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YEATS'S CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE: THE PERIOD FROM DANTE TO SHAKESPEARE

by
Ellen Rosser Smith

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of the requirements for the degree of
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YEATS'S CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE: THE PERIOD FROM DANTE TO SHAKESPEARE

by Ellen Rosser Smith, University of Michigan, 1967

The art and literature of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries exerted a shaping influence on Yeats's imagination. This essay is a chronological study of his symbolic conception of the period from Dante to Shakespeare. Yeats's interest in the period arose naturally from the nineteenth-century discovery and admiration of the Renaissance, an admiration which was manifested in literary and historical works. Influenced by this attitude, he chose the period from Dante to Shakespeare as his cultural touchstone, and developed his system of historical gyres around his conception of the deterioration of the arts since the Renaissance. In the poetry, the art, the society, and the philosophy of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, he found touchstones by which to evaluate the culture of other periods, and he found models to emulate.

During his first period of development--from childhood to 1903--his knowledge of the culture of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries gradually increased, and he found a contemplative ideal in the pastoral works of Spenser and in the universal symbolism of Dante. During his next period--from 1903 to 1915--preferring the active

to the contemplative life, he turned to the works of Ben Jonson and of Castiglione to find examples of an idealized mode of life and to the works of Shakespeare and of Jonson to find portrayals of the complete personality. In his third period--from 1915 to 1938--he returned to contemplation, creating his own metaphysical system, for which Dante was a model, and designating Spenser as a significant example of Neoplatonic thought. He also referred to the Quattrocento painters to illustrate the spiritual perfection of the Fifteenth Phase. Finally, in his last period--from 1938 to 1939--he sought the regeneration of mankind and for his models turned to Shakespeare's heroic old men and to Michelangelo's paintings.

In this last period, during which Yeats brought his own life to unity and indicated the way for mankind to be regenerated, the period from Dante to Shakespeare is more important in his poetry than in any previous phase of his thought. Not only did this period provide the main source of his ideas on unity of being, it also provided him with the symbol of this unity of being: Dante's "perfectly proportioned human body" was for Yeats best exemplified in the paintings of Michelangelo. Through this conception and this example of unity of being, Yeats in this final stage of development united the active and the contemplative life: man's search for a transcendent reality leads him to reproduce in flesh the supernatural element he discovers. Action and contemplation culminate in regeneration, in the

reproduction of the perfect human body, the body painted by Michelangelo. Thus the period from Dante to Shakespeare was not only a constant influence throughout Yeats's lifetime; in his last, most vital and creative period, it was the central influence.

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I should like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my chairman, Professor Donald Hill, and to the members of my committee, Professors Arno Bader, Herbert Barrows and Raymond Grew, for their criticism and their assistance. I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Warner G. Rice for his kindness in reading and criticizing the dissertation. Finally, I should like to thank the following people for the help that they have given me: Professors H. V. S. Ogden, Edward Engelberg, Bert Hornback and John Wright; Miss Gwenn Davis; Mrs. Patricia Sandoval; and Mrs. Henry Christopherson.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past ten years there has been a proliferation of books and articles on W. B. Yeats, but there has been no systematic study of Yeats's interest in the culture of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries in England and Italy. Yet this culture was of major importance to him. In the poetry, the art, the society and the philosophy of those centuries, Yeats found touchstones by which to evaluate the culture of other periods, and he found models to emulate. He interpreted these touchstones, however, in terms of his own belief in "symbolism." As Yeats used this term, it meant, as he defined it in 1898, that "the things below are as the things above," or, when he later modified this Neoplatonic conception, that there is a relationship between man and the supernatural or the divine,[1] a relationship that is revealed most significantly in great works of art and literature.[2] Yeats in his symbolism followed the Neoplatonic and occult traditions, and his poetry, like that

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[1]For Yeats there is little distinction between these two terms. Spirits, visions seen in trances, automatic writing, religions, great works of art and great human passions were for him supernatural, a revelation to man of what is beyond man, which Yeats at various times also called the divine, the Anima Mundi, God or "the secret working mind."

[2]Since Yeats is the foremost English symbolist poet, his definition of "symbolism" will be used henceforth in this essay.

of some English Renaissance poets, is "wrapped about in all the webs of fantastic doctrine about sympathies and symbolism."[3] Yeats appears to have been closer in his doctrines to the early Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, or to English Romantic Neoplatonists, such as Blake and Shelley, than to the Florentine Neoplatonists: Ficino and his school concentrated on reason, which they believed truly sees God, not on "phantasy," which presents God in terms of delightful odors, sweet savors, soft textures, and "a light diffused almost through the immense inane, which is made beautiful with innumerable colors."[4] Yeats, like Blake, was most interested in the sensuous revelation of God.[5] Yet Yeats does not seem to have made a distinction between the various types of Neoplatonism, and his own symbols are drawn from the entire occult tradition that preceded and modified Plato's ideas.[6] Renaissance Neoplatonism, however, especially that described by Castiglione, had a profound influence on Yeats's ideas. In the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries Yeats found poets, especially Dante and Shakespeare, whose works he considered symbolic, and he discovered in fifteenth-century Italy an entire society that he considered symbolic. Yeats's

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[3]Ruth Wallerstein, Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1950), p. 229.

[4]Marsilio Ficino, Theologia Platonica, quoted in Wallerstein, pp. 217-18.

[5]See Chapter I, pp. 47-49.

[6]Since a thorough study of this subject is beyond the scope of this essay, all figures whom Yeats placed in the Neoplatonic tradition will be referred to henceforth as "Neoplatonists."

conception of these centuries is therefore of major importance to an understanding of Yeats's thought and to a full appreciation of his poetry, yet scholars for the most part have neglected this study.

Critics have noted that the Renaissance was for Yeats a significant period of history. For example, Richard Ellmann states that in Yeats's A Vision the Renaissance is described as the period when "subjectivity was at its fullest expansion, and great personalities were everywhere realizing themselves to the utmost."[7] Morton Irving Seiden refers briefly to Yeats's conception of the Renaissance as a combining of "nature and the individual soul, sexual desire and spiritual longing . . . balanced not only in human life but also--indeed, primarily--in art."[8] Edward Engelberg in his study of Yeats's aesthetic comments on "certain historical reassessments of Greece and the Renaissance, which Yeats found obviously in Pater, though the whole nineteenth century was deeply involved in the new awakening of interest in both periods,"[9] and in his essay on "The New Generation and the Acceptance of Yeats" he describes Yeats's conception of the Renaissance in Paterian terms: "Yeats . . . valued the ethos of the Renaissance vertu, the power and sweetness."[10] Harbans Rai Bachchan mentions that for Yeats the two

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[7]Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1948), p. 229.

[8]W. B. Yeats: The Poet as Mythmaker (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 279.

[9]The Vast Design (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. xxiii.

[10]W. B. Yeats 1865-1965. Centenary Essays on the Art of W. B. Yeats, ed. D. E. S. Maxwell and S. Bushrui (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1965), p. 91.

cultural peaks of the Christian civilization were "the Byzantine and the Renaissance,"[11] and he also refers to Yeats's interest in the unity of culture described by Castiglione.[12] Alex Zwerdling mentions that Yeats found parallels between his own time and that in which Castiglione wrote; he also refers to Yeats's earlier conception of the Renaissance as a time of the breaking of culture.[13] Northrop Frye briefly compares Yeats's metaphysical system to that of Dante.[14] These critics have mentioned some of the major areas of Yeats's thought that will be considered in this essay: Yeats's study of Pater's conception of the Renaissance, the gradual development of Yeats's own conception, the importance of Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier and of Dante's work in Yeats's development, and the place of the Renaissance in Yeats's historical system of cycles. These critics have not developed any of these lines of inquiry in any detail.

Two studies on Yeats and certain detailed aspects of the Renaissance have been published recently, however.[15] Corinna

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[11] W. B. Yeats and Occultism (Delhi: Notilal Banarsidass, 1965), p. 181.

[12] Ibid., p. 66.

[13] Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 70.

[14] "The Rising of the Moon," An Honoured Guest, ed. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), pp. 9-11.

[15] This dissertation was written before these works were published.

Salvadori's book, Yeats and Castiglione, examines Yeats's use of Castiglione's delineation of the aristocratic life, his Neo-platonic doctrine, and his conception of unity of being, one of Yeats's own central ideas. Although Miss Salvadori's study is detailed and accurate, it neglects other influences on Yeats's thought. Dante, for example, was at least as influential as Castiglione in forming Yeats's thought; in fact, Miss Salvadori admits that Yeats had already got his conception of unity of being from his father and from Dante before reading Castiglione.[16] Her study, then, is limited. The same criticism can be made of T. McAlindon's essay on "Yeats and the English Renaissance." Like Miss Salvadori's study, McAlindon's essay concentrates on Yeats's courtly ideal, but Shakespeare, Spenser and Ben Jonson rather than Castiglione are the significant Renaissance figures. McAlindon delineates Yeats's conception of Shakespeare's courtly ideal by analyzing Yeats's praise of Richard II's "pristine courtliness."[17] Spenser's thought is also fitted into the "aristocratic-democratic antinomy,"[18] for, as McAlindon rightly points out, Yeats objected to Spenser's allegory, which "constituted the imposition of moralizing, middle-class art upon the aristocratic art" of twelfth-century poets.[19] Yet McAlindon concludes, erroneously, that Yeats's final evaluation of Spenser

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[16](Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1965), pp. 2-3.

[17]PMLA, LXXXII, No. 2 (May, 1967), 159.

[18]Ibid., p. 161.

[19]Ibid.

in 1902 was favorable. McAlindon errs by ignoring Yeats's symbolist bias.[20] Finally, McAlindon discusses very thoroughly Yeats's interest in "Jonson the poet of royalty and nobility, and Jonson the energetic enemy of the mob, its standards, and its petty spokesmen."[21] He also indicates the similarity between Yeats's and Jonson's admiration of noble houses. Both of these critical studies are valuable in that they begin to explore the significance to Yeats of the Renaissance. They do not, however, attempt to treat Yeats's interest in the entire period from Dante to Shakespeare nor his symbolic interpretation of the Renaissance.

