vein, Yeats writes: "You ask me what is the meaning of 'She who dwelt among the Sycamores.' She is the spirit of quiet. The poem means that those who in youth and childhood wander alone in woods and in wild places, ever after carry in their hearts a secret well of quietness and that they always long for rest and to get away from

the noise and rumour of the world."<sup>36</sup> The pursuit of quiet or its corollary, the disturbance of quiet by the intrusion of the world, is an ever-recurring theme throughout the early poems. "The Wanderings of Oisín" itself is an outstanding example. As Russell K. Alspach has shown,<sup>37</sup> the main source for this poem, Michael Comyn's *The Lay of Oisín*, has a closely similar plot; however, though mention is made of a Land of Victories next to the traditional Land of the Young, there is no trace of what becomes with Yeats the third and final realm visited by Niamh and Oisín, the land of repose and forgetfulness. This is his own invention. Moreover, from a letter to Katherine Tynan (after September 6, 1888),<sup>38</sup> we know that the third part gave him by far the greatest satisfaction; for the second edition in 1895 (the first is from 1889), he rewrote and improved the two first parts extensively; but, except for minor changes, the third remained as it was. Clearly, the theme closest to him had "got itself expressed" much better than the others. The quietest mood has an almost irresistible tendency to push itself into the foreground, and it is closely associated with the theme of death.

There is nothing new or unusual about this association of themes, or about the ambiguity which makes quiet appear as both desirable and dangerous: this is a dominant pattern in romantic poetry. One thinks of Keats's "cold pastoral":

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time

where the eternity of the work of art implies a funeral urn and a sacrifice; or of the symbol of the nightingale, the "immortal" bird whose song is the desire for death; or perhaps most of all of the Cave of Quietude in *Endymion*:

But few have ever felt how calm and well  
Sleep may be had in that deep den of all.  
There anguish does not sting; nor pleasure pall:  
Woe-hurricanes beat ever at the gate,  
Yet all is still within and desolate.  
Beset with plainful gusts, within ye hear

No sound so loud as when on curtain'd bier  
The death-watch tick is stifled . . .

(*Endymion* IV.524ff.)

Or one thinks of Wordsworth, whose states of suspended, fragile immobility and silence have a strangely superhuman quality as if they, too, could only occur on the far side of death. Still, in *Igitur*, the same association is present when the "death" of truth is described as "un calme narcotique de moi pur long-temps rêvé" (I.3).

The allusion to Mallarmé helps us to understand how the association between quietness and death, so frequently found in romanticism, must be distinguished from the same association in Yeats, when natural images begin to give way to emblems. Death in *Igitur* is the sacrifice of the natural part of man to the truth of conscious poetic language. With less emphasis on truth and consciousness but no essential difference, this is also what death means for Keats: the necessary sacrifice of the gods of nature to the gods of art, of Saturn to Apollo. Keats chose the myth of the battle of the Titans as the subject for his projected romantic epic, and this myth contains the archetype of the romantic experience, with all its tragic and elegiac connotations. The all-pervading stillness in the opening lines of *Hyperion*

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale  
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,  
Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,  
Still as the silence round about his lair; . . .

is indeed the stillness of Yeats's dead woods of Arcady. But Apollo's song is the reward for this sacrifice: it narrates this death in the language which survives after the sacrifice has been accomplished. Saturn's death marks the end of all hope that a natural image could contain natural objects as presences, i.e., without mediation, but it creates the possibility of another kind of mediable poetic language. Wordsworth, too, with his unshakable faith in the mimetic power of natural speech, postpones the restoration of innocence till the passage of a cosmic

cataclysm has cleansed the world as it now exists.<sup>39</sup> In all those cases, language remains as the lone survivor after the tragic death of the gods that inhabit natural substances, and it becomes the sole carrier of time. It contains the potential future of a new beginning, the next gyre in Mallarmé's spiral. "Tout existe," said Mallarmé, "pour aboutir à un Livre" and this "tout," as Mallarmé's work and the entire romantic tradition testifies, emphatically includes death, our death to the extent that we partake in the existence of natural things.

But the death that appears in Yeats's *The Wind among the Reeds* is different. It is not the *cost* one has to pay for a possible fulfillment, as was still the case in "The Island of Statues"; it is in itself that fulfillment. "Tout existe," Yeats could have said in paraphrase of Mallarmé, "pour aboutir à la mort." Whether death be dreaded in terror or fervently prayed for, it always appears as an absolute annihilation beyond which nothing earthly can survive. Practically all the poems in the book gravitate around the single theme, "the battle between the manifest world and the ancestral darkness at the end of all things" in which "darkness . . . will at last destroy the gods and the world."<sup>40</sup> This "end of all things" is represented by a variety of emblems drawn from several traditions: the cry of the curlew, the death-pale deer, the galloping horses, the boar without bristles, etc. The title of the volume itself, which originally appears in connection with the idea of eternity,<sup>41</sup> more and more acquires an apocalyptic significance: "God will accomplish his last judgment, first in one man's mind and then in another. He is always planning last judgments. And yet it takes a long time and that is why he laments in the wind and in the reeds and in the cries of the curlews."<sup>42</sup> The last judgment means cosmic annihilation—"God burning Nature with a kiss"—as well as the end of language, man "struck dumb in the simplicity of fire," his tongue become a stone.<sup>43</sup> In its most extreme form, as in Mallarmé's *Coup de Dés*, the language of the image also has a destructive power on a cosmic scale, but there always remains the tenuous counterweight of the Work, the "constellation," as a possible survival. The nihilism of *The*

*Wind among the Reeds* is more absolute, without any positive counterpart, although it does not stem from a *fin-de-siècle* decadence, or a weariness of the creative faculties. No such concerns torment Yeats, a young and successful poet in search of a new style at a moment when self-renewal is particularly difficult. What looks like romantic agony is primarily the symptom of a stylistic problem common to all post-romantic poetry. In Yeats's case, the nihilism is a consequence of the unresolved conflict between image and emblem.

Theoretically, the emblem should convey a message of hope and joy, the "good tidings" that the voice of God has again been heard, rediscovered in a tradition that was only dimly aware of its eschatological power. Even if the poet feels only on the brink of this discovery, he should speak with the expectation and the fervor that sometimes appear, though rarely without reservations, when Yeats, in his essays, speaks of the great memory as the storehouse of emblems in which divine presence has been preserved. Why is it then that the poetry of *The Wind among the Reeds* is a poetry of terror and annihilation, apocalyptic rather than eschatological? It can only be because Yeats still experiences the Annunciation as an intolerable destruction of nature. The advent of the emblem marks the end of the ontological supremacy of natural substances as repositories of the divine, but this should be a matter of indifference to the poet who no longer expects a revelation to come from the world of nature. "Words alone are certain good . . ." provided they be divinely inspired, and it will be of little moment if the "vegetable glass" of nature will disappear into nothing if touched by their fire, for all reality resides in the flaming word of God. The poet who has really overcome his nostalgia for natural things will be able, as Yeats says of Blake,<sup>44</sup> to face the Last Judgment without any terror. But Yeats has not freed himself from the latent pantheism which is so deeply rooted in the tradition of the West, and for him the "flaming word" of God is still, throughout his poetry, nothing more than the fear of death. The paralysis of death is apparent in the stilted stiffness of his allegorical language. Yeats rebelled, to some

extent, against the style of *The Wind among the Reeds*; the publication of a collection of poems by young Irish poets, edited by George Russell and entitled *New Songs*, confirmed him in his decision, by showing how his own manner would be corrupted by clumsy imitators. He was so sensitive on this point because it brings into the open what he had in fact been doing himself; instead of recording "some strange revelation," he had merely ransacked the tradition and his own early work for images which he could only passively imitate.

The advent of the emblem can still only be celebrated in what fundamentally remains a natural imagery: as long as we see nature being burned up, we cannot feel the "kiss of God." This leads to curious contradictions. A poem like "The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland" (*Var.*, p. 126) is quite unambiguous in its explicit statement: the necessity for complete renunciation of all worldly pleasures and aspirations, love, wealth, fame, and the peace of death, all of them far surpassed by corresponding supernatural experiences. This message is conveyed by creatures—fish in stanza 1, a lug-worm in 2, a knot-grass in 3, worms in 4—that one must assume to be purely emblematic, pertaining to the realm of "sweet, everlasting voices" where no matter exists. Instead, they possess a vivid reality, strengthened by the precise and specific place-names which suggest that they stem from actual observation; there is a fish market, indeed, at Dromahair and there are plenty of lugworms on the sands of Lissadell; as for the "worms that spired about his bones," they are almost naturalistically plausible. Still, it is those very substantial, real things which are made to announce the utter vanity of anything natural. What makes the poem expressively as well as logically odd is that it derives its undeniable effectiveness precisely from the reality of the images; certainly, one remembers the "little silver heads" of the fishes, the "lug-worm with its grey and muddy mouth," "the sands of Lissadell" where "his mind ran all on money cares and fears," the crowd in Dromahair where "his heart hung all upon a silken dress," much better than the vague people

of Faeryland—and that is the very opposite of what the poem sets out to convey.

Yeats will learn to make use of such contradictions later, and play skillfully on the ambiguous status of an imagery which seduces the reader as a natural image while trying to convince him as an emblem—but at this point, several of the best poems from "The Rose" have an attractive but involuntary aura of absurdity about them. In *The Wind among the Reeds* such mixed imagery is no longer tolerated, and all becomes emblem. Still, even here, the emblems have an irresistible tendency to acquire a life of their own, not as the archetypal experiences which they are supposed to reveal, but as slightly ludicrous, plastically picturesque objects—as when, in an altogether otherworldly poem, a deer with no horns becomes, by metamorphosis, a hound with specifically *one* red ear, while a fierce mythological boar without bristles is last seen very realistically, and understandably, exhausted and grunting, after having rooted sun, moon, and stars out of the sky. In later poems, such absurdities will become controlled ironies, but at this time they illustrate the failure of a style which Yeats is soon to abandon, at least in appearance.

When Yeats's next volume of poetry appears in 1903,<sup>45</sup> it contained the first awkward version of a play that introduces a different character: Cuchulain, the man who has ". . . the touch of something hard, repellent yet alluring, self-assertive yet self-immolating."<sup>46</sup> Cuchulain replaces the passive and yielding Oisín as the main hero, and remains so, by and large, till the end. Introducing his new play, Yeats writes: "The first shape of it came to me in a dream, but it changed much in the making, foreshadowing, it may be, a change that may bring a less dream-burdened will into my verses."<sup>47</sup> The accompanying lyrical poems, as well as the play itself, indicate that the change has already taken place: some of the lyrics differ considerably from *The Wind among the Reeds* in texture, with biting, topical allusions and at times an abrupt diction that treats language

cavalierly with nothing of the elaborate decorum of the previous, hieratic manner:

new commonness  
Upon the throne and crying about the streets  
And hanging its paper flowers from post to post, . . .  
("In the Seven Woods," *Var.*, p. 198)

I thought of your beauty, and this arrow,  
Made out of a wild thought, is in my marrow.  
("The Arrow," *Var.*, p. 199)

While he remained silent about the crucial change that took place between his two preceding books, we now have Yeats's own announcement that a new style is being created. The difference, indeed, is made as conspicuous as possible. Such an attitude should inspire caution before accepting an interpretation which Yeats himself seems almost overeager to suggest.

This interpretation is obvious enough. It appears as if Yeats wanted to free himself from the morbid, decadent obsessions of the early poetry by assuming at last his share of worldly responsibilities (*Responsibilities* being indeed the title of one of his next volumes). In this he seems to be following in the footsteps of such other repentant decadents as, to borrow an enumeration from Praz, Swinburne, Barrès, and d'Annunzio.<sup>48</sup> In terms of imagery, the conversion is reflected in a return to the use of natural imagery, a return which can undoubtedly be observed from this volume on. But such tidy and simple schemes have little chance to apply to a poet of genuine complexity; neither was Yeats the man to abandon the transcendental hopes that inspired his early poetry for a mere compromise with reality, on reality's own terms. Even the biographical facts contradict such a notion.<sup>49</sup> One cannot enlist Yeats's work or life in the cause of an attack on aestheticism in the name of social or existential commitments, however noble and desirable they may be. It could be questioned, of course, if the motives that inspire the early work enter under the category of aestheticism. If by aestheticism one means Oscar Wilde, d'Annunzio, or des Esseintes, the practice of a fastidious poetic

discipline as a means of emancipation from moral restrictions, then the answer is negative. But if by aestheticism is meant the use of poetic language as a means to overcome the kind of alienation characteristic of romanticism, then Yeats remains a representative of what could be called, if the term had not been corrupted, the "aestheticism" of all romantic and post-romantic poetry. At any rate, the interpretation of the change in manner that took place around 1900 is best understood in terms of the different kind of imagery that precedes it. The change is decisive in the sense that it leads, after a long period of gestation, to the masterly poetry written after 1916.<sup>50</sup>

It is very revealing that this change, far from being an exhilarating experience, is felt by Yeats himself as a sacrifice and a loss, the loss of what he most wanted to possess. Yeats's own versions of his transformation, in his later autobiographical writings, are ambiguous to the point of incoherence, and complicated by the use of a cryptic emblematic language, very difficult to decipher.<sup>51</sup> But in *On Baile's Strand* itself, we are offered a hardly veiled statement of his true feelings at that time; indeed, most of the poems from *In the Seven Woods* deal with the tragedy of having had to abandon the emblematic style of *The Wind among the Reeds*.