This study will present a chronological survey of the evolution of Yeats's interest in the culture of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. The main problems this essay will consider are: What were the prevailing conceptions of the Renaissance and the Middle Ages that influenced or contrasted to Yeats's ideas? What was the extent of Yeats's knowledge of the writing and theory of these centuries? How did Yeats's reading in that literature change his conception of those centuries? How did the development of his symbology influence his conception of the period from Dante to Shakespeare? How significant is Yeats's conception of those centuries as a symbolic element in his poetry?

This essay will consider the entire spectrum of Yeats's ideas about that period--from his early conception of the

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[20]See Chapter I, pp. 63-66.

[21]McAlindon, p. 165.

English Renaissance as a time in which all classes of men were united by their appreciation of the arts, to his final conception of the works of Michelangelo as the regenerative agent for mankind. The introduction will consider the interest in the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries in England and Italy, as well as some of the more significant conceptions of the Renaissance, that developed throughout the nineteenth century. The first chapter (childhood to 1903) will discuss Yeats's gradually increasing knowledge of the literature from Dante to Shakespeare and his finding in those works a contemplative ideal. The second chapter (1903-1915) will consider the years during which Yeats entered into the active life and as a result found the Renaissance a period in which poets and courtiers could be politically and socially engaged in aesthetic problems, a conception Yeats found in the works of Castiglione and Ben Jonson. The third chapter (1915-1938) will consider Yeats's historical and metaphysical conception of the period from Dante to Shakespeare, especially his conception of the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance as the time of unity of being. The fourth chapter (1938-1939) will consider Yeats's symbolic use in his poetry of figures from Dante to Shakespeare and of the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance, especially his conception of Michelangelo's figures as models for the spiritual and physical perfection of mankind. For Yeats the Renaissance was one of the four most significant periods in history; the two great ages of Byzantine art and the golden age of Greece are the others. This essay will delineate

Yeats's various conceptions of the period from Dante to Shakespeare, especially his conception of the Renaissance.

Nineteenth-Century Interest in the Thirteenth through the Sixteenth Centuries

An interest in the literature of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries in Italy and England is primarily a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Although the works of the Elizabethans were not lost as were many of the works of ancient Greece, nevertheless until the nineteenth century they were relegated to near-obscurity. With the Romantic rebellion against neo-classical restraint, however, came a surge of awareness of the older forms of English--as opposed to French, Greek or Latin--literature. Poets began to imitate the ballad form, medieval romances were emulated, and Elizabethan poetry and drama were extolled. A growing interest in the imaginative works of Italy of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries also was manifested during the nineteenth century. This burgeoning interest was evident in the scholarly and in the creative works of the nineteenth century: in the editing of texts; in the essays and lectures on the literature of the period from Dante to Shakespeare; in the references to figures of that period in the imaginative literature of the nineteenth century; in the use of Renaissance or Elizabethan themes, settings or techniques in nineteenth-century poetry and drama; and in the historical interpretations of the Renaissance as a distinct

period. These manifestations of interest form the cultural background from which W. B. Yeats's ideas developed.

Scholarly Interest in the Period from Dante to Shakespeare

Editing of Texts

The frequent reprinting and editing of the texts of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries are clear indications of the importance of those works to the nineteenth century. The first major collection of early English texts, Nugae Antiquae, was published in 1804, and it was soon followed by other similar collections: Sir S. O. Brydges edited five such works from 1805 to 1831, and by 1851 five other editors had completed their work on six significant collections, including The Harleian Miscellany; in 1868 W. C. Hazlitt edited Inedited Tracts; and various other scholars continued the work throughout the century. Moreover, various societies began issuing publications of early English texts: in 1814 the Roxburghe Club Publications began and were followed by the Camden Society Publications in 1838 and the Percy Society Publications from 1840 to 1852. Continuing this editing and making available older texts, the Early English Text Society began its publications in 1864, and from 1868 to 1871 Edward Arber brought out seventeen volumes of English Reprints, following these with eight volumes of An English Garner. During the nineteenth century these and other editors and societies, through their scholarly activities, caused the works of the English Renaissance to become known and thereby aided in creating a

conception of the English Renaissance as a period of great creative activity.[22]

Within this general interest in the works of the English Renaissance, there was some concentration on Renaissance poetry. Some editions of Renaissance miscellanies were edited during the eighteenth century, but there was an efflorescence of editions and reprints during the nineteenth century. Although poetry frequently was included in the general editions and reprints mentioned above, there were also collections limited to poetry. From 1790 to 1890 eight major editions of poetry alone were published, including England's Helicon (1812) and Tottel's Miscellany (1870). Moreover, Edward Arber in 1899 and 1900 edited anthologies of the works of Surrey and Wyatt, of Spenser, of Shakespeare, of Jonson, and of Milton. The various societies also put out reprints or editions: the Spenser Society, the Percy Society, the Parker Society and the Ballad Society were devoted to research into and editing of Renaissance poetry.

Scholarly Interest in Spenser

Edmund Spenser was among the Renaissance poets who received particular scholarly attention, and his work was of interest to W. B. Yeats, who selected the poems and wrote an introduction for an anthology of Spenser's work. Thus Yeats himself

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[22] See the Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, Vol. I: 600-1660 (ed. Frederick Bateson [Cambridge: University Press, 1940], I, 317-319, 403-406, 539-551), for a complete listing of editions and reprints during the nineteenth century.

took part in this movement to restore and make known the poetry of the English Renaissance. Spenser's work had been known in the eighteenth century, at least it was edited once, but in the nineteenth century four editions were brought out. Moreover, Spenser's poetry was brought to public attention by critical books and lectures. W. Hazlitt gave a lecture on Spenser that was printed in 1818; Coleridge delivered a lecture in 1818; Leigh Hunt discussed Spenser in Imagination and Fancy (1854); and, among other critics, Edward Dowden published work on Spenser. Spenser was a subject for the nineteenth-century research into and praise of English Renaissance poetry, and Yeats's work on his poetry was a natural twentieth-century continuation of earlier work.

Scholarly Interest in Shakespeare

Shakespeare was given much scholarly attention during the nineteenth century. Although his works had not been completely neglected in the eighteenth century--some sixteen principal editions were published--the number of such editions more than doubled in the nineteenth century (thirty-seven major editions). This increase in the number of editions is evidence of Shakespeare's growing popularity as is the increasingly accurate critical apparatus in these editions. Similarly, the number of Shakespeare societies and periodicals evinces the nineteenth-century scholars' great admiration for Shakespeare.

The nineteenth-century writers did more, however, than merely bring Shakespeare into prominence in academic circles;

some of them also brought him to more general notice. Hazlitt and Coleridge, for example, lectured on Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists; Hazlitt also wrote a Study of Characters of Shakespeare's Plays (1817). De Quincey aided in the popularization of Shakespeare with his impressionistic critical essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth" (1817) and by his article on Shakespeare in the Encyclopedia Britannica, seventh edition (1838). Edward Dowden, whom Yeats knew, brought out Shakspere. A Critical Study of his Mind and Art (1874). Charles Lamb even further popularized Shakespeare by his version of the plays for children, Tales from Shakespeare (1807). Shakespeare during this period was widely acclaimed; a cultural environment in which he was a dominant force was established. This environment had a strong effect on the young W. B. Yeats, causing him to admire Shakespeare before all other dramatists.

Scholarly Interest in Dante

The works of Dante were not neglected in this general enthusiasm for the works of the Renaissance. The first translation of The Divine Comedy was that by the Reverend Henry Boyd in 1802, and it was followed by some fifteen other translations, including those by W. M. Rossetti (1865) and Charles Eliot Norton (1891). The other poems were not translated until mid-century and were not brought out in so many editions. The prose works were not translated until nearly the end of the century. With Dante, as with the figures of the English Renaissance,

the scholarly work of providing texts preceded the general acclaim of the writers.

Nineteenth-Century Writers' Interest in the Period from Dante to Shakespeare

The Romantic poets, with their desire for spontaneity, for imagination, for freedom from conventions and traditions, turned naturally to the "woodnotes wild" of Shakespeare and to the simple lyrics and ballads of the Elizabethans, as well as to the older romances and ballads. Blake, for example, used the simple diction and elliptical narrative line of the old ballads in some of his poems; Wordsworth not only experimented with similar forms, he also explicitly criticized Johnson for not appreciating the Elizabethans;[23] and Coleridge, with his more analytical mind, delineated the difference between the Elizabethans and the ancient Greeks--the romantic and the classic. His conclusion was that the ancients (Sophocles) were statuesque and finite while the moderns (Shakespeare) were picturesque and infinite. Christianity was one of the causes of this expansion into the infinite: ". . . the natural effect of Christianity is that finites, even the human form, must, in order to satisfy the mind, be brought into connexion with, and be in fact symbolical of, the infinite." The result, Coleridge

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[23] "Poetry as a Study," The Prose Works, ed. A. B. Grossart (London; 1876), II, 124-25, quoted in Herbert Weisinger, "The Idea of the Renaissance from Petrarch to Hallam," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, University of Michigan, 1941), p. 406.

concluded, of this combining of poetry with doctrine and of turning the mind inward instead of outward to objects, is "subjectivity, which principally and most fundamentally distinguished all the classic from the modern poetry."[24] Yeats also saw subjectivity as the most characteristic element of the Renaissance, and he similarly considered the human form, the figures of Michelangelo, as symbolic of the infinite.[25] Moreover, Coleridge stated, in terms very similar to Yeats's statements about Shakespeare, that "the romantic poetry, the Shakespearian drama, appealed to the imagination rather than to the senses, and to the reason as contemplating our inward nature, the workings of the passions in their most retired recesses."[26] Shelley's criticism of Shakespeare follows a similar vein. King Lear is praised because it presents "the living impersonations of the truth of human passions,"[27] and Shelley believed that poetry does contain elements of a "diviner nature" than our own.[28] This Romantic criticism, with its emphasis on imagination, subjectivity, passion and symbolism, strongly

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[24] Shakespearean Criticism, ed. Thom. M. Rayson (Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 262-63, 412; tenth lecture of the 1818 series; quoted in Weisinger, p. 412.

[25] See Chapter III, pp. 102-03, 135 and Chapter IV, pp. 195-97 for Yeats's comments.

[26] Shakespearean Criticism, I, 197-98, quoted in Weisinger, p. 412.

[27] "A Defense of Poetry," Shelley's Prose, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 284.

[28] Ibid., p. 294.

influenced Yeats's interpretation of the literature from Dante to Shakespeare.

Nineteenth-Century Interest in Italy of the Thirteenth through the Sixteenth Centuries

The Romantic writers praised the major figures of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy as well as those of the English Renaissance, but the influence of the Italian writers was not so strong as that of the Elizabethans. Wordsworth, for example, praised Petrarch, Tasso and Dante;[29] Coleridge extolled Dante and quoted other Italian poets;[30] Shelley considered Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio among the great poets of the world;[31] Byron admired Petrarch and the revival of learning in Italy;[32] and Hazlitt considered Dante the "father of modern literature."[33] Moreover, Shelley and Byron in particular conceived of the Italian Renaissance as a period of strong personalities driven by passion. Shelley's The Cenci and Byron's two revenge tragedies, Marino Faliero and The Two Foscari, are set in barely post and early Renaissance settings; Byron's plays in fact are based on historical incidents from Marino Sanuto's Lives of

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[29]"Scorn not the sonnet," ll. 4, 5, 8.

[30]Biographia Literaria (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881), pp. 464 ff.

[31]"A Defense of Poetry," p. 292.

[32]"Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," I, 199.

[33]"Review of Literature of the South, by Sismondi," The Edinburgh Review, 1815, quoted in Weisinger, p. 384.

the Doges. The plots and characters in these plays conform to the image of Renaissance Italy found in the works of the Elizabethan dramatists: intrigue, murder and incest are prevalent. This conception of the evil but strong men who dominated the Italian Renaissance is typical of the Romantics as well as of some later writers. In spite of this Romantic interest in the Italian Renaissance, it was not of major importance to nineteenth-century writers until later in the century.

In Browning's work the Italian Renaissance, particularly the art of that period, took a prominent place. Browning used as speakers in two dramatic monologues the Renaissance painters Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi, and in each poem he showed great familiarity with the schools of painting that developed during the Renaissance. Moreover, he used a Renaissance setting and the Renaissance love of art as elements in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," "My Last Duchess" and other works. Browning was one of the first mid-century writers to evince a strong interest in the Italian Renaissance and to use his knowledge in poetry.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, so named in 1848 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt and J. E. Millais, was the first literary and artistic movement to take its aesthetic principles largely from the works of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy. Rossetti's father, Gabriele Rossetti, had been immersed in the study of Dante, especially of Dante's occult philosophy, and his children, particularly Dante Gabriel, later

continued these studies.[34] Not only did D. G. Rossetti translate the Vita Nuova and other of Dante's poems; in his own poetry he tried to recreate the "definiteness of sensible imagery" of Dante as well as combat, as did Dante, the false contrast between spirit and matter.[35] Moreover, he turned to fourteenth-century Italy for inspiration for his paintings. He, like the others of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, attempted to capture the realistic detail, the truth of Nature, of the early Italian painters.[36] Italian works thus had a significant effect on this English literary and artistic movement, which in turn affected the aesthetic of W. B. Yeats, largely through the influence of J. B. Yeats.

John Ruskin, like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, admired the work of the painters before Raphael, and he condemned the art and the architecture that succeeded them. Establishing the Romantic school of criticism firmly in England,[37] he judged the works of art on moral or inspirational grounds rather than on purely aesthetic ones. It was his contention that at the beginning of the sixteenth century in Italy (and he classified preceding centuries as medieval) art and architecture had

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[34]Oswald Doughty, A Victorian Romantic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1949), p. 33.

[35]Walter Pater, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti," Appreciations (London: Macmillan Co., Ltd., 1914), pp. 207, 212-13.

[36]Doughty, pp. 66-67.

[37]Wallace K. Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948), p. 142.

undergone a transformation from moral to immoral.[38] The "entire feeling of the Renaissance schools," he believed, was "compound of indolence, infidelity, sensuality, and shallow pride."[39] Although W. B. Yeats did not follow Ruskin's judgment on the sixteenth century, he did judge the Renaissance according to its inspirational elements.

J. B. Yeats, like Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, turned for inspiration to the painters before Raphael, but he was even more strongly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; in fact, he, J. T. Nettleship, Edwin Ellis and George Wilson even named themselves the Brotherhood.[40] This second Brotherhood rejected Raphael, whose paintings had "that calm which is not an ordered passion but an hypocrisy," and emulated the Pre-Raphaelite principles. Moreover, J. B. Yeats's taste in literature also was what his son called Pre-Raphaelite; that is, he preferred literature such as that of Shakespeare in which passion, but an "ordered passion," predominates.[41] These aesthetic principles recur in the writings of W. B. Yeats, and, indeed, he considered his own poetic credo to be a "more profound Pre-Raphaelitism."[42]

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[38] Ibid., p. 143.

[39] "Pre-Raphaelitism," Victorians on Literature and Art, ed. Robert L. Peters (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961), p. 33.

[40] Joseph Hone, "Memoir," J. B. Yeats. Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1944), p. 29.

[41] W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1955), pp. 65-66.

[42] "Art and Ideas," Essays and Introductions (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 355.

During the nineteenth century the interest in the Elizabethans and in the thirteenth- to the sixteenth-century Italian writers and artists developed quickly. From the editing of texts to the emulation of the works of those centuries, the scholars, critics and writers evinced an ever-increasing knowledge of and often admiration of the English and Italian works of the period from Dante to Shakespeare.

Historical Interpretations of the Renaissance

Around the middle of the nineteenth century many of the historians became interested in the Renaissance as a distinct period with definable characteristics. Although the historical interpretations of the period delineate it with varying dates and with varying emphases on specific figures, there was a general tendency to turn to the Renaissance as "a cultural ideal."[43] The historians combined a faith in progress with a dislike of some of its attributes, particularly the philistinism and materialism that accompanied it in the nineteenth century, and this combination caused them to reject the "nationalistic, religious, and sentimental medievalism of early nineteenth-century Romantic criticism."[44] Instead, with their predominantly aesthetic interests, they turned to the Renaissance, in which they found the progressive attitudes of the modern age. Yet they, like Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, were seeking in the

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[43] Ferguson, p. 180.

[44] Ibid., 181.

past an age in which art and the artist were integrated into the culture and were universally appreciated.[45] This ideal is one that W. B. Yeats also sought in the Renaissance, and he, like them, discovered in the Renaissance the beginnings of the modern world. For him the appreciation of art that existed during the Renaissance was more important than the beginning of modern times; for the historians, however, it was "as the birth hour of the modern world that the Renaissance acquired its positive historical significance and also the justification for its excesses."[46]

Before the middle of the nineteenth century the Renaissance had been considered a part of the Middle Ages. William Roscoe and Henry Hallam referred to the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries as such, although they appreciated the effect on western culture of the revival of learning and of art.[47] Arthur Hallam, in an essay (1832) that Yeats probably knew,[48] described the influence of Italian on English literature, but he did not designate the Renaissance as a period distinct from the Middle Ages. Although the origin of the term

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Neither William Roscoe, Life of Lorenzo de' Medici, Called the Magnificent (1796) and The Life and Pontificate of Leo the Tenth (1805), nor Henry Hallam, The Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries (1837-38), designates the Renaissance as a period separate from the Middle Ages.

[48] Yeats quoted from another essay in the only edition of Arthur Hallam's works available at that time; he probably read "The Influence of Italian on English Literature" also.

"Renaissance" can be traced back as far as the work of Vasari (1550),[49] not until the work of Henri Michelet (1855) was the Renaissance established as a separate period.

Although Yeats may not have read the work of Michelet, his father was familiar with Michelet's volume on the Renaissance[50] and may well have mentioned to his son some of Michelet's conceptions: for example, that the revival of antiquity was an important characteristic of the period, that a new art emerged, that old customs changed, or that the period was a time of "la découverte du monde, la découverte de l'homme."[51] More significantly, J. B. Yeats may have referred to Michelet's cyclical theory of history, a theory derived from Vico's work. Vico's theory, which both Michelet and W. B. Yeats studied, is that history proceeds in a spiral pattern; for example, he believed that governments change, moving through the following stages: aristocracy, popular republic, monarchy, corrupt monarchy, "barbarism of reflection," and heroic barbarism.[52] Moreover, he believed that styles of art similarly change: the epic, for example, was characteristic of the period of heroic barbarism. Michelet used a similar interpretation of history in his Histoire de France and designated the Renaissance as the

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[49]Ferguson, p. 62.

[50]J. B. Yeats, Letters, p. 179.

[51]Jules Michelet, Histoire de France, IX (Paris: A. le Vasseur, 1876), p. 6.

[52]Benedetto Croce, The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico (London: H. Latimer, Ltd., 1913), pp. 203-06. This is the translation of Vico that Yeats used.

period of the "retour de la nature," of heroic barbarism.[53] Although Michelet followed Vico in his theory of history, Michelet's interpretation of the Renaissance was coloured by his negative attitudes towards the clergy, the Church and feudalism. Since these elements were strong during the Middle Ages, which he termed "l'état bizarre et monstrueux," he rejected that period and turned instead to the Renaissance, in which he found "la critique et le progrès des idées."[54] His own rationalism and democratic idealism led him to glorify the period in history in which he found these qualities.

Michelet, however, found the soul of the Renaissance in the works of art, as did W. B. Yeats later. Raphael, da Vinci and Michelangelo were, for Michelet, the artists whose works most fully expressed the spirit of the Renaissance:

> Où fut l'âme de l'Italie au seizième siècle? Dans la placide facilité du charmant Raphaël? Dans la sublime ataraxie du grand Léonard de Vinci, le centralisateur des arts, le prophète des sciences? Celui-ci, toutefois, qui voulut l'insensibilité, qui se disait: "Fuis les orages," il a, qu'il le voulût or non, laissé dans le Saint Jean, dans le Bacchus, et la Joconde même, dans le sourire nerveux et maladif que ces têtes étranges ont toutes aux lèvres, une trace douloureuse des tiraillements de l'esprit italien, de cette fièvre maremme qu'il couvrait d'hilarité fausse. . . . Avez-vous vu dans le Jugement dernier, vers le milieu de cette toile immense, celui que se disputent les démons et les anges? Avez-vous vu dans cette figure et d'autres ces yeux qui nagent et s'efforcent de regarder en haut, l'anxiété mortelle de l'âme, où luttent deux infinis contraires? . . . Images vraies du seizième siècle entre les croyances anciennes et les nouvelles,

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[53] Michelet, IX, 7.