*On Baile's Strand*, like many of the plays, contains an intimate confession, expressed by means of a rather transparent and somewhat mechanical pattern of symbols and emblems.<sup>52</sup> It is a dramatization of Yeats's inner conflict at that time, having to do, in part, with personal matters: his relationship to Maud Gonne and, no doubt, Lady Gregory's well-meaning attempts to make his life more stable and orderly. Much more prominently, however, it deals with problems of poetic style, for the events in Yeats's life tend to become very quickly inseparable from his literary concerns.<sup>53</sup> On one level of meaning, the characters in the play correspond to the different types of style with which Yeats has been experimenting, and the action—Cuchulain unwittingly slaying his son at the instigation of Conchubar—reflects Yeats's despair at having to abandon the purely emblematic style of *The Wind among the Reeds*. The

new poetry will be successful, as Conchubar and his comic equivalence, the blind man, are successful in securing their position as unchallenged rulers. But the true tradition has only contempt for this kind of success, the stability of ordered government and domestic happiness, of natural order and natural imagery. It can only be satisfied by supernatural revelation, direct unity with the Sun to whose realm Cuchulain belongs, in opposition to the lunar, reflected light of Conchubar's rationality.<sup>54</sup> The transmission of the true esoteric tradition is represented in Cuchulain's wish to pass on to his son and heir the "coat" which Yeats will later identify, derisively but explicitly, as representing his early emblematic style ("I made my song a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies / From heel to throat"—*Var.*, p. 320). Cuchulain himself has received it from his solar father, as emblems are inherited from the gods by ways of the literary tradition:

(Spreading out cloak)

Nine queens out of the Country-under-Wave  
Have woven it with the fleeces of the sea  
And they were long embroidering at it . . .

(*Plays*, p. 270)

My father gave me this.

He came to try me, rising up at dawn  
Out of the cold dark of the rich sea.  
He challenged me to battle, but before  
My sword had touched his sword, told me his name,  
Gave me this cloak, and vanished. It was woven  
By women of the Country-under-Wave  
Out of the fleeces of the sea.

(*Plays*, p. 268)

Cuchulain killing his son corresponds to Yeats's turning away from his true heritage, at the instigation of his older, wiser self that knows of the dangers to which his allegiance to the emblem may lead. But this defensive victory of the natural image turns out to be a tragedy: Cuchulain, by his own hand, destroys the tradition of which he was the recipient and, fooled

by a false loyalty to the natural order of things, he fails to see his own strength. The final image of his hopeless fight against the waves can be interpreted in various ways but it is not, at any rate, a symbol of appeased reconciliation. As in "The White Birds" the ultimate destiny is death in the infinity of the sea, but instead of the passive, contented quietism of the early poem, death is now a bitter, absurd, heroic act. And, also as in the early poems, two roads lead to this fulfillment: the solar route of the emblem and the lunar route which is closer to the order of nature. In this particular text, the natural image appears as the unmitigated villain, and all Yeats's sympathies go to the emblem, the loser in the play as well as in the poetry. This stands in contradiction, of course, to the nostalgic longing for natural imagery when, as in *The Wind among the Reeds*, Yeats adopts the solar road of the emblem. Such contradictions are to be expected from a poet who, in his own words, "vacillates" between two extremes that permit of no synthesis or dialectical mediation. At a moment when his work seems to come back to a more concrete kind of poetry, the nostalgia for the supernatural is at its strongest.

Even statements that seem to herald the new manner with unreserved conviction and enthusiasm are still loaded with the particular sophistry which allows Yeats to say two contradictory things at the same time. As stated before, the open, public polemic against the early manner was instigated in part by Yeats's impatience with the anthology of *New Songs*, edited by George Russell; on that occasion, he wrote AE a letter which sounds like a powerful manifesto against his early manner (although the target of his attack is the mawkish *Land of Heart's Desire*, not *The Wind among the Reeds* or *The Shadowy Waters*): "I have been fighting the prevailing decadence for years, and have just got it under foot in my own heart—it is sentiment and sentimental sadness, a womanish introspection . . . Let us have no emotions, however abstract, in which there is not an athletic joy."<sup>55</sup> But this very Nietzschean outcry carefully avoids including the real substance of the early work in the condemnation; Yeats insists that "my own early subjectiveness rises



at rare moments<sup>56</sup> . . . above sentiment to a union with a pure energy of the spirit," and makes a revealing distinction between the spirit, which inspires his early poetry and leads to ecstasy, and the will, which inspires epic and dramatic poetry and leads to joy; the gradation from joy to ecstasy suggests a hierarchy in which the emblematic poetry ranks the highest.<sup>57</sup> The "athletic joy" may at times come close to the ecstasy of divine revelation, but it can be no substitute for it.

Perhaps Yeats's own reservations about his new manner should not be pressed too far; they could be a passing nostalgia, a tolerant fondness of the older for the younger poet. They are a part, however, of a much larger bundle of evidence: not only in his statements *about* the change, but in actual practice, Yeats never really abandoned the emblematic style of *The Wind among the Reeds*. Learning from the failure of this book, he now becomes much more cautious, strategically avoids some of the stylistic pitfalls and masks his real predicament behind a screen of ambiguities which has succeeded in convincing a majority of readers that he is a much more assertive and self-confident, though a much less considerable poet than he really is.

In "Adam's Curse," a poem from *In the Seven Woods* which sounds unlike anything in *The Wind among the Reeds*,<sup>58</sup> appears the following passage:

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
We saw the last embers of daylight die,  
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
About the stars and broke in days and years.

(*Var.*, pp. 205-6)

If this image of the moon is compared with earlier examples of Yeats's imagery—the shell from *Oisín*, the meteor from "The White Birds"—it may seem closer to the earlier of the two. This moon is like the shell in that it does not point to ". . . any of [the moon's] ancient names and meanings" and does not refer us to a myth preserved in the literary tradition. Like the de-

scriptive "trumpet-twisted" that gave the shell visual presence and reality, the "trembling blue-green of the sky" coupled with the indefinite and very un-allegorical article "a moon," makes this into a very specific object, perceived at one particular time by Yeats and his friends, in a real, concrete setting. Unlike the meteor, the moon is a natural presence, and the passage seems to start out from the perception of this presence. In this respect, it is indeed very similar to the natural imagery of *Oisín* and very different from the allegorical emblems of *The Wind among the Reeds*.

Natural presences like the moon from "Adam's Curse" will henceforth appear very frequently. The poems are often given a natural setting and start with the description of a natural scene or a situation of unmistakable reality. Examples abound; "The Wild Swans at Coole" can be taken as typical:

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

(*Var.*, p. 322)<sup>59</sup>

and "Among School Children" is a clear case of a poem starting not with a natural setting, but with a concrete situation:

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;  
A kind old nun in a white hood replies; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 443)<sup>60</sup>

Even when an altogether supernatural realm is being evoked, it is often done in a matter-of-fact, circumstantial manner, as if it were a perception in ordinary time and space—as in "Byzantium"

The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;  
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song  
After great cathedral gong; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 497)

or in "News for the Delphic Oracle"

There all the golden codgers lay,  
There the silver dew, . . .  
Plotinus came and looked about,  
The salt-flakes on his breast, . . .

(*Var.*, pp. 611-12)

From those few examples, taken among many others, it seems indeed as if Yeats solved the dilemma of his *fin-de-siècle* manner by reintroducing the natural imagery to which the later poems owe, in part, their superiority over the earlier ones. Instead of inheriting emblems from the literary and esoteric tradition, the mature poetry goes back to the particular perception in the poet's own experience from which the metaphor originates, "as flowers originate." This original experience may grow into an altogether supernatural vision, but the very fact that, within the span of a single poem, the two can exist side by side without destroying the coherence of the whole, establishes the possibility of unity between them: "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed" ("Supernatural Songs," *Var.*, p. 556). The return to natural images coincides, moreover, with several explicit statements pleading for the necessity to root the image in the concrete substance, the "body" of this world. One does not have to look for examples in the less accessible prose or in the plays, for they appear conspicuously in the most famous poems:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul . . .  
(*"Among School Children," Var.*, p. 445)

Paul Veronese

And all his sacred company  
Imagined bodies all their days  
By the lagoon you love so much,  
For proud, soft, ceremonious proof  
That all must come to sight and touch; . . .  
(*"Michael Robartes and the Dancer," Var.*, p. 386)

Often at evening when a boy  
Would I carry to a friend—  
Hoping more substantial joy  
Did an older mind commend—  
Not such as are in Newton's metaphor,  
But actual shells of Rosses' level shore.  
(*"At Algeciras—A Meditation upon Death," Var.*, p. 494)

What if I bade you leave  
The cavern of the mind?<sup>61</sup>  
There's better exercise  
In the sunlight and wind.  
(*"Those Images," Var.*, p. 600)

For what but eye and ear silence the mind  
With the minute particulars of mankind?  
(*"The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," Var.*, p. 384)

God guard me from those thoughts men think  
In the mind alone;  
He that sings a lasting song  
Thinks in a marrow-bone;  
(*"A Prayer for Old Age," Var.*, p. 553)

To such statements must be added an obvious thematic development: as the imagery becomes more and more concrete and as Yeats grows in years as well as in mastery, the theme of love does not only become much more important, but it becomes much more frankly sexual. This is so evident that it requires no illustration. Love is certainly present as a theme in *Oisín* and in *The Wind among the Reeds*, but, whatever interpretation one chooses to give it, those works are certainly far from being ribald, while one can easily think of the later poems as an exaltation of the body, be it as a way of access to the divine. The gradual sexualization of the poetry, which reaches its extreme point in *Last Poems*, would seem to be one more confirmation of a definitive return to the world of natural images.

Backed by this impressive amount of evidence, it is

tempting to see Yeats as the poet who went further than any in overcoming the separation between mind and matter, the "dissociation of sensibility" that characterizes the romantic heritage. This has been the prevalent opinion among his closest interpreters. It is in this sense, presumably, that Richard Ellmann refers to Yeats as a great "realist"<sup>62</sup> and emphasizes his "affirmative capability,"<sup>63</sup> or that Graham Hough speaks of Yeats as "in love with experience, with the world as it has been"<sup>64</sup> and compares him with Blake, whose salvation "is so deeply attached to the phenomenal world that it cannot bear to think of it except as eternally recurrent"—in opposition to the Buddhist salvation which escapes from the cycle of material reality. The thesis is most consistently argued in Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* where Yeats is presented as the successful seeker for "the reconciling image." The image of the dancer is said to be the supreme instance of the reconciliation (a reconciliation which presupposes, of course, an initial severance) because it contains the ideal attributes of both body and imagination. The author willingly concedes that the reconciliation is not painless, and that it has to happen at some expense to the natural world; hence the morbidity, the death-in-life aspect of the resulting symbol.<sup>65</sup> But the world of reality is never really annihilated, partly because—always according to Mr. Kermode's very convincing argument—the tension between body and imagination becomes itself the subject matter of the poem; life, body, and matter thus enter the work as a necessary part and, although they may at times be under attack or in jeopardy, they can never altogether cease to exist: they are forces in a dialectic able to meet their antithesis on equal terms. Yeats is praised for having begun "Among School Children" with the concrete situation of the first stanza; the passage is necessary because "the Image belongs to life in so far as the artist suffers for it."<sup>66</sup>

Some extrinsic facts prevent unqualified acceptance of this opinion. The first fact, nowise decisive by itself, is Yeats's own description of the new style as a capitulation—but this could be relegated to the "cost" side of the balance sheet and dis-

missed as temporary discouragement, overcome in the obvious gusto of the later work. More disturbing, however, is the predominant tone of the late poetry. Mr. Kermode's main text, understandably enough, is "Among School Children," with its seductively dazzling imagery of unity. But even this poem acquires very different overtones when read within a somewhat larger context. One may well dislike the violence, the invective, and the fundamental strangeness of so many poems, especially (but not only) among the latest ones; one can gloss over the obsessive image, in the last plays, of the poet being murderously cut into pieces by queens and beggars, calling this a literary memory of romantic decadence, a late version of Wilde's *Salomé* or Mallarmé's "Hérodiade." The fact remains that one enters here into a world of cold terror and strident dissonance, far removed from the essentially attractive and reassuring image of the "great-rooted blossomer" and the "body swayed to music." No interpretation will do Yeats justice that fails to account for the controlled violence of the late work.