[54] Ibid., pp. 7-9.

> images de l'Italie entre les nations, images de l'homme d'alors et de Michel-Ange lui-même.[55]

With this impressionistic art criticism, part of an attempt "d'évoquer, refaire, ressusciter"[56] the period, Michelet set the pattern for subsequent writers on the Renaissance, such as Pater,[57] Symonds and W. B. Yeats, and Michelet designated as the touchstones of the period some of the same paintings that Pater and Symonds later used in a similar manner. Michelet was a significant figure in this time when the conception of the Renaissance was developing, for, on the one hand, he had a periodic conception of the Renaissance, and, on the other hand, he was the first to use an impressionistic and evocative approach. He did, however, focus his study on sixteenth-century Italy and on the influence of that country on French culture.

Georg Voigt, like Michelet, was one of the first historians to analyze in detail the significance to the Renaissance of the revival of learning. In Pétrarque, Boccace et les débuts de l'humanism en Italie (1859) he presented a detailed historical appreciation of the influence of these poets on the development of the modern period. His intention in writing the work was ". . . de n'étudier qu'une époque et un côté de

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[55] Ibid., pp. 316-17.

[56] Ibid., I, xi.

[57] Pater in "Style" (Appreciations [London: Macmillan Co., 1924], pp. 6, 12) described Michelet's style as "Mystical and Intimate." Pater's own style, especially his description of La Gioconda, has these same qualities, as well as a similar rhythm, which, as Pater stated, "in . . . Michelet . . . at his best, gives a musical value to every syllable."

ce développement historique, c'est-à-dire la renaissance de l'antiquité classique et son action sur la vie intellectuelle de l'Italie."[58] He proceeded by showing the modernity of Dante's desire for fame and of his revelation of himself to the world; then he designated Petrarch as the true discoverer of the new world:

> Le mérite de Pétrarque, c'est d'avoir ressuscité les lettres. Non seulement, il a fait revivre l'antiquité . . . , mais il a mis aux prises le passé avec le présent qui l'entourait, dans la prévision que de cette lutte sortirait un âge nouveau.[59]

Although Voigt mentioned Petrarch's involvement in political intrigues, particularly in Cola **di Rienzi**'s attempt to liberate Rome and reinstate the glories of the ancient days, he concentrated primarily on the literary manifestations of Petrarch's humanism. Thus Voigt's work, though historical in its orientation, gives evidence of the growing appreciation in the nineteenth century of the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, and his book defines the Renaissance in terms of these writers.

It was Jacob Burckhardt, however, who crystallized the conception of the Renaissance for the modern world. Although the various materials of Burckhardt's study were present in the works of earlier historians, his "Italian Renaissance was nonetheless, in its integrated entirety, an original creation, the masterpiece of a great historical artist, . . . the classic conception around which the storms of revisionism rage with

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[58]Trans. M. A. Le Monnier (Paris: H. Welter, 1894), p. 3.

[59]Ibid., p. 25.

increasing violence."[60] Burckhardt, in The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860), developed the historical delineation of the Renaissance begun by Michelet and Voigt, although he did not include works of art in his description of the period, for he planned another essay on art alone to complete his study. Michelet is Burckhardt's source for the conception of the Renaissance as the time of "the discovery of the world and of man," but Burckhardt was primarily concerned with the Kulturgeschichte of the times,[61] while Michelet's aim was more limited. Burckhardt's work was broader in scope also--from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century--and he treated the Renaissance as a period unified by a certain Volkgeist. All elements that he discussed--the state, the development of the individual, the revival of antiquity, the discovery of the world and of man, society and festivals, and morality and religion--were unified by the spirit of the Italian people. This spirit manifested itself through the individualism, the subjectivity and the secularism of the Italian people, the "modern men,"[62] and all elements of the culture reflected these characteristics, as Burckhardt presented that culture. The individualism and the self-awareness of the Italian Volkgeist led, however, not only to the creation of the modern world and to great works of art, but also to a "grave moral

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[60] Ferguson, p. 179.

[61] Ibid., pp. 186-87.

[62] Ibid., p. 194.

crisis"[63] in the sixteenth century. Excessive individualism was the cause of the immorality as well as of the genius of the Renaissance. Like Yeats, Burckhardt identified what he considered the unifying spirit of the Renaissance, and fitted all phenomena of the period into that interpretation. Yeats, like Burckhardt, was concerned with the subjectivity and the unity of the period, but his central conception was that of the unity of being that unified the fifteenth century.

John Addington Symonds in Renaissance in Italy (1872-1886) developed many of Burckhardt's ideas, particularly the idea of relating all phenomena to the "spirit of the age." This spirit he believed revealed itself as the "self-conscious freedom attained by the human spirit" and as "the emancipation of the reason of the modern world."[64] Symonds differed from Burckhardt, however, in discussing the works of art of the period, most notably Michelangelo's Last Judgment, which Symonds considered the touchstone of the Renaissance. He also differed from Burckhardt in his interpretation of the relationship between the corruption and the art of the Renaissance: "Crimes and vices are not the hotbed of arts and literature. . . . The faults of the Italians in the age of the Renaissance were neither productive of their high achievements, nor conversely were they generated by the motion of the intellect toward

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[63] The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1928), p. 433.

[64] Renaissance in Italy (London, 1897), I, 36, 3, 7, quoted in Ferguson, p. 201.

antique forms of culture."[65] Symonds thus followed Burckhardt in delineating the spirit of the age, but he differed from him in discussing the works of art and in distinguishing between the causes of the art and the causes of the corruption of the Renaissance.

Walter Pater, like Burckhardt and Symonds, attempted to delineate the spirit of the Renaissance, but he was more specifically humanistic in his interpretation than they. He considered the spirit of the Renaissance proper to be "a humanistic movement" in which there was general sympathy for all living things.[66] In The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (1873) he concentrated particularly on the unity of culture that he believed existed in Italy during the fifteenth century, a belief that Yeats later accepted and worked into his symbology.

> But it is in Italy, in the fifteenth century, that the interest of the Renaissance mainly lies,-- in that solemn fifteenth century which can hardly be studied too much, not merely for its positive results in the things of the intellect and the imagination, its concrete works of art, its special and prominent personalities, with their profound aesthetic charm, but for its general spirit and character, for the ethical qualities of which it is a consummate type.
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> There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate. The

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[65] Renaissance in Italy, Vol. II: The Revival of Learning (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1877), p. 46.

[66] "Review of Renaissance in Italy; the Age of the Despots. By John Addington Symonds," The Academy, VIII (July 31, 1875), 105.

> unity of this spirit gives unity to all the various products of the Renaissance.[67]

For Pater the spirit of the Renaissance was manifested most perfectly in the culture of the fifteenth century, and he interpreted the period in the light of the attributes that he found in that century: the Renaissance "is the name of a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt."[68] Pater, and Yeats after him, found in fifteenth-century Italy a cultural touchstone.

Pater and Yeats were primarily engaged in studies of the imaginative works of the fifteenth century rather than in studies of the political or social phenomena of that time. Each chose to write on Botticelli, whom Pater called a "visionary painter"[69] and whom Yeats considered a painter of "intellectual beauty," that is, a supernatural beauty; on Michelangelo; and on Leonardo da Vinci. Yeats admired Pater's poetic description of da Vinci's La Gioconda and, in fact, printed part of it as a poem in his edition of the Oxford Book of English Poetry (1936). Moreover, Yeats almost echoed one of Pater's statements about da Vinci's genius, but Yeats generalized the statement to refer to the paintings of what he called in A Vision

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[67](London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1914), pp. xiii, xiv.

[68]Ibid., p. 239.

[69]Ibid., p. 53.

the Fifteenth Phase. Pater mentioned that da Vinci's problem "was the transmutation of ideas into images."[70] Yeats, in A Vision, claimed that in the works of the Fifteenth Phase "all thought has become image."[71] Pater, however, was describing da Vinci's attempt to portray personality through the medium of paint; Yeats was describing the effect of a supernatural phase, the Fifteenth Phase, on works of art or on an individual. Yeats took Pater's impressionistic study of the Renaissance, chose from it those elements that he found significant, and interpreted them symbolically. Pater's study of the Renaissance had a significant influence on Yeats's thought, but Yeats transformed Pater's impressions of the period into part of a complex symbology.

Friedrich Nietzsche was another writer who influenced Yeats's thought, although not until a later date than Pater (sometime after 1903). Nietzsche wrote no historical work on the Renaissance, but he did make a few significant statements about the period. He was a romanticist in his approach to the period, finding in it "the great age of the Superman, the reign of Antichrist," and, like Yeats, "he simply used it as a symbol of what he wanted for the present and the future. It was a myth to be realized."[72] He delineated his conception of the Renaissance most precisely in The Antichrist:

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[70] Ibid., p. 112.

[71] (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 136.

[72] Ferguson, pp. 207-08.

> Does anybody at last understand, will anybody understand what the Renaissance was? The transvaluation of Christian values, the attempt undertaken with all means, all instincts and all genius to make the opposite values, the noble values triumph. . . . I see a spectacle so rich in meaning and so wonderfully paradoxical to boot, that it would be enough to make all the gods of Olympus rock with immortal laughter,--Caesar Borgia as Pope.[73]

His interpretation of the Renaissance is in some respects comparable to that of Yeats: both saw in the Renaissance the breaking of Christian unity and the instituting of aristocratic values, and both referred to Caesar Borgia as representative of the era.[74] Yeats's praise of strong Renaissance personalities, men beyond good and evil, (most frequent in his works during the 1920's) was undoubtedly influenced by his reading of Nietzsche.