The main discrepancy in the interpretation of Yeats was again clearly demonstrated on the occasion of a recent book, F. A. C. Wilson's *W. B. Yeats and the Tradition*. Because Mr. Wilson has a strong philosophical interest in Yeats's Neoplatonic sources, he is keenly aware of the use of traditional emblems stemming from that tradition. Consequently, when he comes to the refrain from Part VI of "Meditations in Time of Civil War"

O honey-bees  
Come build in the empty house of the stare  
(*Var.*, p. 425)

he naturally refers to the well-known passage in "Among School Children"

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed, . . .  
(*Var.*, p. 444)

where Yeats himself supplies a note mentioning Porphyry's commentary on the Homeric ode "The Cave of the Nymphs." On the assumption that Yeats uses recurrent emblems, Mr. Wilson concludes that "we are justified in interpreting 'The Stare's Nest by my Window' from the same source."<sup>67</sup> A reviewer took issue with this and protested that all the beauty of the image is lost if one does not see it as a lyrical development founded on an actual perception,<sup>68</sup> and indeed, a note by Yeats mentions a real starling which, at that time, built his nest by his bedroom window. Yeats's notes cannot even be trusted to be necessarily unreliable,<sup>69</sup> but regardless of the authenticity of the starling or the bees, their relevance to this particular poem depends to a large extent on an emblematic reading derived from Porphyry. In the context of Section VI, the bees are treated in antithesis to the violence and destructiveness of the war; read as natural images, they appear as symbols of peace and abundance:

. . .  
 We are closed in, and the key is turned  
 On our uncertainty; somewhere  
 A man is killed, or a house burned,  
 Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.  
 A barricade of stone or of wood;  
 Some fourteen days of civil war;  
 Last night they trundled down the road  
 That dead young soldier in his blood:  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

(*Var.*, p. 425)

A reading that extends the context to include the entire poem will recall the "ancestral houses" in the first part ("some marvellous empty sea-shell . . .") emptied and burned by war and internal decay, and notice the analogy with the "empty house" of the starling. In addition to being a symbol of peace, the bees become a symbol for the possible rebirth that may occur after the forces of destruction have taken their toll. This is how far the natural image will take us, and it is quite a way toward an

understanding of this poem. If, however, we wish to relate the passage to the theme that gives a deeper unity to "Meditations in Time of Civil War" as a whole, an emblematic reading becomes necessary. Bees, in Yeats's reading of Porphyry, signify "pleasure arising from generation"<sup>70</sup> and generation is the descent out of the realm of the divine, which is eternal and continuous, into the fallen realm of matter and nature, which is subject to discontinuity and decay. The various birds that appear throughout the work are among Yeats's prevailing emblems of the soul's longing for the divine, and the eternal manifestation of the divine will in this world is often represented by the infallible knowledge with which birds build their nests.<sup>71</sup> This emblem appears in "Meditations . . .", first in Part IV, in connection with birds (owls) that build their nests in the cracked masonry of the house

The Primum Mobile that fashioned us  
 Has made the very owls in circles move; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 423, ll. 17-18)

and it is taken up again later, with the starling's nest in the refrain of Part VI. The prayer, then, for bees to take over after the birds have left, becomes a prayer that the natural order of man, kept alive by the pleasure of procreation, may achieve the same kind of continuity that existed in a divine order with which we have lost contact. This fits in with Yeats's hopes at that time as the "founder" of an estate and a family (Parts II and IV, respectively "My House" and "My Descendants"), but from a bitter passage in Part IV we know this hope to be a vain illusion:

And what if my descendants lose the flower  
 Through natural declension of the soul,  
 Through too much business with the passing hour,  
 Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?  
 May this laborious stair and this stark tower  
 Become a roofless ruin that the owl  
 May build in the cracked masonry and cry  
 Her desolation to the desolate sky.

(*Var.*, p. 423, ll. 9ff.)

A further enrichment of meaning is brought in by another emblematic association. Bees are related, through Porphyry, to Homer who, for Yeats, is the poet of "pleasure arising from generation"—"What theme had Homer but original sin?"—and thus the poet of the incarnate, Western, Hellenic world of "bodies" and natural images. This cluster of emblems provides the link with the Christian emblem of "the lion and the honeycomb" in "Vacillation"

Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.  
The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture  
said? . . .

(*Var.*, p. 503)

and suggests the kind of Jungian unity of emblematic archetypes in which Yeats finds the main confirmation of his beliefs. Homer is mentioned in "Meditations . . ." in Part I, expressing the conviction that life can be sufficient to itself, that "profane perfection of mankind" is not in need of divine assistance or intervention:

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not sung  
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
That out of life's own self-delight had sprung  
The abounding glittering jet; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 417)

The Western conception of art and poetry is founded on this belief; in emblematic terms, it is the belief that the bees will be able to "build" as if they were divine like the birds, that the natural image may accomplish what only the emblem can achieve. What this belief leads to is revealed in Part I, where the gradual decline of Western art, a decline that began with Homer,<sup>72</sup> is represented in terms of the decline of the Irish gentry, ending up, with perfect emblematic consistency, with the "sea-shells" of Yeats's earliest poetry, the emblem for the narcissistic, decadent natural image:

. . . though now it seems  
As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung  
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,

And not a fountain, were the symbol which  
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

(*Var.*, pp. 417-18)

The ephemeral instability of Western art is contrasted, in Part III, with the permanence of an art that never gives in to the "pleasure of generation" and remains purely emblematic, like the art of the East that produced Sato's sword. By comparison, the Western art of Homer seems to be on the verge of collapse, about to disappear in the apocalyptic destruction heralded by the cry of Juno's peacock, "the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation . . ." (*Vision*, p. 268): "it seemed / Juno's peacock screamed."

The refrain "O honey-bees, / Come build in the empty house of the stare . . ." acquires a very different function in this wider context. It stands in a deliberate and ironic contrast to the concluding section, which has its own innumerable complications but has to do, at any rate, with "the half-read wisdom of daemonic images" (i.e. emblems) and stands under the sign of the East, of a moon "that seems unchangeable, / A glittering sword out of the east . . ." The refrain expresses the vain and desperate hope of Western, romantic poetry, that divine presence will return in nature, a hope from which Yeats, too, can not disentangle himself, although he knows of the existence of another road. Hence the pathos of the section, which typifies the pathos of all Yeats's mature work.

A poem like "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is built on an intricate network of emblems: our quick analysis of one single line suffices to reveal some of them. No reader can perceive the larger unity of the work, carried by the natural suggestiveness of the imagery alone: real birds and bees cannot take one to Homer or to the *Primum Mobile*, and without this link the poem would only consist of parts haphazardly assembled under a common title, contrary to all we know about Yeats's method of poetic composition. This does not prevent the reviewer who censored Mr. F. A. C. Wilson from being altogether right on the naive plane of immediate appreciation; we all prefer the perception of things to the manipulation of

emblems, and we receive much more pleasure from authentic, live bees at Thoor Ballylee than from Porphyry's bookish images—just as we obtain much more satisfaction from reading the poem, with all its personal overtones and memories and its dramatic setting so masterfully conveyed, as if it were a casual diary rather than as a kind of puzzle of esoteric emblems. Yeats's entire effect is calculated to seduce the reader by the apparent realism of his narration. But since it is much easier to construct a seemingly real setting around a system of emblems than to discover a coherent set of emblems in a real situation, one may well conjecture that the reality here is artifice, while the emblematic network is the real starting-point. A definite stylistic pattern thus begins to appear; the poem uses natural imagery and gains its immediate appeal and effectiveness from this imagery; the true meaning, however, is only revealed if the images are read as emblems, and one is led to believe that it consists of emblems masquerading as images rather than the opposite.

The dual role of the emblem image does not appear in the form of a discontinuity in texture; the two versions dovetail perfectly with each other and with the larger context of the poem. They fit neatly within the picture of the concrete scene, as well as in the network of emblems. Various techniques achieve this unity of texture, while preserving the duality of function. The technique is at times quite explicit and mechanical, as when Yeats uses the artificial device of a footnote to tell us that the starling is a "real" bird, or when he openly tells us that a natural object in a landscape is *also* to be read emblematically:

An acre of stony ground,  
Where the *symbolic* rose can break in flower, . . .  
("Meditations . . .," *Var.*, p. 419, emphasis added)

or

At sudden thunder of the mounting swan  
I turned about and looked where branches break  
The glittering reaches of the flooded lake.

Another emblem there! . . .  
("Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," *Var.*, p. 490, ll. 14 ff., emphasis added)

or a slightly more complicated example:

Under my window-ledge the waters race,  
Otters below and moor-hens on the top,  
Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face  
Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop,  
Run underground, rise in a rocky place  
In Coole demesne, and there to finish up  
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.  
What's water but the generated soul?

(*Ibid.*, ll. 1 ff.)

The last line makes it clear that every detail in what sounded exactly like a realistic description is chosen for its place in an emblematic picture, transposed into reality. And this emblem, as the word "generated" suggests, is Porphyry's cave in another version: the "dark" "cellar" corresponds to the "obscurity of the cavern" (*IoGE*, p. 119), the underground stream to the two gates, that of generation and that of death, where the body "drop[s] into a hole"; the otters are the animal principle "below" and the moor-hens the divine principle "on the top," etc.<sup>73</sup> The very discomfort one experiences in thus destroying a wonderful picture is an essential part of Yeats's statement.

Moreover, when the ambiguity between image and emblem occurs, as in the above passage on the honey-bees, Yeats, who by then has sufficient mastery to write just as "beautifully" as he wishes, charges his language with a maximum of natural seduction. The emblematic reading, however, leads to a statement that proclaims the irrevocable inferiority and defeat of the natural image; in the case of "Meditations . . ." it does so by undermining all hope in the continuity of an art founded on "life" or on the body. The passage states the destruction of the stylistic device by means of which it functions and exists. This is a recurrent strategy in Yeats's mature work, his particular way of coping with the dilemma of the natural

image. Two more examples will indicate the recurrence of the pattern.

In the earlier "Adam's Curse," the charm of the poem is also conveyed by the natural setting: the casual scene, the tone of civilized conversation with touches of urbane wit, the two handsome women, the evening light in an atmosphere of refined emotions and courtly love. The title remains something of an enigma: why such a ponderous reference for such a personal poem? And the unity of the poem, too, is by no means obvious: it develops as a somewhat rambling conversation, moving from the hardships of the misunderstood poet to considerations on feminine beauty, to end up with a statement of renunciation that may seem ill-prepared by what comes before. Remembering, however, that the poem appears in *In the Seven Woods* and that most poems of that period deal, like *On Baile's Strand*, with the change of style, a possible reading emerges. One of the two women, Maud Gonne, has always been associated with renunciation of this world, renunciation of the "pleasure of generation"; her literary archetype is Sarah in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël*, in whose destiny Yeats found the equivalence of their own relationship. Her beauty is of divine origin and stands above worldly decay and weariness; in terms of style, she corresponds to the emblem which stems, as she does, from "precedents out of beautiful old books" ("Adam's Curse," *Var.*, p. 205, l. 26). She belongs to the realm of revealed divine presence that precedes all labor; the labor of generation and childbirth, the labor to keep the decaying body beautiful as well as that of the poet condemned to write in natural images,<sup>74</sup> all of which began when Adam discovered the "pleasure of generation." The other woman in the poem (identified by Hone as being Maud's sister),<sup>75</sup> who has gently and mildly resigned herself to being a natural body, corresponds to the natural image.<sup>76</sup> The poet, too, has resigned himself, though bitterly, to write in the labored language of images instead of in the inspired language of revelation, but there is no doubt as to what beauty he rates highest:

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 206)

The lines which we singled out earlier as typifying the return to natural imagery ("And in the trembling blue-green of the sky / A moon, worn as if it had been a shell . . .") now also appear as the emblematic analogy for the fall from a divine into a natural state. The moon being hollowed out by the waters of the sky as if it were eroded by time constitutes a perfectly consistent image of a natural process, but in Yeats's emblematic language, the shell is a recurrent emblem for the failing natural image. In contrast, the moon represents at least a possible way of access to the divine, with qualifications that need not be stressed at this point. The metamorphosis of the moon into a shell marks a regression back to the unsolvable problems of the period when *Oisín* was being written, the period before the "solution" of the emblem; the same regression is experienced in falling from ecstasy to labor, from Maud Gonne to a "beautiful mild woman" who "must labour to be beautiful." The pattern is the same as in "Meditations in Time of Civil War": a striking natural image, "A moon . . . , in the trembling blue-green of the sky" functions also as an emblem that states the inadequacy and the downfall of precisely that type of natural image.

A final example comes from "Among School Children," the poem singled out by Kermode as heralding the triumph of the reconciliatory image:

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

(*Var.*, p. 446)

It might seem far-fetched or even perverse to find here anything but a splendid statement glorifying organic, natural form, its sensuous experience and fundamental unity. Tracing back

the images of the dancer and the tree in romantic and symbolist poetry, Mr. Kermode adds the testimony of history<sup>77</sup> to the instinctive delight with which one welcomes a climax for which everything in the poem, the imagery as well as the drama, seems to be a perfect preparation. Yeats calls these images "presences"

O Presences

That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise- . . .

and, in the three beginning stanzas, the poem describes how such an image originates through an act of memory, by thinking of a past experience:

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage  
I look upon one child or t'other there  
And wonder if she stood so at that age—  
.....

And thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
She stands before me as a living child.

(*Var.*, pp. 443-44)

Memory starts in a concrete perception, the spectacle of the children in the schoolroom; hence the necessity for the first, descriptive stanza and the importance of the "real" setting. Many poems about memory, in the romantic tradition, start like this, from a physical perception that widens into the infinite expansion of accumulated memories:

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,  
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit  
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,  
Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,  
A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,  
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.

(Baudelaire, "Le Cygne")

or Hölderlin's poem "Andenken" (An-denken like Yeats's "thinking of that fit . . ." or Baudelaire's "Je pense à vous . . ."), which starts out with a sense perception in the present:

Der Nordost wehet,  
Der liebste unter den Winden  
Mir, weil er feurigen Geist  
Und gute Fahrt verheisset den Schiffern.  
Geh aber nun und grüsse  
Die schöne Garonne,  
Und die Gärten von Bourdeaux . . .

The deepening of a perception through memory offers a perfect analogy with the structure and intent of the natural image: memory is engendered as an act of consciousness freed from the restrictions of time and space, but entirely contained in the original, material perception. Memories originate out of perception "as flowers originate"; the perception is, as it were, the epiphany of the accumulated memories that give it meaning.<sup>78</sup> Hence that memory is a favorite theme in symbolist writing. It acts as a reconciling agent by providing the link with a natural identity from which the poet is alienated: the exile remembers his homeland as possessing the physical, natural well-being which he has lost. It stands in contrast to his present state as winter contrasts with summer, aridity with abundance, consciousness with matter:

Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage,  
Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,  
Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.  
Près d'un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec  
Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,  
Et disait, le coeur plein de son beau lac natal:  
"Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu,  
foudre?"

("Le Cygne")

and the same swan, in Mallarmé

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui  
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre  
Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre  
Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.<sup>79</sup>

("Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui")



The intent of memory, like that of the natural image, is always directed toward matter, toward the need to "communicate substantially with what is substantial in things."<sup>80</sup> With its "substantial" images of the chestnut tree, the dancer's "body swayed to music" and the poet's memory of his beloved in her youth, "Among School Children" seems to fit perfectly in the general pattern of romantic poems on memory. It seems even more affirmative, though with no easy concessions, than Baudelaire and less exclusively mental than Mallarmé.

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

The emblems of the "tree," the "dancer," and the "dance" are not too difficult to identify. Emblematic trees abound in Yeats's poetry, but the most explicit is doubtlessly the reference to the tree from *The Mabinogion*; it is mentioned in an essay from 1897, "The Celtic Element in Literature" (*IoGE*, p. 275) and it returns in a poem written not long after "Among School Children":

A tree there is that from its topmost bough  
Is half all glittering flame and half all green  
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;  
And half is half and yet is all the scene;  
And half and half consume what they renew,  
And he that Attis' image hangs between

That staring fury and the blind lush leaf  
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.  
("Vacillation," *Var.*, p. 500)

The Tree of Life is divided in two parts, one part being the green way of nature and the incarnated world, the other that of divine fire, unmediated by material things. The leafy part corresponds to the nature image, the fiery part to the emblem. Neither of them is practicable by itself, each leading to its own kind of failure, but a synthesis is suggested by Attis' image or, more precisely, by the poetic act of hanging Attis' image between the two halves. Attis is a highly ambiguous reference that weighs the balance heavily in favor of the emblem; not only is he a sun god, and thus definitely on the side of fire, but his myth, as Yeats knew it, is precisely that of the renunciation of matter in order to achieve unity with the divine: Attis is castrated before he can return to Cybele, the mother of the gods.<sup>81</sup> What appears as a synthesis is thus only one more veiled statement of the absolute superiority of the emblem over the image. The same tree appears in the "chestnut tree" of "Among School Children," in which the leaf corresponds to the green foliage, the blossom to the fire, and the bole to Attis' image. No hierarchy or preference is expressed in this case, but the question is asked whether the presence celebrated in the poem is to be reached and held by natural or by supernatural—and also anti-natural—ways; in stylistic terms again, whether it is to be an image or an emblem.

The same question is asked in the final line: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" The dance is a recurrent emblem for contact with the divine; the following early quotation describes it well: "Men who lived in a world where anything might flow and change . . .<sup>82</sup> had always, as it seems, for a supreme ritual that tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon; and, as some think,

imagined for the first time in the world the blessed country of the gods and of the happy dead."<sup>83</sup> The state of the dance can only be evoked in the divinely sanctioned language of the emblem. The "dancer" on the other hand, in this poem at least, is associated with the symbol of the "body" and appears as a real woman in the generated world of matter, capable of giving the "pleasure of generation." More equivocal in other poems, the "dancer" of "Among School Children" is doubtlessly oriented toward the seduction of physical beauty; she appeals by means of a "body swayed to music," a "brightening glance," a "Ledaean body." All the temptation in the poem emanates from nature and suggests sensuous pleasure. But this might well be the serpent's trick all over again, and by giving in to this temptation, one may trade eternity for a world of decay and weariness. It would make a big difference, in that case, how one chose; to choose the dancer means to fall into the transient world of matter for the sake of a few moments of illusive pleasure; to choose the dance means to renounce all natural joys for the sake of divine revelation. The ways of the image and of the emblem are distinct and opposed; the final line is not a rhetorical statement of reconciliation but an anguished question; it is our perilous fate not to know if the glimpses of unity which we perceive at times can be made more permanent by natural ways or by the ascesis of renunciation, by images or by emblem.

Under the guise of preparing a reconciliation, the foregoing stanzas lead up to this unsolvable predicament. Structurally and stylistically, they seem to emphasize the natural power of memory, of bodies and of physical things, but they state in fact the opposite throughout. When memory is named, in what seems like a casual aside,

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed,  
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape  
As recollection or the drug decide, . . .

(Var., p. 444)

it is not the Arcadian memory of romanticism but prenatal Platonic recollection, stemming from a stage of being that precedes all descent into matter. This same recollection is present as an ironic contrast in the opening stanza: in the *Meno* (81 b to 86 c) as well as in the *Phaedo* (72 e to 73 b), the doctrine of recollection is associated with a system of education that proceeds by divine revelation, the very opposite of the children's plodding labor in "the best modern way," under the guidance of servants of a religion founded on incarnation. When the sexual act, to which so much in the poem invites, is mentioned, it is as an aberration into which the soul is tricked by the fallacious "drug" of sexual pleasure. There is much emphasis throughout on the extreme stages of human life, childhood and old age, when the soul is closest to its divine origin and least disturbed by erotic temptations. The soul is pleased by the body's bruises (a line which, on one level, refers to the asceticism of the nuns, but much more significantly to the liberation of the soul once it ascends out of this world)<sup>84</sup> because it knows that it is drawing near to its real abode. The actual reminiscence of Maud Gonne mentions a Ledaean body and alludes to the Eros of the *Symposium*, but it occurs over a "sinking fire," by means of a tale that reminds one of the escapism of "The White Birds." In fact, it is not a real memory at all but a Platonic recollection, not of Maud Gonne as Yeats knew her but of her in the shape of a child, and it is all too easily superseded by the real memory of her present appearance.<sup>85</sup> The predominant theme of the poem becomes the cancellation of divine messages by the destructive power of nature, as it appears in the absurd hope for a "happy" generation, in the naive faith of a religion founded on an epiphany, or even in the work of art itself.<sup>86</sup> We are very far removed from a reconciliation between image and reality.

Yeats's mature style is founded on a curiously complex duality of substance and function. He often treats the dance as if it were the dancer, that is, he presents emblems disguised as natural images. On the other hand, when the poems

are more openly emblematic in imagery, this is often counterbalanced by a thematic insistence on the value of incarnated beauty. The result is a tenuous equilibrium, in itself an extraordinary feat of style and rhetoric, but no reconciliation, not even a dialectic. The reader vacillates between two extremes, reflected in the two main trends that dominate in Yeats's interpretation: the tendency to give in to the natural seduction of the images, to read the poems without afterthought and to protest against any intrusion of "systems" or pedantic erudition; or, on the other hand, the tendency to read them as if they were esoteric puzzles accessible only to the initiates as a reward for an act of faith. The two approaches are hard to reconcile. The resulting image is never truly natural, as Baudelaire's or Keats's images are natural; they remain oddly void of substance and texture. They have about them something transparent and discarnate, reminiscent, in their extreme stylization and the precision with which they focus upon a few outstanding details to evoke an entire landscape or mood, of Chinese scroll-painting. The imagery is overwhelmingly visual, with hardly a suggestion of the warmer, tactile sensations that pertain to the realm of pure matter. The vision is not one that tries, like Baudelaire's or Rilke's, to mold the form in its spatial dimensions, to make it stand out as a sculptural unit. A passage like the following, very close to being pure landscape

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

("The Wild Swans at Coole," *Var.*, p. 322)

appears strictly as a two-dimensional picture, with a strong emphasis on linear contour (one is reminded of Yeats's admiration for Blake's sense of contour), but none at all on texture. Unlike the impressionists, whose light almost possesses vol-

ume, Yeats's light is pure transparency, the fitting lack of texture for the *sign* which is there to reveal, not itself, but what stands behind it. It would be impossible to apply to Yeats the categories of the material imagination suggested by Gaston Bachelard that fit Baudelaire so well.<sup>87</sup> The very carefully gauged brittleness of the image is necessary, lest the natural attraction would grow so powerful that the opposite, emblematic reading would be overcome.

If this rhetoric is able to deceive the reader, it can never deceive the author, whose fundamental bewilderment is bound to emerge sooner or later. It does emerge in the late poetry, not so much in the structure of the imagery, which undergoes no other important transformations, but in the form of a thematic crisis, closely related to the problems of the image, and which gives to the late work its strident tone.

From the failure of *The Wind among the Reeds*, Yeats learned not only that a purely emblematic style was impracticable as long as his own commitments remained divided, but also that the thematic pattern resulting from this conflict could not be stated too openly. Significantly, after his poetry had been almost exclusively centered on the apocalyptic vision of annihilation, the first poem in the new manner, the introduction to *The Shadowy Waters*, turns away to silence when it reaches the point where previous poems would have taken up this very theme:

And more I may not write of, for they that cleave  
The waters of sleep can make a chattering tongue  
Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence.<sup>88</sup>

The same poem puts in the form of a question what in the preceding volume would have been unreservedly answered in the affirmative: "Is Eden out of time and out of space?" (*Var.*, p. 218, l. 36).

This change in attitude toward one of the major themes does not take place because Yeats has given up the convictions so openly and candidly stated in the essays from *Ideas of Good and Evil*. The rhetorical strategy, as our examples showed,

remains organized around emblematic patterns. They are, however, no longer immediately apparent, but are enveloped in a pseudo-hermetic and esoteric language, less forbidding and inaccessible than it may at first appear (since it suffices, in general, to know Yeats's work to obtain a key), but nevertheless somewhat hidden below the surface. Other statements, definitely oriented in the opposite direction, appear in full evidence, such as to receive the full attention and solicit the assent of even a casual reader. Among those statements, the theme of erotic love is probably the most prominent.

The reconciling symbol of the "body," the loosely Platonic notion that the divine is manifest in the incarnated world as Eros, has a long and tortuous history in Yeats's work. It can be traced back to his early heroines' wavering between a divine and a natural status, a familiar romantic theme much in evidence, for instance, in Keats's *Endymion*. Similar hesitations befall several of Yeats's heroines: Naschina in *The Island of Statues*, Niamh in *The Wanderings of Oisín*,<sup>89</sup> the Countess Kathleen, Dectora in *The Shadowy Waters*, the heroine of the Hanrahan stories, etc. Sometimes, the heroine is divided within herself, sometimes she becomes two opposed symbolic characters (as in the novel *John Sherman*), or she appears as committed to one side (Niamh to the supernatural, the Countess to the real world), but then the conflict is transferred to the tragic decision of the lover who has to renounce her. In the romantic tradition, the theme appears predominantly as the sacrificial death of the beloved, a death which becomes a necessary tragedy in the initiation of the hero: one thinks of Goethe's Gretchen, of Hölderlin's Diotima in *Hyperion*, of Keats's Indian Maiden in *Endymion*, and also of Julie's death in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* with its innumerable offspring of romantic love-deaths. The death often marks the hero's transcendence of the world of personal experience and his entrance upon the larger stage of a creative life on a metapersonal level; more deeply, the sacrifice symbolizes the cost, the tragedy of all becoming, which proceeds by the negation of what it overcomes. In its most spiritualized form, the dead heroine be-

comes the subject of a romantic elegy, the equivalence of an Arcadian symbol recaptured in a natural image that originates out of memory. She is the lost experience of natural unity and the romantic love-death at its most extreme, as in Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht* or Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, is a half-morbid version of the pantheism which receives unadulterated expression in Wordsworth's Lucy Gray sonnets; the theme has its Satanic counterpart in Poe, in Sade, and in certain aspects of Baudelaire. Later, in the more language-obsessed world of symbolism and aestheticism, the Eros becomes the linguistic symbol itself and the relationship between the poet and his own language gains erotic overtones. Mallarmé remains committed to this conception: the poem originates in a manner analogous to sexual generation ("Telle que vers quelque fenêtre / Selon nul ventre que le sien, / Filial on aurait pu naître." "Autres Poèmes et Sonnets," III) and its failure is called impotence or sterility.

Yeats's treatment of the same theme grows into a curious conglomeration of personal and traditional elements, biographical self-justification and symbols drawn from various sources. It often sounds like orthodox Platonism, an impression which is reinforced by the frequent use of emblems stemming from the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition.<sup>90</sup> At other times, however, it resembles Wagner or Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's love-death and, frequently enough, it seems to be a mere re-statement of Pater's conception of art for art's sake. It is not easy to disentangle a cluster of themes that seem to derive from a variety of not altogether compatible sources, all the more so since Yeats's thematic strategy is not unlike his ambivalent use of imagery: he uses the language of Neoplatonism, romanticism, and aestheticism in order to undermine a belief which these traditions have in common: the belief in the Eros as a reconciliatory force.

Because of the attractive richness of his profane values, it requires some argument to show that Yeats's approach to the Eros is, on the whole, negative—as negative, for instance, as in Balzac's *Louis Lambert* or in Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*, where

sexual consummation is an obstacle to divine insight. Granted the obvious fact that his poetry is never voluptuous in the manner associated with Baudelaire, or even sensuous like Keats's, it certainly remains open to question whether it can be called anti-erotic. When, in *The Wind among the Reeds*, one comes upon passages like the following:

And when you sigh from kiss to kiss  
I hear white Beauty sighing, too,  
For hours when all must fade like dew,  
But flame on flame, and deep on deep,  
("He remembers Forgotten Beauty," *Var.*, p. 156)

or

... O women, bid the young men  
lay  
Their heads on your knees, and drown their eyes with your  
hair,  
Or remembering hers they will find no other face fair  
Till all the valleys of the world have been withered away . . .  
("He tells of a Valley full of Lovers," *Var.*, p. 163)

or

Until the axle break  
That keeps the stars in their round,  
And hands hurl in the deep  
The banners of East and West,  
And the girdle of light is unbound,  
Your breast will not lie by the breast  
Of your beloved in sleep . . .  
("He hears the Cry of the Sedge," *Var.*, p. 165)

or when he entitles a poem "He wishes his Beloved Were Dead" or, in *The Shadowy Waters* makes his heroine leave a world of riches and glory to follow a poet on a quest for death—in all those cases, the theme seems to be that of love as the only human experience extreme enough to equal or to overcome death. And when, in the later work, one comes upon the numerous statements that hold up the "body" as the supreme value

All dreams of the soul  
End in a beautiful man's or woman's body . . .  
("The Phases of the Moon," *Var.*, p. 374)

this seems very close to the humanistic Neoplatonism of the Renaissance, as it explicitly appears in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer":

Paul Veronese  
And all his sacred company  
Imagined bodies all their days  
By the lagoon you love so much,  
For proud, soft, ceremonious proof  
That all must come to sight and touch;  
While Michael Angelo's Sistine roof,  
His 'Morning' and his 'Night' disclose  
How sinew that has been pulled tight,  
Or it may be loosened in repose,  
Can rule by supernatural right  
Yet be but sinew.  
(*Var.*, p. 386)

Finally, when in the Crazy Jane poems from "Words for Music Perhaps," a harlot reproves a pompous bishop, or when, in the *Last Poems*, we are offered a ribald story about an enterprising chambermaid ("The Three Bushes"), it may seem difficult to conceive of Yeats as a poet who speaks evil of erotic love. Some examples, taken from different periods, will show that this is nevertheless the case.<sup>91</sup>

Most of the early works, up to *The Shadowy Waters*, place considerable emphasis on the theme of love. *The Wanderings of Oisín*, for instance, has all the aspects of a story of erotic wish-fulfillment, even without the authority of Yeats's late poem for confirmation

But what cared I that set him on to ride,  
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?  
("The Circus Animals' Desertion," *Var.*, p. 629)

Certain symbolic passages in the poem still strengthen this impression: when Niamh and Oisín ride away, they see a vi-

sion of a deer chased by a white dog with one red ear (*Var.*, pp. 11-12, ll. 139ff.) and of a lady with a golden apple followed by a young man; the emblem, as we know from Yeats's notes to *The Wind among the Reeds*, represents "the desire of the man, and . . . the desire of the woman 'which is for the desire of the man,' and . . . all desires that are as these." (*Var.*, p. 153). The interpretation can only be that Oisín's quest, which moves from a worldly, natural realm to supernatural experiences, is prompted by desire. The Eros awakens a longing for the divine and kindles dissatisfaction with the world as it is; but it is by no means certain that it is to be the guide in man's upward striving, nor is it altogether certain that "desire" refers to the natural need for sexual pleasure. Even in this early poem, doubt is clearly in evidence. When Oisín notices the lady and young man following each other in pursuit, he asks Niamh:

"Were these two born in the Danaan land  
Or have they breathed the mortal air?"

(*Var.*, p. 12, ll. 146-47)

The question is of crucial importance, foreshadowing the later question of "Among School Children": "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" If these symbols of desire are a transcendental form of a natural experience, if, in other words, these two *have* breathed mortal air, then the progression toward the divine, as Diotima teaches in the *Symposium*, can start in the pleasure of the body and move upward in continuous progression from man to god. If however the kind of longing by which Oisín is driven belongs exclusively to the godlike inhabitants of supernatural realms, then the earthly counterpart is deceptive and, by giving in to it, one would be betraying the call of the gods. In that case, true desire is not for the body and sexual pleasure could never be a foreboding of divine bliss.

Niamh does not answer Oisín's question directly

"Vex them no longer," Niamh said,  
And sighing bowed her gentle head,  
And sighing laid the pearly tip  
Of one long finger on my lip.

(*Ibid.*, ll. 148ff.)

but in the opening scene of Book II, when the same vision reappears, her answer is more openly negative and suggests that Oisín should turn away from all intercourse with his own human kind:

And now fled by, mist-covered, without sound,  
The youth and lady and the deer and hound;  
"Gaze no more on the phantoms," Niamh said,  
And kissed my eyes, and, swaying her bright head  
And her bright body, sang of faery and man  
Before God was or my old line began; . . .

(*Var.*, p. 29)

However, when it comes to expressing the contact between man and the gods, the imagery is still overwhelmingly erotic:

Wars shadowy, vast, exultant; faeries of old  
Who wedded men with rings of Druid gold;  
And how those lovers never turn their eyes  
Upon the life that fades and flickers and dies,  
Yet love and kiss on dim shores far away  
Rolled round with music of the sighing spray: . . .

(*Var.*, pp. 29-30)

The "dim shores far away" are all that nature is not, and none of the pleasures experienced there should bear any resemblance to the joys of this world; the erotic imagery seems to be a weakness of the language, unable to reach beyond the limits of nature in its attempt to express what is supernatural. Later poems, such as "Byzantium," attempt to evoke the union with the gods in an imagery that is no longer sexual, but in *Oisín*, the all-pervading erotic symbolism blurs the actual statement.<sup>92</sup> This statement is quite unambiguous: "Gaze no more on the phantoms" can only mean that Oisín's quest implies the renunciation of sexual desire; the union between man and woman is futile and, in a sense, evil. Oisín is one of the Yeatsian heroes who reject the possibility of a union with the gods and prefers to return to earth, partly because the traditional story demands it, partly out of patriotic loyalty; most of his other heroes accept the renunciation as their only possible destiny.<sup>93</sup> But many begin by sharing in the fallacious concep-

tion of this union as a mere extension of an earthly experience.

Similar thematic hesitations appear in all of Yeats's early treatment of the love theme. Niamh is the daughter of Aengus, the god of love, and Edain (*Var.*, p. 5, ll. 46ff.) and thus the offspring of an adulterous relationship (Edain is the wife of Midhir). Yeats refers to this myth in an introductory poem to *The Shadowy Waters* (*Var.*, p. 219), which originally was a part of the first version of the play (*Var.*, p. 762), and also, indirectly, in the narrative poem "Baile and Aillinn." He ignores the adulterous element in the myth and centers instead his attention on the emblematic details of the "tower of glass" where Aengus took Edain and the "boughs where apples made / Of opal and ruby and pale chrysolite / Awake unsleeping fires; . . ." (p. 219) under which they lay. The emblem of the apple is particularly revealing because it is linked, by contrast, with the apple of Genesis. Eve's apple suggests the profane pleasure of original sin and "honey of generation,"<sup>94</sup> but Aengus's jeweled fruit has very different connotations. It may remind one of Parnassian and Baudelairean artifice, of *Émaux et Camées*, Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* and the lines from Baudelaire's "Rêve parisien":

J'avais banni de ces spectacles  
Le végétal irrégulier, . . .

Remembering, however, that the enumeration of precious stones ("Of opal and ruby and pale chrysolite . . .") stems from a biblical passage describing the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21.19-20) and that Baudelaire himself possibly inherited it from there by way of Swedenborg,<sup>95</sup> it becomes apparent that Aengus's apples are not merely a negation of nature, but apocalyptic emblems which take us beyond any natural being whatsoever. This is even more clearly apparent when they reappear in "Baile and Aillinn":

They know undying things, for they  
Wander where earth withers away,  
Though nothing troubles the great streams

But light from the pale stars, and gleams  
From the holy orchards, where there is none  
But fruit that is of precious stone,  
Or apples of the sun and moon.

(*Var.*, p. 196)<sup>96</sup>

"Sun" and "moon" are among the cornerstones of Yeats's emblematic system, and their fruit is bound to have nothing in common with nature. To love under these "apples," as do Aengus and Edain, is to experience the very oblivion of earthly love. Aengus is said to be watching ". . . over none / But faithful lovers" (*Var.*, p. 763), but "faithful" has the same meaning here as in the poem "The Grey Rock" when Yeats says of himself

I have kept my faith, though faith was tried,  
To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot, . . .

or the goddess, Aoife, by man "betrayed"<sup>97</sup> moans

"Why are they faithless when their might  
Is from the holy shades that rove  
The grey rock and the windy light? . . ."

(*Var.*, pp. 276 and 275, ll. 124-25 and 109-11)

A "faithful" lover is one who rejects the temptation of erotic love and pursues fearlessly his quest for the divine. Like Forgael in *The Shadowy Waters*, he stands under Aengus' guidance and, as a poet, plays Aengus' harp—that is, writes entirely unnatural, nonerotic, emblematic poetry. Baile and Aillinn are "faithful" lovers, helped in this by Aengus who uses every trick to prevent an earthly consummation of their love:

Their love was never drowned in care  
Of this or that thing, nor grew cold  
Because their bodies had grown old.  
Being forbid to marry on earth,  
They blossomed to immortal mirth.

(*Var.*, p. 189)

Mongan, one of the mythical speakers in the original version of *The Wind among the Reeds*, is an example of a lover who

was not "faithful."<sup>98</sup> Though initiated into divine wisdom, he chose to become ". . . a man, a hater of the wind" (i.e. afraid of the mystical 'death in God') and to remain entangled in erotic desire:

I was looking another way;  
And now my calling is but the calling of a hound;  
And Time and Birth and Change are hurrying by.  
("He [originally Mongan] mourns for the Change  
that has come . . .,"  
*Var.*, p. 153)

The hound, as a note specifies, is the hound from *Oisin*, an emblem of sexual desire. As punishment for his betrayal

his head  
May not lie on the breast nor his lips on the hair  
Of the woman that he loves, until he dies.  
(*Var.*, p. 177)

What appears as a Wagnerian Tristan theme turns out to be something entirely different: instead of the Eros finding complete fulfillment in death, it is Eros being surmounted by means of death. The punishment befalls Mongan because he has given in to desire: the "woman that he loves" is a supernatural being, and she can only be recaptured when he will be restored to his previous condition of greatness, by means of total renunciation. Another persona in the same volume, Aedh, is said to be purged of all worldly involvement, pure "fire burning by itself" like the "flames begotten of flame" in "Byzantium." In his case, the situation between sexes is reversed: it is his task to purify the woman, instead of having to concern himself, like Mongan, with his own salvation. He is made to wish for the death of his beloved, so that she may join him in a realm where no sexual desire exists. One misreads a poem like "He wishes his Beloved were dead" (*Var.*, p. 175), which pleads for an entirely spiritual unity far beyond the world of the body, in looking for necrophilic elements: there is nothing here of Poe or Baudelaire.