Yet Yeats's conception of the Renaissance resembles that of Pater more closely than that of any other writer on the period, for both Pater and Yeats concentrated on the culture of fifteenth-century Italy, both derived their impressions of the period primarily from the imaginative works of the time, and both were concerned with delineating the particular quality of beauty conveyed by the works of art and literature. Pater, however, did not fit the Renaissance into a cyclical pattern of history, as did Yeats and Michelet, nor did he interpret the culture of the fifteenth century as a manifestation of a

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[73]The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Vol. XVI: The Twilight of the Idols; The Antichrist, trans. A. M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), p. 228.

[74]See Chapter III, pp. 98-100.

supernatural influx; that is, he did not interpret the period symbolically. Yeats, in A Vision, did fit the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance into his symbolic historical gyres, and he used this symbolic interpretation of the period in his poetry. Moreover, Yeats, unlike Pater, drew ideas and models from the imaginative works of the English Renaissance as well as from the works of the Italian Renaissance, but Yeats's discussions of individual figures are not so detailed as Pater's. The most significant element Yeats gained from his reading of Pater's work on the Renaissance was an impression of the unity of culture of fifteenth-century Italy, an impression that became a central element in his historical cycles.

Yeats drew from many nineteenth-century writers ideas about the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Like the Romantics, he admired the subjectivity and imaginative quality of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans; like Browning, he admired the art of the Renaissance; like the Pre-Raphaelites, he emulated Dante; like Ruskin, he searched for inspirational qualities in art before the sixteenth century; like his father, he judged Shakespeare according to Pre-Raphaelite principles; like Michelet, he developed a cyclical theory of history and placed the Renaissance in the pattern; like Burckhardt and Symonds, he attempted to describe the spirit of the Renaissance, and, like Burckhardt, he found subjectivity a major element of that spirit; like Nietzsche, he admired the strong personalities of the Renaissance; and, like Pater, he found in fifteenth-century Italy a cultural ideal. By 1925 when he published

A Vision, Yeats unified these various conceptions and placed them within the framework of a complex symbology. Although the Renaissance was for Yeats, especially during his later years, the most significant time during the period from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the entire period from Dante to Shakespeare helped mold Yeats's thought.

In A Vision, Yeats followed the nineteenth-century historians in referring to the period from 1380 to 1600 as the Renaissance, but he did not have the same associations with the word that they had. For them "Renaissance" meant a rebirth of culture, a time of light coming after ages of darkness. Yeats, however, found the beginnings of the Renaissance culture in the Arthurian legends and Romanesque architecture of 1005 to 1180. Moreover, Yeats compared the Arthurian tales to the Homeric epics, a comparison that probably derived from Vico's characterizing the age of heroic barbarism as the time of epics. Vico's characterization Michelet applied to the Renaissance; Yeats applied that characterization to an earlier period. Thus Yeats was unlike Michelet and the other nineteenth-century historians in that he placed the beginning of the subjective era in the Middle Ages not in the Renaissance. His use of the word "Renaissance" is therefore merely a convenient and current designation for the period from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries in Italy, not a designation for the time when culture was reborn.

The period from Dante to Shakespeare was Yeats's cultural touchstone, not merely the Italian Renaissance, which was

the nineteenth-century historians' cultural touchstone, nor the Elizabethan age, which served a similar function for the Romantics. Yeats thus assimilated the ideas of the nineteenth century, but he was more like the twentieth-century historians who reinterpreted the Renaissance to show it as a continuation of the Middle Ages.[75] He was not, however, an historian, even though his ideas can be placed into an historical tradition. He was a poet who selected from the work of previous scholars, writers and historians elements of the period from Dante to Shakespeare, and he transformed these elements into a poetic construct. He was a symbolist poet, not an historian manqué; he transformed historical conceptions into a poetic artifact, a symbolist ideal.

Yeats's idealization of the period from Dante to Shakespeare was a manifestation of the general growth of interest in that period that occurred during the nineteenth and continued during the twentieth century. The editing and reprinting of texts prepared the way for the more general scholarly and literary concern with the period. The Romantic poets' interest in the Elizabethans and the mid- and late-nineteenth-century literary interest in the Italian Renaissance set the pattern for Yeats's own admiration of those periods. Finally, the historical interpretations of the period that began around the middle of the nineteenth century were a necessary antecedent to Yeats's own delineation of the period from Dante to Shakespeare.

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[75]Ferguson, p. 329.

Thus Yeats's conception of this period fits into the general nineteenth-century trends of thought; his work differs radically from that of earlier writers, however, insofar as he combined his study of that period with his occult studies. Converting history into myth, he transformed Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo and fifteenth-century Italy into symbols of man's creative powers, of the supernatural revealing itself through works of genius. The background of Yeats's vision of the period from Dante to Shakespeare is present in earlier nineteenth-century thought, but his incorporation of that thought into a symbology is his own imaginative construct.

CHAPTER I

THE PERIOD FROM DANTE TO SHAKESPEARE AS YEATS'S CONTEMPLATIVE IDEAL: CHILDHOOD TO 1903

This chapter will consider in detail the following matters about the period from Dante to Shakespeare that Yeats was concerned with from childhood to 1903. During these years Yeats's attitude towards the literature of that period was consistent in that he conceived of it as great literature, literature to be emulated, but the particular qualities on which he focused changed during that time. In childhood and adolescence, under his father's tutelage, Yeats sought in literature passion (spiritual energy) and the revelation of personality; in young manhood he turned to a contemplative ideal, to a pastoral world, such as that of Spenser, in which passion was transformed into an "austere emotion."[1] Yeats's reading of Pater's The Renaissance, with its description of the cultural unity of fifteenth-century Italy, helped to turn his attention to the Renaissance as a contemplative ideal, as a world of supreme art. Yeats's own early short stories used a setting of Renaissance and earlier art and literature to symbolize this transcendent world of art. Yeats's symbolist desire to find supernatural elements

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[1]"A Sicilian Idyll," Letters to the New Island (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 112.

in the arts resulted from the unification of his interest in the arts and in hermetic systems with their symbologies. From studying Blake's symbolism Yeats concluded that literature could reveal the supernatural, and he began to develop his own symbolist theories around the principle that art is a revelation of the supernatural. This principle influenced his interpretation and evaluation of the writings of Shakespeare and Dante. At this time Yeats considered Dante the greater poet because he worked within a system of symbols, "intellectual symbols," rather than with unrelated "emotional symbols" like those of Shakespeare. Yeats, however, ceased to make this distinction between types of symbolism shortly after arriving at it, and decided instead that all great poetry has a relationship with the supernatural. This conclusion is the basis for all of Yeats's subsequent literary theories and mythologies, although he refined and elaborated the conception until he arrived at the complex relationship delineated in A Vision.

With this symbolist principle determining his evaluation of works of literature and art, Yeats wrote an essay (1902) on Spenser. Spenser's pastoral world did not satisfy Yeats at this time, although earlier he had imitated it in his own poetry, for, to Yeats, Spenser's pastoral world had no connection with the supernatural. Spenser, thought Yeats, was not a symbolist, and Yeats was highly critical of poetry that was not symbolic. During this period Yeats sought a contemplative ideal, a world like his own Irish faeryland, that transcended the cares, the materialism, the Puritanism of his own

society. As he read the poetry of the Renaissance he found first in Spenser, later in Shakespeare and Dante, examples of this kind of work, and in Pater's The Renaissance he found a description of the unity of culture in fifteenth-century Italy. The period from Dante to Shakespeare--its literature, its art and its culture--provided Yeats with his first and most significant contemplative ideal, an ideal to which he returned in 1915 as he developed more fully his early symbolist conceptions of art, life and history.

J. B. Yeats, with his typical nineteenth-century admiration of Shakespeare and with his Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on passion, was influential in directing his son's attention towards Renaissance literature. W. B. Yeats's interest in Shakespeare began when he was a child, for his father took him to see a production of Hamlet, and the boy was impressed with the "image of heroic self-possession" presented in the figure of Hamlet.[2] When he was seventeen, his father read to him "passages from the poets, and always from the play or poem at its most passionate moment."[3] One of the passages that Yeats remembered long afterwards was the scene in which Coriolanus, coming to the house of Aufidius, "tells the impudent servants that his home is under the canopy."[4] The thought of that figure, banished from his city, allying himself with

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[2]W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1955), p. 47.

[3]Ibid., p. 65.

[4]Ibid.

his bitterest enemy and claiming as home nothing but the canopy of sky above him, impressed itself vividly upon Yeats's imagination. At this time Yeats's mind was impregnated with the genius, the vitality, the passion of great dramatic poetry, and he did not forget the ideal that was born of these early encounters. The influence of J. B. Yeats's literary principles upon his son was significant both in setting up the ideal and in setting out the principles of criticism to explain the ideal.

J. B. Yeats's aesthetic principles, as described by his son, consisted of a view of poetry as passionate utterance, as something unencumbered by generalization or abstraction, as the embodiment of "some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty," and as the presentation of "some desirable, familiar life."[5] These ideas seem to have been derived primarily from J. S. Mill, whose work J. B. Yeats studied in his last year at Trinity College.[6] Mill in his "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" (1833) defined poetry as "the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself,"[7] as "impassioned truth," and he was critical of poetry in which thought predominates over feeling.[8] Thus in delimiting Shakespeare's

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Joseph Hone, "Memoir of John Butler Yeats," Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1944), pp. 27-28.

[7] John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," Victorians on Literature and Art, ed. Robert L. Peters (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961), p. 89.

[8] Ibid., p. 92.

excellence, he emphasized "the delineation of passion and character" as well as "a coherent and probable series of events."[9] Both J. B. Yeats and J. S. Mill presented the poet as a man of feeling who portrays life passionately. Moreover, both considered poetry the fruit of solitude,[10] and both opposed it to oratory.[11] Thus, although W. B. Yeats called his father's ideas on literature Pre-Raphaelite,[12] they actually had their source in an essay that preceded the formulation of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic.

The young poet was imbued, therefore, with aesthetic principles that had their roots in the works of Mill and in the Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on Nature and the natural. W. B. Yeats, from his father's iteration of the idea that passion is the essence of literature, assimilated naturally an approach to literature that was purely aesthetic, a seeking after passion or intensity. This conception did not become a part of Yeats's poetic theory until 1902, however, for until that time he rejected his father's ideas.[13] Nevertheless, from J. B. Yeats the young poet gained an appreciation of the poetry of the English Renaissance, and his admiration for the works of that period in history continued throughout his life. The works of

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[9]Mill, p. 81.