None of these poems seem to be aware that they describe

an ideal in the very language of the experience least compatible with that ideal. A rather complicated passage in the first version of *The Shadowy Waters*, a work more than any other concerned with the love relationship between man and woman, indicates that this problem is growing more and more pressing, and marks the beginning of a transition to a more complex conception of the erotic in the later poetry. The passage describes the various stages that lead to the full initiation of the woman into the mysteries of divine love. The situation is analogous to Aedh's rather than to Mongan's: Forgael, the hero of the play, has no hesitation about his supernatural calling, but his companion, Dectora, is not freed from worldly ties. Forgael uses his poetry as a means to win her for his cause, and begins by taking her back in memory to the day she first discovered the emotion of love in herself:

She has begun forgetting. When she wakes,  
The years that have gone over her from the hour  
When she dreamt first of love, shall flicker out  
And that dream only shine before her feet.  
(*Var.*, pp. 760-61)

Like Milton's Eve, the revelation of love came to her when she discovered the beauty of her own image mirrored in a natural stream:

Look on this body and this heavy hair;  
A stream has told me they are beautiful.  
(*Var.*, p. 767)<sup>99</sup>

The desire that this vision awakes in her, however, is not the longing for the self as nature, not even in its extreme, narcissistic form. Desire is demonic and opposed to nature; it destroys at once the moment of natural revelation:

I will drink out of the stream. The stream is gone:  
Before I dropped asleep, a kingfisher  
Shook the pale apple-blossom over it;  
And now the waves are crying in my ears,  
And a cold wind is blowing in my hair.  
(*Var.*, p. 761)



The familiar emblem of the red-eared hound appears as a destructive, antinatural force:

A hound that had lain in the red rushes  
Breathed out a druid vapour, and crumbled away  
The grass and the blue shadow on the stream  
And the pale blossom; . . .

This is the second stage in Dectora's growth, during which she is following the red hound as her guide, sexual love trying to be sufficient to itself.<sup>100</sup> It is the specific function of the poet (Forgael's song), to take her beyond this stage and to "overturn" the demon-hound, sublimating, like Aedh, what there still remains of earthly attachments in her:

. . . but I woke instead  
The winds and waters to be your home for ever;  
And overturned the demon with a sound  
I had woven of the sleep that is in pools  
Among great trees, and in the wings of owls,  
And under lovers' eyelids.

(Var., pp. 761-62)

The "winds" and "waters" among which this song transports her are not the natural stream and sky where her desire first awakened, but supernatural emblems: the "wind" among the reeds that heralds annihilation and the "waters" on which one embarks for another world. This world will contain the peace that is lacking here; therefore, the song will be made of substances associated with rest and sleep, including the lover's sleep, when full sexual consummation has killed all desire in him. This theme to which Yeats often returns in the last poems<sup>101</sup> is taken up again and developed a little later in the same scene:

Even that sleep  
That comes with love, comes murmuring of an hour  
When earth and heaven have been folded up;  
And languors that awake in mingling hands

And mingling hair fall from the fiery boughs,  
To lead us to the streams where the world ends.  
(Var., p. 765)

Desire (which, it must be stressed, is itself already opposed to nature and to the body as part of nature) longs for the sexual act, not for the pleasure that it gives, but as the best means to kill desire itself. This most negative conception of the pleasures of sex remains constant throughout the entire work.

The "progression" from nature to the divine, by ways of the destruction of natural and erotic love, expresses Yeats's conviction at the height of his "emblematic" period. Some of the doubts that will lead to the partial abandonment of this attitude are already evident in the same scene from *The Shadowy Waters*. After Dectora has awakened from her dream and Forgael has interpreted it for her, they experience a kind of relapse into their mortal condition; even if they now both have a clear vision of their supernatural destiny, they are still creatures of flesh and blood, and Dectora, especially, is not fully detached from the world. The dramatic interest of the play resides in her final conversion to Forgael's quest, a climax which is not handled very convincingly in either version. But the movement is interesting from a thematic point of view, illustrating Yeats's hesitations about the Eros theme: somewhat later in the scene, Forgael takes Dectora in his arms, and this gesture, which one may assume to be instigated by her, reawakens desire and brings back the hound that Forgael's song had removed. It is, says Forgael, as if the gods had suddenly decided to love as mortals and thus reawakened the temptation:

F. Aengus has seen  
His well-beloved through a mortal's eyes;  
And she, no longer blown among the winds,  
Is laughing through a mortal's eyes.

D. (*Peering out over the waters*) O look!  
A red-eared hound follows a hornless deer.

(Var., pp. 763-64)

In the ambiguous state of desire, which is half out of nature but still tied to it, a strong temptation exists to return to the easy joys of the natural world. Dectora succumbs to it:

The gods weave nets, and take us in their nets,  
And none knows wherefore; but the heart's desire  
Is this poor body that reddens and grows pale.

(*Var.*, p. 764)

but Forgael knows this to be a deceptive trick the gods play on men, like the "cup of oblivion" which causes us to forget prenatal memory and leads to the "betrayal" of generation. He wins out, although it is not too clear why Dectora, who has been eloquently extolling the dangers of divine love and praising the limited blessings of its human counterpart, changes her mind at the last minute.<sup>102</sup> To judge by its thematic content, it is not altogether clear either that Forgael has won out in Yeats's work during the twenty years that follow *The Shadowy Waters*. For this is the period, marked by continuous labor on *The Player Queen* and culminating in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), during which many statements seem to give substance to the current image of Yeats as a highly sophisticated but genuine poet of the reconciliatory power of the Eros and the body.

It is difficult to imagine Forgael speaking to Dectora as Yeats wrote to Florence Farr in 1906: ". . . I once cared only for images about whose necks I could cast various 'chains of office' as it were. They were so many aldermen of the ideal, whom I wished to master the city of the soul. Now I do not want images at all, or chains of office, being content with the unruly soul . . . I have myself by the by begun eastern meditations—of your sort, but with the object of trying to lay hands upon some dynamic and substantialising force as distinguished from the eastern quiescent and supersensualizing state of the soul—a movement downwards upon life, not upwards out of life" (*Letters*, p. 469). One is inclined to take this for Yeats's final pronouncement, forgetting all too easily that such statements

occur during periods when his inventive powers are at a low ebb. As far as the poetic style is concerned, this return "downwards upon life" results in the devious manner in which natural images reappear in the work; as far as the theme of love is concerned, it results in an apparent descent from the otherworldliness and renunciation of *The Wind among the Reeds* to the concrete and sensuous realm of the "body."

The texts in which the symbol of the body receives the most emphasis are generally associated with the persona of Michael Robartes: "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," "The Phases of the Moon," etc. This is no doubt deliberate. In the enigmatic notes to *The Wind among the Reeds*, Michael Robartes is described as "fire reflected in water" or "the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions or the adoration of the Magi." The Magi are those who offer worldly riches and power to the divinity; opposed to the other mythical figures from *The Wind among the Reeds*, Aedh and Hanrahan, Robartes is the one who proudly wishes to "possess" images:

When my arms wrap you round I press  
My heart upon the loveliness  
That has long faded from the world; . . .

("He remembers Forgotten Beauty," *Var.*, p. 155)

In the prose story *Rosa Alchemica* he appears again as the leader of a secret order that searches for God alchemically, by trying to change the common metal of matter into gold; initiation in the order involves a dance with the goddess Eros. Are we to conclude that he considers man and nature as the direct reflection of God (as he is the *reflection* of the divine fire in the "water" of generation) and thus advocates a search for divine knowledge, not in the ascetic disciplines of the mind, but in the sensuous experiences of the body? He is steadily opposed to the monkish Owen Aherne who is "stout and sedentary-looking, bearded and dull of eye" (a striking resemblance of George Russell), while Robartes, not altogether unlike Yeats, is "lank, brown, muscular, clean-shaven, with an alert, ironi-

cal eye."<sup>103</sup> This opposition between two personalities, the one active, questioning, and energetic, the other dreamy, passive, and introverted, is at the basis of the polarity on which *A Vision* is founded, the contrast between what Yeats calls antithetical and primary men, or civilizations. Throughout *A Vision*, he manipulates his tone and his symbols in such a way as to make it appear as if he favored the antithetical, which is—at least at the present moment in history—secular and “natural,” over the primary, which is religious and “emblematic”; he thus makes his book into an oblique and immensely involved plea in favor of the later poet over the earlier. Since, however, the mechanics of the symbolism are set up as a closed system, in which any value affirmation is immediately canceled out by a symmetrically opposed countervalue, the entire statement is self-destructive; there is, in fact, no value judgment at all. One gains the strong impression, for instance, that the book is an attack on the asceticism and the indiscriminate universality of Christian love, to which it opposes a religious revelation that would have all the characteristics which we associate with the profane. It is the familiar conflict between *Eros* and *Agape*: to the “primary” civilization of Christianity will succeed an “antithetical” civilization which, being favorably inclined toward the body, will be conducive to the kind of artistic creation that Christian morality prevents; Yeats appears then as the prophet of the new, “aesthetic” dispensation. But this is not how the logic of *A Vision* works. If such were indeed Yeats’s unqualified conviction, Western art would have to be celebrated by the achievements that come closest to this ideal, namely the profane art of Greece and of the Italian Renaissance. Those two periods are indeed considered to be high points, but the originality of Yeats’s panorama of the arts consists in the introduction of another, counterbalancing climax, not, as one might expect, medieval art (which is said to tend toward the profane!), but the art of Byzantium, described as purely emblematic and dependent, for its existence, on the “primary” Christ. “The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were al-

most impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image; and this vision, this proclamation of their invisible master, had the Greek nobility, Satan always the still half-divine Serpent, never the horned scarecrow of the didactic Middle Ages."<sup>104</sup> No more exalted praise of the emblem can be found in Yeats, including the claim that this art can outdo the Greeks at their own game and defeat the enemy, the serpent of natural temptation, without having to degrade it. “To me it seems that He, who among the first Christian communities was little but a ghostly exorcist, had in His assent to a full Divinity made possible this sinking-in upon a supernatural splendour, these walls with their little glimmering cubes of blue and green and gold.” The greatness of this art stems from its total inhumanity: Christ is exalted as the One who dared to give himself entirely to the divine, and the Divine Principle is so little associated with nature that it can be said, at this point, that there was no incarnation at all, no human body of Christ: “. . . wherever Christ is represented by a bare Cross and all the rest is bird and beast and tree, we may discover an Asiatic art dear to those who thought Christ contained nothing human.” At such moments, the passivity of the total “assent to a full Divinity” appears as a high virtue, because it is clear that the Divinity has nothing in common with natural or human norms. A book that contains such passages can not possibly be a plea for incarnated beauty. More than anything else, it is this very Yeatsian mixture: a pseudo-theory of reality which is to exorcize reality. It shows reality to be an absurd realm, where all determinations or values are pseudo-truths canceled out by their opposites; only direct interventions of the divine have the power to shape and determine the content of things and events, and of these we have no knowledge, for they escape the causal network of

the system altogether. Reality is ours, body and mind, but precisely insofar as it is accessible to us, it is nothing. The pseudo-exploration and pseudo-ordering that takes place in *A Vision*, the theories of personality, of history, and even of the afterlife (which is made part of reality as soon as it is said to be known) have considerable exegetic value for the poems (like all Yeats's prose texts), but they do not reveal a true commitment. The fundamental intent can only be derived from the poems themselves, considered in their entirety.

The "body," which, according to Michael Robartes, can bring perfection, outdance thought, prove that all must come to sight and touch and even be the Eucharist, would have all the attributes of the Eros if it were also a real, actual substance. It is, however, only an apparition in a dream or, more often still, in a mirror. As such, it is reminiscent of the Narcissus myth in Yeats's earliest poetry, and one remembers that Dectora's initiation also started in self-contemplation. But an important difference separates the narcissistic predicament of Yeats's earliest poetry from the "discipline of the looking glass" which Michael Robartes recommends to beautiful women who ". . . may / Live in uncomposite blessedness, / And lead us to the like— . . ." ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer," *Var.*, p. 387). Narcissus discovers his own presence and reality as a consciousness (reflection) of himself, revealed by a perception; the perception is possible because he is also a natural object. As a natural object, he awakens desire for self-knowledge, and the failure of his attempt at self-possession (the dispersion of the reflection in the water when he tries to seize it or, in Yeats, the echoing shell shattering the "song" of consciousness into chaos)<sup>105</sup> corresponds to the impossibility for consciousness to become its own object and leave the natural status of the self undisturbed. Narcissus is the myth of the dialectic between object and consciousness, and the myth necessarily implies that the reflection be perceived as being that of a thing in nature. Yeats's mirror, however, in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," reflects the element in the woman that is not her natural self, but that is supernatural—not her material, incarnate being but

whatever, as a direct emanation of the divine, remains "out of nature." The "body" is precisely what is not embodied or, to put it less paradoxically, the mirrored body itself has become pure emblem. All that binds the woman to earth, her cares, affections, and especially her "opinions"<sup>106</sup>—one remembers the catastrophical opinions of the Countess Kathleen and of Maud Gonne—are eliminated from the mirrored form, and this includes whatever is material in the body. Only her contour, her form emptied of all substance, remains and it is as such, as pure form, that she appears to the light of perception. We "perceive" the divine in the pure transparency of a form which, being a mere shadow in a mirror, has no material reality whatsoever. In the same manner, an emblem appears to the eye or to the ear as a pure sign, without having to become matter. The mirror asserts the priority of the shadow over the object, because the shadow, not the object, is the product of divine fire and light.<sup>107</sup> To the real woman, trapped in her own opinions and desires, the mirrored image is the most alien of visions, as remote as the sight of a strange god:

I rage at my own image in the glass  
That's so unlike myself that when you praise it  
It is as though you praised another, or even  
Mocked me with praise of my mere opposite; . . .  
(*"The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool," Var.*, pp. 447-48)

The echo from the early poem, the parrot "raging at his own image in the enamelled sea," isolates and contrasts two symmetrically balanced predicaments: that of the narcissistic poet of the image, who fails to unite with the body as a natural object, and that of the poet of the emblem, who fails to unite with the body as a supernatural form of the divine.

Being mere shadow and entirely out of nature, the image of the dancer is also out of reach of erotic desire. It represents a highly refined kind of beauty, revealed to the inner eye of vision, but that does not appeal to the senses and does not invite possession. It is Athena rather than Venus, Shelley's intellectual beauty rather than Keats's "sensation." Like the be-

loved which Aedh wishes to lead beyond life, the dancer has ". . . danced her life away, / For now being dead it seemed / That she of dancing dreamed" ("The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," *Var.*, p. 383). In "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," which is an urbane and personal love poem,<sup>108</sup> aside from being written partly, as Yeats puts it, "for exposition" (*Var.*, p. 821), Robartes himself has not altogether escaped from desire, hence his insistence on sight and touch instead of eye and ear, hence also his references to the later painters of the Renaissance, Veronese and Michelangelo, whose work is capable of arousing sexual desire. The dancer herself is closer to Quattrocento, to Botticelli ("we had not desired to touch the forms of Botticelli or even Da Vinci"—*A Vision*, p. 293), who, as Yeats insists, was a purely emblematic painter. An orthodox disciple of Pater and Pre-Raphaelite taste, Yeats dates the beginning of decadence from Michelangelo; from his time on "all is changed, and where the Mother of God sat enthroned, now that the Soul's unity has been found and lost, Nature seats herself, and the painter can paint only what he desires in the flesh . . ." (*A Vision*, pp. 293-94). Supernatural beauty can be revealed through the Eros only if the lover, unlike Robartes or Michelangelo, can refine his desire out of existence. If Narcissus had seen God where he saw only nature, he would never have broken the mirror. In spite of the reversal in language, the statement remains very close to that of *The Shadowy Waters*: the way of the Eros and of nature appears as a preparatory stage on one of the roads toward greater perfection, a dangerous stage, because it is particularly easy, at this point, to take the dancer for the dance and to fall back into the condition of matter out of which one is trying to rise. Similarly, the natural images that have been introduced in the poetry can take the reader some way toward their understanding, but if he confines himself to them, he will be led astray. It is the task of poetic language to transform mere desire into authentic vision.

Many of the passages on bodily perfection, in *A Vision* and in the poems from the middle period, seem to resemble the

reconciling ideal of symbolism and aestheticism: language acting as a mediator between mind and matter because it partakes of both. Frequent references to the Renaissance remind one of Pater (Yeats started out his late *Oxford Book of English Modern Verse* with Pater's description of the Mona Lisa), and the same is true of sentences that appear in the description of Unity of Being (at phase 15): "Thought has been pursued, not as a means but as an end—the poem, the painting, the reverie has been sufficient of itself"; or "The being has selected, moulded and remoulded, narrowed its circle of living, been more and more the artist, grown more and more 'distinguished' in all preference" (*A Vision*, pp. 135-36). But whereas for Pater, as for Baudelaire and still, negatively, for Mallarmé, the "body" of language is derived from the sensation of natural things, the "body" of Yeats's *logos* is celestial; in the condition which he considers ideal, "love knows nothing of desire" (*A Vision*, p. 136). The poets of the romantic and symbolist tradition are all poets of desire, whose dream is not the suppression, but the eternal fulfillment and renewal of desire after a seemingly endless period of starvation; they rejoice in things that originate "as flowers originate," green foliage after the desert. Yeats remains among them only in his failure, although his frustration stems not so much from the excessive barrenness of his wasteland as from the fact that it never grew barren enough to be left without regret. His ideal is no longer that of aestheticism, but it does not suffice to change the ideal in order to escape from the predicament.

Whether one should call it Platonic (or Neoplatonic) will depend on the kind of Platonism one chooses to take as a norm. Yeats certainly shared with this intellectual tradition—with which he was well acquainted<sup>109</sup>—the elements that stress the supernatural aspects of the soul and the spiritual character of the divine, and he often uses Platonic or related myths and emblems in preference to their Christian equivalences. But if one considers as essential to Platonism the notion of a continuous universe in which all individual entities are emanations of the same divine spirit and thus, to some degree, analogous

to that spirit, then Yeats is not a Platonist. His ambiguous treatment of the Eros and the conception of physical and divine love as mutually exclusive are not Platonic; for all his sexual bravado, Yeats has a very protestant and un-Greek sense of the degradation of matter and of the body—as his ferocious treatment of old age, for instance, testifies. And it would be exceedingly difficult to make a statement like the following, which expresses a very genuine conviction, fall within the boundaries of Platonism: "Life is no series of emanations from divine reason such as the Cabalists imagine, but an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall but a whirlpool, a gyre."<sup>110</sup>

Coming upon such "Platonic" lines as these: "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed" or "For things below are copies, the great Smaragdine Tablet said" ("Supernatural Songs," *Var.*, p. 556), their aphoristic quality makes them stand out in memory, and one tends to think of them as Yeats's own credo. In the context of the poem from which they are taken, far from representing the author's belief, they represent a rejected heresy. "Supernatural Songs," Yeats's most far-reaching attempt at a personal theology, are said to be spoken by the hermit Ribh, who, as a later suppressed note tells us, speaks for the element in Christianity that came to the foreground in Byzantium and denied all notion of Christ as an incarnated being: "one could be a devout communicant and accept all the counsels before the Great Schism that separated Western from Eastern Christianity in the ninth century . . . For the moment I associated early Christian Ireland with India; Shri Purohit Swami, protected during his pilgrimage to a remote Himalyan shrine by a strange great dog that disappeared when danger was past, might have been that blessed Cellach who sang upon his deathbed of bird and beast;<sup>111</sup> . . . Saint Patrick must have found in Ireland, for he was not its first missionary, men whose Christianity had come from Egypt, and retained characteristics of those older faiths that have become so important to our invention . . ." (*Var.*, p. 837). Ribh is one of those "Asiatic" Christians and his denunciation of

Patrick, in which the alleged quotation from the Hermes Trismegistus appears,<sup>112</sup> is founded on his denial of any analogy between the realm of man and the realm of God. His attack is aimed at the doctrine that conceives of earthly and natural things as reflections of a divine order (a doctrine Yeats equates with the Platonic and the Western Christian tradition); in such a universe, God can be known by analogy with natural processes. The human Eros, for instance, can be extended to become the pure Idea of divine unity and permanence:

Man, woman, child (a daughter or a son),  
That's how all natural or supernatural stories run.  
Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are  
wed.  
As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets,  
Godhead begets Godhead, . . .  
("Supernatural Songs" II, "Ribh Denounces Patrick,"  
*Var.*, p. 556)

The orthodox Saint Patrick has derived his conception of the Christian incarnation and of the Trinity from this doctrine; without any ambiguity, Ribh condemns it as "An abstract Greek absurdity" which has "crazed the man." He opposes to it the entirely masculine Trinity, God begetting himself on his own self and bearing his own son, the self-begotten generation of the divine, which knows nothing of sex, birth, or death, and is bound to remain entirely incomprehensible to the human mind. The divine, which Yeats calls, by antiphrase, "reality" ("Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come / Into the desolation of reality"—*Var.*, p. 563) is a realm in which there is neither generation nor becoming:

Things out of perfection sail,  
And all their swelling canvas wear,  
Nor shall the self-begotten fail  
Though fantastic men suppose  
Building-yard and stormy shore,  
Winding-sheet and swaddling-clothes.  
("Words for Music Perhaps," xxiv, *Var.*, p. 530)

Beginnings and endings, births and deaths, are so many human illusions; men can sometimes find salvation out of their world of aberrations, but their attempt to understand God by analogy with their own experience is absurd; a true theology contains nothing of history, sex, or bodily death.

Being self-begotten, the Trinity is in fact a Unity. The Godhead can not be said to "augment (its) kind," for it is always identical with the totality of its own omnipresent self, not, as in nature, a chain or collection of individuals in a species that perpetuates by generation. Humans are multiple, not One, and therefore never complete as long as they remain in nature; our multiplicity is apparent from the fact that we beget on an "other" sex: it takes two of us to create a third who, in his turn (being "a daughter or a son"), will keep on copying copies. Like all extreme experiences, sexual joy contains some foreboding of divine reality, but those glimpses of light are irrevocably dispelled by the impurity of the generated world, represented in this poem by the traditional serpent from Genesis:<sup>113</sup>

When the conflagration of their passion sinks,  
damped by the body or the mind,  
That juggling nature mounts, her coil in their  
embraces twined.

The mirror-scalèd serpent is multiplicity, . . .  
(*Var.*, p. 556)

Michael Robartes' mirror, which was to filter the divine gold from the common matter of nature, is transformed by human love in the mere "copy" of reproduction: "Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show" ("*The Statues*," *Var.*, p. 610). The evil power of nature is strong enough to overcome man's aspiration toward the divine; the incarnated body as well as the mind drag him down into generation: divine passion *sinks* as the serpent of nature *mounts*. The "supernatural" songs, which presumably were to praise a God that stands above and beyond nature, end up by being songs of hatred directed against the evil but victorious power of nature.

In the sequence entitled "A Woman Young and Old" appears the poem that fully reveals the failure of the emblem. Yeats's awareness of his defeat might well come as a surprise. The survey of the most earthbound of his themes reveals no wavering in his commitment to a belief that could find poetic expression only in terms of emblems, never of natural images. Yeats's Eros, if it can still be called by that name, is aimed against the body, the senses, and the mind, and it demands that the quest for the divine begin with the denial of whatever natural attributes man may possess—or, to speak in terms of intellectual traditions, that it begin outside of the Christian, Platonist, and humanist tradition. If we can nevertheless speak of a failure of the emblem, it is not by implying that Yeats changed his mind; he did not discover that other endeavors, be it human love, or the pursuits of the intellect, or the actions of history, could serve him better. Instead, he failed to overcome the inimical power of nature itself. After having been treated as an ambiguous poetic device, destined to give texture and appeal to emblems and themes not really strong enough to dispense with its assistance, nature returns in the later poetry in a very different form. No longer does it function as the self-reflecting, narcissistic mirror of the early poetry, but it acts as the brutal strength of matter, a bestial violence which can only find expression in images of blood and torment.

"Her Vision in the Wood," the poem which, perhaps more than any other, contains the essence of the late Yeats, is, in a very literal sense, a poem about "bodies from a picture or a coin" contrasted with actual bodies of men and women. Whereas "Among School Children" ended with a question, "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?," this poem tells what happens beyond the unanswered question, when the dancer is taken for the dance, the body treated as if it were an emblem. Yeats's poetry presents emblems in the guise of natural images; his theory of divine love is stated in terms of a bodily Eros—in the same manner, the man and the woman in "Her Vision in the Wood" have loved each other, not for

themselves, but in a search for archetypal experiences that belong to the gods. From the Michael Robartes poems and, well before, from *The Shadowy Waters* and *The Wind among the Reeds*, we know this deliberate confusion to be generally willed by man, against the resistance of the more human desires of woman:

Say on and say  
That only God has loved us for ourselves,  
But what care I that long for a man's love?  
(*"The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool," Var., p. 448*)

In "A Woman Young and Old," Yeats goes further and describes the solitude of a love in which both partners, the woman as well as the man, are using each other as a means to escape from the endless turmoil of physical time and matter. Unlike the recalcitrant girl from "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," the woman in this sequence of poems—presumably Every-Woman—is quite willing to submit to "the discipline of the looking-glass," willing to attract a man by what she knows to be supernatural in herself, though knowing that it is precisely this unhuman, superhuman element in her that the man pursues:

If I make the lashes dark  
And the eyes more bright  
And the lips more scarlet,  
Or ask if all be right  
From mirror after mirror,  
No vanity's displayed:  
I'm looking for the face I had  
Before the world was made.