[10]J. B. Yeats, p. 105; Mill, p. 84.

[11]J. B. Yeats, p. 130; Mill, p. 85.

[12]Autobiographies, p. 66.

[13]See Chapter II, pp. 74-79, for evidence of Yeats's later acceptance of his father's emphasis on passion and personality.

the Renaissance retained a central position as Yeats later developed his own aesthetic.

During these years, as part of his youthful rejection of his father's influence, Yeats sought in literature not human passion but a world remote from reality, a world in which passion was idealized, transcendent. In his own early poetry, therefore, he chose as models not poets like Shakespeare, who portrayed passion, but poets who he thought transcended passion by placing it in an unreal setting. Hence Yeats's early writings were "in imitation of Shelley and of Edmund Spenser."[14] This turning to the pastoral as an art form was part of Yeats's attempt to escape the dust of the quotidian, and it was also a part of the twenty-year old poet's rebellion against his father's dominating emphasis on the impassioned personality. He preferred a realm like that shown in Todhunter's pastoral play, "Sicilian Idyll," which Yeats later said portrayed a "world of knowledge and beauty and serenity" and an "austere emotion."[15]

For the next ten years Yeats's predilection for the literature of the English Renaissance persisted, although his central interest was studying Irish legends and folklore. The literature and the culture of the Renaissance provided him with an ideal against which to judge the modern works and times. In his earliest published critical essays (1889-1891), he used

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[14]Autobiographies, p. 66.

[15]"A Sicilian Idyll," p. 112.

Renaissance poets as the standard of excellence in drama and contrasted the modern lack of appreciation of poetic drama to the Elizabethan's enjoyment of such a form. "The audiences that loved Ben Jonson's Masks, Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois or the love scenes of Old Fortunatus would have wished for more numerous set passages of poetic oratory, more audacious metaphors."[16] The audience of his own time, however, asked for realism, and in disparaging their lack of taste, their lack of understanding of imagination and drama, Yeats implied an opposition between the exuberant culture of the Renaissance, in which imagination was "a high and worthy thing,"[17] and the paucity of culture in his own time. This opposition subsists throughout Yeats's writings.

Furthermore, in these early essays Yeats, discussing Victor Hugo's Shakespeare, made a distinction between two kinds of poetry that is correlative with his distinction between the audiences of the Renaissance and of the Victorian eras. He referred to "that school of poets that looks upon poetry as a direct message from the Most High, and amenable to no law but its own" and opposed to it that school that considers poetry "a purely human art, a criticism of life by subtle and refined thinkers."[18] The first of these two kinds of poetry is that of the symbolists, those who looked on poetry or art as a

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[16]"A Poetic Drama," p. 216.

[17]Ibid., p. 214.

[18]"A Scholar Poet," p. 205.

revelation of the supernatural. By 1890 Yeats had assimilated sufficient information about symbolism from his hermetic studies[19] and from his work on Blake[20] to enable him to appreciate Hugo's symbolist approach to Shakespeare. Yeats also by this time had set up categories into which the Elizabethan and the modern poets could fit: "the inspired" (the extravagant, exuberant, mystical) and "the accomplished."[21] He further contrasted these two periods of literature in "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux" (1895), combining his father's criterion of passion with his own criterion of preternatural inspiration and arriving at a symbolist interpretation of the Renaissance:

> The ancients and the Elizabethans abandoned themselves to imagination as a woman abandons herself to love, and created beings who made the people of this world seem but shadows, and great passions which made our loves and hatreds appear but ephemeral and trivial fantasies. . . .[22]

The imagination typical of that period has, like the body of Father Christian Rosencrux, "been laid in a great tomb," a

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[19]Yeats was chairman of the "Dublin Hermetic Society" that first met in 1885, and in 1890 he joined the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. (Ellmann, pp. 41 and 86.) One of the tenets of the hermetic students was that "The things below are as the things above," that is, earthly objects symbolize supernatural things. ("Symbolism in Painting," Essays and Introductions [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961], p. 146.

[20]Yeats and Edwin Ellis collaborated on an edition of Blake's works from 1889 to 1893, and Yeats found that Blake's ideas were like those of the students of the Golden Dawn. (Ellmann, p. 116.)

[21]"A Scholar Poet," Letters to the New Island, p. 205.

[22]"The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux," Essays and Introductions [henceforward referred to as E. and I.] p. 196.

tomb of criticism.[23] With this confluence of literary criticism and mysticism, Yeats not only began to develop a symbolist aesthetic, he also began to develop a cyclical theory of cultural history, for in envisioning a return to the knowledge that "the great passions are angels of God"[24] he moved towards a theory of recurrence, which culminated thirty years later in A Vision. For him, as for many nineteenth-century historians, the Renaissance was the ideal period of culture against which other periods could be measured.

In 1897 Yeats began to formulate a conception of the Renaissance as a period in which works of art manifested clearly a supernatural element. His reading of Pater's The Renaissance reinforced this search for a world of supreme art, for Pater wrote of "that solemn fifteenth century" which attained unity of culture and which "was an impassioned age, so ardent and serious in its pursuit of art that it consecrated everything with which art had to do as a religious object."[25] It is this attitude toward Renaissance arts, though not only toward the arts of the fifteenth century, that Yeats presented in his short stories and in his essays written in 1897.

The settings or the ideas of the short stories, "Rosa Alchemica" and "The Tables of the Law," reveal Yeats's symbolist conception of the Renaissance. In "Rosa Alchemica" the

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[23] Ibid., p. 196.

[24] Ibid., p. 197.

[25] Pater, p. 31.

narrator tells that he has just published a little book on alchemy "somewhat in the manner of Sir Thomas Browne,"[26] in which he relates the alchemists' attempt to change common metals into gold to their philosophical attempt to transmute all things "into some divine and imperishable substance; and this enabled [him] to make [his] little book a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences."[27] The great creative works from Dante to Shakespeare comprise much of the setting of the story, a setting which is symbolic of this transmutation of life into art. The narrator has surrounded himself with paintings--a Crivelli virgin and a Francesca; with leather-bound books--"Shakespeare in the orange of the glory of the world, Dante in the dull red of his anger, Milton in the blue-grey of his formal calm"; and with statuary--antique bronze gods and goddesses.[28] These works of art and literature are symbolic of a world of essences, a supernatural and ideal world, and even in 1897 Yeats had chosen the period from Dante to Shakespeare as the period from which to draw the majority of these symbolic works.

The narrator of "Rosa Alchemica," in fact, states that the characters in great works of art are gods: he lives "amid

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[26]"Rosa Alchemica," p. 267. Yeats, however, was actually following Pater not Browne, for in The Autobiographies Yeats admitted ". . . Villiers de L'Isle Adam had shaped whatever in my Rosa Alchemica Pater had not shaped"[pp. 320-21].

[27]"Rosa Alchemica," p. 267.

[28]Ibid., p. 268.

immortal essences," gathering all the gods to him because he believes in none.[29] The antagonist of the story, Michael Robartes, who has a belief and a limitless energy that the narrator lacks, arrives and initiates the narrator into vision and the Order of the Alchemical Rose. Robartes speaks of the gods that a man who "lives in imagination and in a refined understanding" meets and speaks with: "Roland, who sounded in the Valley of Roncevalles the last trumpet of the body's will and pleasure; . . . Hamlet, who saw them perishing away, and sighed; . . . Faust"; Beatrice; and Lear, "his head still wet with the thunderstorm, and he laughs because you thought yourself an existence who are but a shadow, and him a shadow who is an eternal god. . . ."[30] Robartes, summoning up the passionate figures of the period leading up to and including the Renaissance, personifies the belief Yeats would have liked to have, for in the Autobiographies he summarizes the dogma that is embodied in the story: "'Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.'"[31] These passionate and ideal figures from the period of great literature were for Yeats symbolic of a more perfect existence than that lived by ordinary men; these figures from works of the thirteenth to

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[29] Ibid., p. 268.

[30] Ibid., pp. 274-75.

[31] Autobiographies, p. 116.

the sixteenth centuries were, even at the beginning of Yeats's career, the standard by which man might measure himself and the ideal towards which he might aspire.

In "The Tables of the Law" the antagonist, Owen Aherne, believes not in the alchemical transmutation of life and the world but in the heretical teachings of Joachim of Flora. In choosing this obscure twelfth-century abbot as the figure whose beliefs would lead Aherne to despair, Yeats was again following Pater's lead, for in The Renaissance Pater classified Joachim of Flora among the antinomian elements of the Middle Ages. Joachim of Flora's teachings, like the revolt of the Albigensians, the romantic love of Abelard, and the story of Aucassin and Nicolette, were indicative of "that sinister claim for liberty of heart and thought"[32] that is the precursor of the Renaissance. Pater described Joachim of Flora as one "of those obscure prophetical writers, . . . strange dreamers in a world of flowery rhetoric of that third and final dispensation of a 'spirit of freedom,' in which law shall have passed away."[33] Owen Aherne describes the secret teachings of Joachim of Flora in somewhat similar terms, terms that also could be applied to the symbolist doctrine of the young Yeats:

> . . . certain others, and in always increasing numbers, were elected, not to live, but to reveal that hidden substance of God which is colour and music and softness and a sweet odour; and . . . these have no father but the Holy Spirit. Just as poets and painters and

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[32]Pater, p. 25.

[33]Ibid.

> musicians labour at their works, building them with lawless and lawful things alike, so long as they embody the beauty that is beyond the grave, these children of the Holy Spirit labour at their moments with eyes upon the shining substance on which Time has heaped the refuse of creation; . . . and terror and content, birth and death, love and hatred, and the fruit of the Tree, are but instruments for that supreme art which is to win us from life and gather us into eternity like doves into their dove-cots.[34]

Yeats and Pater both mentioned the freedom, the transcendence of law, that is found in Joachim of Flora's works, but Yeats, with his symbolist's interest in the supernatural, emphasized the revelation of the divine while Pater was concerned with the rebellion against the church of the Middle Ages. Yeats used Joachim of Flora's teachings as a means of presenting his own symbolist interpretation of the function of art and mysticism: both reveal the "hidden substance of God," a sensuous substance with colour, music, softness, and a sweet odor. Yeats, the symbolist poet, believed God could be revealed to the senses, and he chose a medieval predecessor of the Renaissance as spokesman for this idea.

A study of Renaissance works and a symbolist approach to literature converge in Yeats's two essays on Blake (1897). Yeats, studying Blake's symbolism and interpreting it in terms

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[34]"The Tables of the Law," Mythologies, p. 300. Yeats probably was using Pater or Mme. Blavatsky as a source for his information about Joachim of Flora, for, although there was one French translation of the work in 1745 as well as various Italian translations, there was no English version until the twentieth century. Since Yeats's French was not good and his Italian was non-existent, he could have had no first-hand knowledge of the works of Joachim of Flora.

of his own occult and alchemical studies, attributed Blake's conception of art as revelation to his reading of Jacob Boehme and earlier alchemical writers:

> He had learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, 'the body of God,' 'the Divine members' and he drew the deduction, which they did not draw, that the imaginative arts were therefore the greatest of Divine revelations, and that the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ.[35]

Yeats considered Blake's belief that art is the highest morality to have derived from his study of Jacob Boehme and from his readings in the earlier alchemists. These ideas that Yeats attributed to Blake are similar to those he attributed to Joachim of Flora in "The Tables of the Law" in that in both analyses Yeats focused on the physical properties of God--'the body of God' and 'that hidden substance of God'--and in both analyses the arts are the agents by which eternal things are revealed. He thus traced the genealogy of the symbolist conception of literature to the mystical writings of the Renaissance and before, to those writings that foreshadowed the confluence of art and religion.[36] In the works of Blake, of Jacob Boehme, of Joachim of Flora, and of Pater, Yeats found sources of or support for his conception of the arts, especially

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[35]"William Blake and the Imagination," E. and I., p. 112.

[36]Since Yeats's own occult studies followed the same path, he came to the conclusion that Blake's belief must have been the same as his own; that is, he decided that Blake had been a member of the Golden Dawn. (Ellmann, p. 117.)

the arts of the Renaissance, as revelations of the divine. This conception continued to develop in Yeats's thought until it culminated in his description of the Fifteenth Phase.

In two essays on symbolism, "Symbolism in Painting" (1898) and "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), Yeats developed more fully his symbolist conception of literature and interpreted the works of Dante and Shakespeare in terms of his own ideas. First, turning to Renaissance art for his examples, he made a distinction between art that is merely allegorical and that which is symbolic. Tintoretto's Origin of the Milky Way is purely allegorical; hence, except for its fine painting, it is "but a moment's amusement." The horns of Michelangelo's Moses, however, contain elements of both allegory and symbolism, and "one need not doubt that its symbolism has helped to awaken the modern imagination."[37] Thus Yeats judged technique to be less important than content, which should be revelatory, an expression of the things beyond mortality. He evaluated Renaissance painting as well as Renaissance literature from a symbolist position: the arts, works of imagination, should reveal the supernatural.

Even among symbolic works, however, Yeats distinguished varying degrees of symbolism and valued most highly those works that were most inclusive in their revelation of the supernatural. He preferred the works of the modern symbolists to those of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century symbolists because the

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[37]"Symbolism in Painting," E. and I., p. 148.

modern ones were more universal. Wagner, Keats, Blake, Rossetti, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Beardsley, Whistler, Maeterlinck and Verlaine differ from Giotto and his disciples and from Fra Angelico in having accepted the symbolism not of one religion but of all religions. Those early symbolists manifesting the divine in form and colour did not encompass in their art "the symbolism of the ancient shepherds and star-gazers, [the] symbolism of bodily beauty . . . , the symbolism in day and night, and winter and summer, spring and autumn, once so great a part of an older religion than Christianity."[38] They did not accept "all the Divine Intellect, its anger and its pity, its waking and its sleep, its love and its lust, for the substance of their art."[39] Yeats desired a symbolism that included occult and pagan as well as Christian revelation, and even in 1900 he mentioned the symbolism of physical beauty, which for the Neoplatonists was a sign of spiritual beauty. This symbolism that Yeats extolled in this first period of his development he praised again in his third period in A Vision and created in his own work in his final period, most notably in "Under Ben Bulben."

Within this favored category of the universal symbolist Yeats subsumed a smaller category, that of the "fragmentary symbolist." In "Symbolism in Painting" he used Keats and Calvert as examples of this type of symbolist, but in "The Symbolism

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[38] Ibid., p. 149.

[39] Ibid.

of Poetry" Shakespeare is the most frequent example. Yeats defined the "fragmentary symbolist" as the poet or artist who "evokes in his persons and his landscapes an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence, [yet] he does not set his symbols in the great procession."[40] This "great procession" neglected by the "fragmentary symbolist" is the vision that comes to the poet or painter who is a systematic mystic, who embodies in his art a personal or traditional symbolism.

> . . . such men often fall into trances, or have waking dreams. Their thought wanders from the woman who is Love herself, to her sisters and her forebears, and to all the great procession; and so august a beauty moves before the mind that they forget the things which move before the eyes.[41]

This conception of a movement from the individual to the universal, the essential, is Platonic, deriving ultimately from The Symposium.

> And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards as for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.[42]

The universal symbolist is the poet or painter who summons through his art the superhuman, who particularizes the universal

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[40] Ibid., pp. 149-150.

[41] Ibid., p. 150.

[42] Plato The Symposium 211.

essences so that they become perceptible. Of these symbolists Yeats used Dante as the example of a poet who expresses his thought through traditional symbols, and Shakespeare as the "fragmentary symbolist," the poet who intuitively and emotionally, not systematically, comprehends the divine.

Shakespeare is the poet of "emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone,--and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight us fully, away from rhythm and pattern."[43] Dante is the poet of "intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions."[44] Emotional symbols are objects imbued with energy and meaning because they shadow forth the "archetypal ideas,"[45] that is, the Platonic forms or ideas. These symbols, however, are mixed with "the accidents and destinies of the world";[46] their correspondence with the forms is thus instinctive not conscious. Although Yeats believed that all true art, imaginative art, "deals with spiritual things symbolized by natural things,"[47] he found significant the distinction between intellectual and emotional approaches to the spiritual:

> If one is moved by Shakespeare, who is content with emotional symbols that he may come the nearer to our

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[43]"The Symbolism of Poetry," E. and I., p. 160.

[44]Ibid.

[45]"At Stratford-On-Avon," E. and I., p. 102.

[46]"The Symbolism of Poetry," p. 161.

[47]The Letters . . . , p. 343.

> sympathy, one is mixed with the whole spectacle of the world; while if one is moved by Dante, or by the myth of Demeter, one is mixed into the shadow of God or of a goddess.[48]

In classifying symbols as intellectual and emotional or instinctive, Yeats used as an example of the former type the myth of Demeter. Since this myth is not so well-known as to have been an obvious choice to exemplify intellectual symbolism, his reference to the myth was undoubtedly influenced by Pater's "Demeter and Persephone."[49] In this essay Pater traced the evolution of conceptions of the supernatural, a subject that would naturally interest Yeats during this period in which he also was trying to analyze the relationship between literature and the supernatural. Pater found three successive stages in the development of a myth:

> There is first its [the myth's] half-conscious, instinctive, or mystical, phase, in which, under the form of an unwritten legend, living from mouth to mouth, and with details changing as it passes from place to place, there lie certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world. We may trace it next in its conscious, poetical or literary, phase, in which the poets become the depositaries of the vague instinctive product of the popular imagination, and handle it with a purely literary interest, fixing its outlines, and simplifying or developing its situations. Thirdly, the myth passes into the ethical phase, in which the persons and the incidents of the poetical narrative

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[48]"The Symbolism of Poetry," p. 162.

[49]Since Yeats was very much interested in Pater's work at this time (See n. 26, p. 44) and since Yeats's habit was to read all the works he could find of any writer in whom he was interested, it is highly probable that he knew this essay.

> are realised as abstract symbols, because intensely characteristic examples, of moral or spiritual conditions.[50]

Yeats used the last two stages, myth presented through literary form and myth transmuted into ethical or intellectual teachings, to structure his distinction between the symbolism of Shakespeare and that of Dante. Shakespeare's characters are given the attributes of the mythological or legendary figures in Greek literature:

> The six plays, that are but one play, [Shakespeare's history plays] have, when played one after another, something extravagant and superhuman, something almost mythological. These nobles with their indifference to death and their immense energy seem at times no nearer the common stature of men than do the gods and heroes of Greek plays.[51]

These figures are comparable to the characters in the literary presentation of myths, the tragedies, while Dante's world is one similar to that in the later forms of the myth of Demeter in that it has abstract ethical or spiritual implications. In both stages of religious development the divine is manifested through the literary work, but in the one case instinctively, unconsciously, and in the other case consciously. Yeats thus took part of Pater's delineation of myth and applied it to certain Renaissance writings: Shakespeare's plays embody only fragments of the divine; Dante's poem encompasses an entire system.

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[50]Walter Pater, "Demeter and Persephone," Greek Studies (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1920 [first edition, 1895]), p. 91.

[51]"At Stratford-On-Avon," p. 109.

Yeats dissolved this elaborate classification of symbols, however, shortly after devising it. In "Magic" (1901) he reaffirmed the power of symbolism while negating the distinctions between the various kinds:

> I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic [such as MacGregor Mathers, a member at one time, of the Order of the Golden Dawn[52]] or half consciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist. At first I tried to distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little or nothing. Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods.[53]

Yeats never stated the reasons for this reversal of thought, but it seems probable that he concluded that such an evaluative classification of symbols was leading him to a paradoxical position: his aesthetic and his metaphysical judgements on poetry conflicted. Elizabethan poets, including Shakespeare, were implicitly condemned for their lack of an intellectual system of symbols. Yeats, therefore, resolved the tension between the artist and the mystic by eliminating the categories. All true art is equally a revelation of the Divine Intellect, but by means of the Great Memory.