(*"A Woman Young and Old," Var., pp. 531-32*)

In his early description of the hound emblem from *Oisín*, Yeats had already spoken of "the desire of the woman 'which is for the desire of the man,' " but this sentence takes on a very different meaning when one realizes that man's desire is not for sexual satisfaction, but for the end of all natural passion in the stillness that follows his lovemaking, when

God's love has hidden him  
Out of all harm,  
Pleasure has made him  
Weak as a worm.  
(*"The Chambermaid's First Song," Var., p. 574*)

Vicariously, the woman can achieve the same escape out of time, whenever she admits that her desire is not for the satisfaction of a natural craving, but for the destruction of man's desire:

If questioned on  
My utmost pleasure with a man  
By some new-married bride, I take  
That stillness for a theme  
Where his heart my heart did seem  
And both adrift on the miraculous stream  
Where—wrote a learned astrologer—  
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.  
(*"A Woman Young and Old," Var., p. 535*)<sup>114</sup>

One begins to understand, perhaps all too well (though one should beware not to confuse ontology and psychoanalysis), Yeats's interest in the castration myth of Attis. The rejection of all feminine and maternal elements of sex,<sup>115</sup> brings to mind Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*, a resemblance confirmed by the frequent references to the decapitation of Saint John in late plays closely related to this theme. Yeats's Queen and woman, however, are more extreme symbols than *Hérodiade*: Mallarmé's heroine refuses Venus for the sake of self-contemplative self-knowledge; she overcomes the pantheistic temptation of a fusion with nature and resigns herself instead to the mediated knowledge of her own consciousness as she beholds it acting upon natural substances. Later, in the fully developed version of the drama in which Saint John was to appear, and of which only a few fragments remain, *Hérodiade* would have accomplished her action as a sacrifice of the female and natural principle to the male and intellectual principle. The decapitation freed John from the weight of the body (a tragic act



which involves the Mallarméan form of death), but only Hérodias can be said to be actually "killed" by this act; John survives as pure spirit, pure "head";

Et ma tête surgie  
Solitaire vigie  
Dans les vols triomphaux  
De cette faux

and he can praise Hérodias as the one who made the radical separation between mind and body (*rupture franche*) possible:

Comme rupture franche  
Plutôt refoule ou tranche  
Les anciens désaccords  
Avec le corps

(where "*tranche*," aside from the literal meaning "*couper*," also has the figurative meaning of solving an intellectual problem, as in "*trancher [résoudre] la question*"). Mallarmé's gods still reside in nature and his mythology remains fundamentally pantheistic, a cult of the physical sun as pure intellect (Saint John is equated with the sun)—but Yeats's gods are the fierce destroyers of anything natural or human-bred. The entire concept, essential to Mallarmé, of abstract, intellectual self-knowledge is altogether alien to Yeats, and when his woman banishes all sexual and natural inclinations from her body, she is not running away from Venus but engaged in a quest to become Venus, the archetype of her species, instead of a transient, incarnated emanation of this divine principle. "Her Vision in the Wood," with its transparent allusions to the Venus and Adonis myth, describes what happens when a man and a woman refuse the call of nature and follow instead that of the gods.

The unity of imagery in "Her Vision in the Wood" is accomplished by the successive metamorphoses of blood into wine, "wine" being the emblem of the natural substance "blood" or, in other words, human blood being wine to the gods.<sup>116</sup> The action of the poem takes place "in the sacred wood" which, from Yeats's version of *Oedipus at Colonus*, is

known to be the abode of the Athenian gods and, more specifically, of the Furies and of Dionysos<sup>117</sup>—and it takes place at "wine-dark midnight," another link with Dionysos,<sup>118</sup> as well as an indication that the mortal woman is in a state of vision and able to perceive the supernatural.<sup>119</sup> The connection of "wine" with the divine is established at the very start of the poem ("wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood") and its equation with blood (the extension of the Christ in a Holy Blood symbol to the pagan world) occurs in the Bacchante-like self-immolation of the woman:

Imagining that I could  
A greater with a lesser pang assuage  
Or but to find if withered vein ran blood,  
I tore my body that its wine might cover  
Whatever could recall the lip of lover.

(*Var.*, p. 537)

Blood is transformed into wine in the offering of her life to the wine god, the violent but voluntary death by means of which, in the reversed movement of Dionysos' own descent into matter, she achieves unity of being with the gods. A similarly irrational and ecstatic surrender, this time acted out by men, is mentioned in *A Vision*: "One knows not into how great extravagance Asia, accustomed to abase itself, may have carried what soon sent Greeks and Romans to stand naked in a Mithraic pit, moving their bodies as under a shower-bath that those bodies might receive the blood of the bull even to the last drop" (*A Vision*, p. 272).<sup>120</sup> Her death is the passion for prenatal light as opposed to *Hysterica Passio*, the passion for the natural womb of nature:

I—love's skein upon the ground,  
My body in the tomb—  
Shall leap into the light lost  
In my mother's womb.

("Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman," *Var.*, p. 511)

On the other hand, the self-sacrifice to the gods also represents the decay of feminine beauty, the proof that the at-

tempt to escape from the world of time has failed. In the realm of nature, old age only involves a decline, the return of clay to clay, and Wordsworth's elegiac consolation can be effective:

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

But in Yeats's discontinuous universe, where nature and the gods are engaged in a merciless battle, the decline of a woman's beauty becomes the ultimate tragedy, the defeat of the divine at the hand of nature:

To dream of women whose beauty was folded in  
dismay,  
Even in an old story, is a burden not to be  
borne.

("Under the Moon," *Var.*, p. 210)

The wine of the "wine-dark midnight" and of the divine libation turns back into the dark blood of old age and withered veins, and the sacrifice—which already was a "lesser pang" compared to the full abandon of a virgin's love—appears as the absurd gesture of an old woman who wants to make certain that she is still alive:

Or but to find if withered vein ran blood,  
I tore my body . . .

In the visionary stage that follows her death, she "dreams back," in accordance with Yeats's theory of the afterlife, and relives the experience of her youthful love and crime. "Dark changed to red," and the black blood of old age recovers the glow it had when she was "A Woman Homer sung"<sup>121</sup> and would have been "fit spoil for a centaur / Drunk with the un-mixed wine" (*Var.*, p. 355). The poem becomes emblematic, with references to Renaissance painting indicating that we are watching "bodies from a picture or a coin" during the narration of the experience of love as it affects man:

And after that I held my fingers up,  
Stared at the wine-dark nail, or dark that ran  
Down every withered finger from the top;  
But the dark changed to red, and torches shone,  
And deafening music shook the leaves; a troop  
Shouldered a litter with a wounded man,  
Or smote upon the string and to the sound  
Sang of the beast that gave the fatal wound.

All stately women moving to a song  
With loosened hair or foreheads grief-distraught,  
It seemed a Quattrocento painter's throng,  
A thoughtless image of Mantegna's thought—  
Why should they think that are for ever young?  
Till suddenly in grief's contagion caught,  
I stared upon his blood-bedabbled breast  
And sang my malediction with the rest.

That thing all blood and mire, that beast-torn wreck,  
Half turned and fixed a glazing eye on mine,  
And, though love's bitter-sweet had all come back,  
Those bodies from a picture or a coin  
Nor saw my body fall nor heard it shriek,  
Nor knew, drunken with singing as with wine,  
That they had brought no fabulous symbol there  
But my heart's victim and its torturer.

(*Var.*, p. 537)

Like the woman, the man has used love as a means to reach the gods, and his divine possession, the equivalence of her self-immolation, is treated by reference to the Adonis myth: Adonis slain by a boar, "the beast that gave the fatal wound." The notes to *The Wind among the Reeds* make explicit the association between the boar that killed Adonis (and also Attis), and the "boar without bristles" or the "black pig," emblems that appear frequently in the early volume, representing the destruction of all natural things at the end of time.<sup>122</sup> What was treated before 1900 as a cosmic annihilation now confines the same destructive power to the individual destiny of every man. As a lover, he chose the divine element in the woman—the beauty

of her mirrored form—in order to escape from the wheel of time; in that sense it can be said that he is indeed her “victim,” for her body (as Michael Robartes understands the word) represents, as it were, and acts for the god who destroys him. Allusions to Mantegna (whom Yeats classifies with Botticelli and da Vinci at phase fifteen, not with the later Michelangelo) as well as the development on the word “thoughtless” (“A thoughtless image of Mantegna’s thought— / Why should they think that are for ever young?”) make the link with “Michael Robartes and the Dancer”: one remembers Robartes’ reference to Renaissance painting and his advice to the girl to “banish every thought” (*Var.*, p. 387, l. 48). To the onlooking woman, the “stately women” appear as so many reflections of her own youthful body when, like the dancer, she had eliminated all thought of worldly involvement and become purely the “body” that lured her lover to his sacrificial death. This extends and clarifies the emblem of the dancer who becomes associated, by the setting in the “sacred wood” of Athens, with the Furies. The etymology of the Eumenides’ name connects them also with the “Good People” of Faery,<sup>123</sup> the demonic shape-changers of the Sidhe who “empty [our] heart of its mortal dream” (*Var.*, p. 140). The supernatural figures, dancing in lamentation around Adonis’ body, are the completed emblem, constant and identical in the Christian,<sup>124</sup> Greek, and Irish tradition, of the eternal feminine as the destroyer of natural man.

Within the strict orthodoxy of the emblem, the poem should have ended in the apotheosis of this pageant: the woman, having shed her mortal body, becomes a demonic icon, while the man, soon to be purged from “the fury and the mire of human veins” (“Byzantium,” *Var.*, p. 497), turns into a “fabulous symbol,” far out of reach of bodily pain or human grief. Poems heralding the triumph of the emblem, such as “Byzantium,” or “Colonus’ Praise,” or “All Souls’ Night” end in that way. Instead, “Her Vision in the Wood” forcefully returns to the world of blood and mire. “Wine” is mentioned once more near the end, now associated with the half-divine

mourners whose “bodies” are sharply contrasted with the human body of the woman:

Those bodies from a picture or a coin  
Nor saw my body fall nor heard it shriek,  
Nor knew, drunken with singing as with wine,  
That they . . .

They are still close enough to their human origin to lament Adonis’ death, but their lament is already far removed from the event, far enough to become the ecstatic grief of “song” compared to the “shriek” of the real woman. We can think of this “song” as the poetry which Yeats would have wanted to write. Instead, we hear only the shriek of the lovers as they discover with horror what the gods have done to them. The turning point that marks the dramatic climax of the poem re-introduces the natural substance of “blood”:

That thing all blood and mire, that beast-torn wreck,  
Half turned and fixed a glazing eye on mine, . . .

and marks a decisive shift from the realm of the emblem back to that of the natural image. That this shift remains possible and becomes necessary indicates the defeat and the fallacy of the entire wisdom derived from the emblem. For if it is true that, for the creatures in the poem and, consequently, for the poet and his readers as well, the man has remained a physical, natural body and not grown into a supernatural emblem

That they had brought no fabulous symbol there  
But my heart’s victim and its torturer

then the entire ritual of love, together with the poetical and stylistic strategy that prompted this ritual, is shown to be an infinitely dangerous deceit. Where we had been promised the eternal peace and ecstasy of divine presence, only the image of a beast-torn wreck remains. The poem records the irrevocable condemnation of Yeats’s entire enterprise but offers no alternative.

With this shift of theme, all that is left for the poetry to

do is to "shriek" in utter derision. In *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, after the same story is told, this time by means of the myth of Salomé and John the Baptist instead of that of Venus and Adonis, Yeats gives the last word to a sardonic, nihilistic emblem of nature (the "wicked, crooked hawthorn tree") that rebukes and dashes the hopes of a "travelling-man," who contains elements from all Yeats's favorite heroes including his most triumphant self (*Plays*, pp. 640-41). In *The Herne's Egg*, after narrating again, by means of another set of emblems, the same myth of divine possession, Yeats ends his play in utter mockery ("All that trouble and nothing to show for it . . ."—*Plays*, p. 678).

Nowhere is the derision more apparent than in the last of the poems directly concerned with the problem of imagery, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (*Var.*, pp. 629-30). One has to remember what hopes Yeats had invested in his emblems to measure the bitterness with which he refers to them as

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till.

They represent not only the sardonic counterpart of his most venerated "holy things" but also, quite literally, the utterly worthless content of reality. The failure of the emblem amounts to total nihilism. Yeats has burned his bridges, and there is no return out of his exploded paradise of emblems back to a wasted earth. Those who look to Yeats for reassurance from the anxieties of our own post-romantic predicament, or for relief from the paralysis of nihilism, will not find it in his conception of the emblem. He cautions instead against the danger of unwarranted hopeful solutions, and thus accomplishes all that the highest forms of language can for the moment accomplish.

## 9 Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric

THE GESTURE that links epistemology with rhetoric in general, and not only with the mimetic tropes of representation, recurs in many philosophical and poetic texts of the nineteenth century, from Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" to Nietzsche's perhaps better known than understood definition of truth as tropological displacement: "Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen . . ." <sup>1</sup> Even when thus translated before it has been allowed to run one third of its course, Nietzsche's sentence considerably complicates the assimilation of truth to trope that it proclaims. Later in the essay, the homology between concept and figure as symmetrical structures and aberrant repressions of differences is dramatized in the specular destinies of the artist and the scientist-philosopher. Like the Third Critique, this late Kantian text demonstrates, albeit in the mode of parody, the continuity of aesthetic with rational judgment that is the main tenet and the major crux of all critical philosophies and "Romantic" literatures. The considerable difference in tone between Nietzsche