Having rejected the distinction between emotional and intellectual symbols, Yeats, in his next essay, "What Is 'Popular Poetry'?" (1901), developed a theory of a linear descent

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[52]Ellmann, p. 93.

[53]"Magic," E. and I., pp. 49-50.

of the supernatural from the early religions to the great poetry of the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. First he distinguished between the "popular poetry" of the middle class, with its triviality of emotion and its imperfect sense of beauty, and the poetry of the peasants, the unlettered, with its "unwritten tradition which binds the unlettered, so long as they are masters of themselves, to the beginning of time and to the foundation of the world."[54] He then identified the poetry of what he calls the coteries, groups such as his own Rhymers' Club, with "the true poetry of the people," for both are strange and obscure, and both presuppose the unwritten tradition.[55] Using as an example Ben Jonson's line "Beauty like sorrow dwelleth everywhere," Yeats described the progression of the religious instinct as it moves from religion to poetry: "[the line's] enchantment depends on an association of beauty with sorrow which written tradition has from the unwritten, which had it in its turn from ancient religion."[56] Through the Great Memory, which is very like Jung's racial unconscious, true poetry creates resonances that awaken the past energies and ecstasies of mankind inherently present in the individual. Hence Nashe's lines,

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[54]"What Is 'Popular Poetry'?," E. and I., p. 6.

[55]Yeats probably had in mind his own poetry and the poetry of the other symbolists, who, in using occult systems and symbologies, were drawing from mythologies and religions that pre-date recorded history.

[56]Ibid., p. 7.

Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye,[57]

summon ancient associations with tragic beauty, associations that Yeats later used in his poems about Maud Gonne to make his own love reverberate with the passion of that earlier love. This conception of the Great Memory he expanded in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, but in that work Dante was his major example.

By 1901 Yeats had begun to develop his symbolist theories, experimenting with means of defining the relationship he perceived between art and the supernatural, yet never deviating from his basic assumption that art should be symbolic, should reveal the sensuous attributes of the supernatural. His focus changed, however, from the supernatural to the aesthetic values of a work of art. From envisioning all great works of the imagination as the revelation of the immanent Divine, Yeats turned to concentrate somewhat less dogmatically upon the reasons for the power of great art. Instead of evaluating poetry according to its emotional or intellectual symbolism, he sought associative links to religion that would explain the emotional effect produced by great poetry, particularly by the great poetry of the Renaissance.

At the same time that Yeats was developing his symbolist theories using thirteenth- through sixteenth-century writers as sources and as examples, he also was developing an historical conception of the English Renaissance. In characterizing the

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[57]Thomas Nashe, "Summer's Last Will and Testament," quoted by W. B. Yeats in "What is 'Popular Poetry'?," p. 7.

period, he followed earlier nineteenth-century writers such as Carlyle and Ruskin, who considered the Renaissance as the time when the cultural unity of the Middle Ages was destroyed. Yeats had not yet worked out a coherent system into which he could place each work of art and literature, but his conception of the English Renaissance as a time of fragmentation remained constant throughout his life.

Yeats had garnered from the writings of his age and from his father's conversation and letters a disaffection for his own society, and he, like his father and other nineteenth-century figures, saw the Renaissance as the time of the breaking of culture. He adopted this interpretation not in childhood, however, but after 1891, for in that year he described the Renaissance in England as the time in which "commercialism and puritanism had not yet set their brand on England."[58] This conception of the period he had acquired from Elizabethan poetry and drama and from one passage in Dekker's prose.[59] By May, 1901, when his essay on Shakespeare was published, he had assimilated Ruskin's formulation of the Renaissance as the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern materialism and instability:

> The courtly and saintly ideals of the Middle Ages were fading and the practical ideals of the modern age had begun to threaten the unuseful dome of the sky.[60]

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[58]"A Poetic Drama," p. 214.

[59]Ibid.

[60]"At Stratford-On-Avon," p. 106.

Moreover, "the Puritanism that drove the theatres into Surrey was but part of an inexplicable movement that was trampling out the minds of all but some few thousands born to cultivated ease."[61] These "practical ideals," commercialism and puritanism, the bêtes noires of the nineteenth-century search for cultural unity, Yeats decided were integral to the beginning of the modern temper as evinced in the Renaissance.

He, nonetheless, made a characteristically Yeatsian distinction between the common people's ideals in the Renaissance and those of the aristocracy--the nobles or the artists, the latter the aristocracy of intellect.

> Shakespeare wrote at a time when solitary great men were gathering to themselves the fire that had once glowed hither and thither among all men, when individualism in work and thought and emotion was breaking up the old rhythms of life, when the common people, sustained no longer by the myths of Christianity and of still older faiths, were sinking into the earth.[62]

In indicating this division between the artist and his society, Yeats was following a usual Romantic mode of thought: the artist is isolated from contemporaneous life; his concerns are not those of the masses.[63] Yeats, however, placed the advent of this division in the Renaissance, and he added a symbolist interpretation to the idea: the fire that once glowed among

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[61] Ibid., p. 110.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 1-29.

all men is the fire of supernatural revelation.[64] In A Vision Yeats expanded the conception of Shakespeare as an artist isolated from his society and writing at a time when the unity of the world was broken, and he placed Shakespeare within a completed historical framework.

A brief reiteration of the characteristics of the Renaissance appears in a discussion of playwriting (Samhain: 1901) in which Yeats quoted from a letter from his father (October 27, 1901).[65] The congruency of thought between father and son is typical, although in this instance the son was the originator of the idea. J. B. Yeats had read his son's Shakespeare essay with great pleasure, and in his letter he has abstracted the central idea about the Renaissance, giving it a nationalistic twist:

> A relation of mine has just written me a letter, in which he says: 'It is natural to an Irishman to write plays; he has an inborn love of dialogue and sound about him, of a dialogue as lively, gallant, and passionate as in the times of great Eliza. In these days an Englishman's dialogue is that of an amateur. . . . Petty commerce and puritanism have brought to the front the wrong type of Englishman; the lively, joyous, yet tenacious man has transferred himself to Ireland.[66]

Yeats and his father concurred in their diagnosis of the causes of England's decline: "petty commerce and puritanism" caused the decay of English literature since the Renaissance.

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[64]In "Rosa Alchemica" Yeats wrote of the "Incorruptible Fire," an alchemical fire symbolic of the transmutation of the material to the spiritual (p. 287), and in Per Amica Silentia Lunae he wrote of the condition of fire, the spiritual world.

[65]Part of the letter is in J. B. Yeats, p. 67; a few more sentences were quoted by W. B. Yeats in Samhain: 1901, Explorations (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 81.

[66]W. B. Yeats, Samhain: 1901, p. 81.

In writing "Edmund Spenser" (1902), Yeats used this interpretation of the Renaissance to explain why the genius of one Renaissance poet, Edmund Spenser, did not flourish. To discuss adequately the forces that inhibited Spenser's pictorial genius, Yeats found it necessary to ascertain the causes of what he had previously called the "inexplicable movement" that created Puritanism and commercialism. With his usual proclivity for the aristocratic life with its chivalric ideals, he first blamed its decay simply on the rise of its opposite, the Middle Class. As he wrote to Lady Gregory:

> I had no sooner begun reading at the British Museum after my return when it flashed upon me that the Coming of Allegory coincided with the rise of the Middle Class. That it was the first effect on literature of the earnest spirit which afterwards created Puritanism.[67]

Realizing, however, that he had not yet analyzed sufficiently the reasons for the occurrence of this "earnest spirit," he added to his interpretation a racial theory of the rise of the Middle Class in England. Subsequently, he described the essay to Lady Gregory as being "founded now on a single idea--the contrast between Anglo-French England and Anglo-Saxon England."[68] In attributing to racial propensities, to the rise of the "hitherto conquered Saxon elements,"[69] the transformation of feudal England into modern England, he was, as he said, "original."

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[67] The Letters . . . , p. 386.

[68] Ibid., p. 176.

[69] Ibid., p. 387.

Instead of taking the historical approach of Burckhardt or Symonds and describing the political bases for the psychological differences between feudal and modern temperaments, or the scientific bases for the changing conception of man, or the religious bases for the decay of Catholic unity, Yeats applied to his study of the period the type of interpretation that derived from Taine and Renan--the racial approach that Arnold, for one, used in distinguishing the Celtic influence on English literature.

Yeats's essay on Spenser's work and period is the first one, however, in which he accepted and used the racial approach to literature. His own delving into Irish folklore and ancient way of life was primarily a conscious nationalism--not racialism--and a search for an individual form of belief. In fact, in his essay on "The Celtic Element in Literature," he argued that any folklore "delights in unbounded and immortal things."[70] Thus he refuted Renan's and Arnold's racial interpretation of Celtic influence by generalizing the Celtic turbulence, passion, and magic to all folk belief:

> I do not think he [Arnold] understood that our 'natural magic' is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which it brought into men's minds.[71]

Yet, after rejecting the racial explanation of the desire for passionate liberation in favor of a more universal one, Yeats

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[70]"The Celtic Element in Literature," E. and I., p. 179.

[71]Ibid., p. 176.

paradoxically gave a racial interpretation of the moralistic element in Elizabethan literature.

> Italian influence had strengthened the old Franch joy that had never died out among the upper classes, and an art was being created for the last time in England which had half its beauty from continually suggesting a life hardly less beautiful than itself.[72]
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> . . . . . .
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> If he [a poet of the Merry England that was passing away] came to England he would find nothing there but the triumph of the Puritan and the merchant. . . . He had lived in the last days of what we may call the Anglo-French nation, the old feudal nation that had been established when the Norman and the Angevin made French the language of court and market. In the time of Chaucer English poets still wrote much in French, and even English labourers lilted French songs over their work; and I cannot read any Elizabethan poem or romance without feeling the pressure of habits of emotion, and of an order of life, which were conscious, for all their Latin gaiety, of a quarrel to the death with that new Anglo-Saxon nation that was arising amid Puritan sermons and Marprelate pamphlets. This nation had driven out the language of its conquerors, and now it was to overthrow their beautiful haughty imagination and their manners, full of abandon and wilfulness, and to set in their stead earnestness and logic and the timidity and reserve of a counting-house.[73]

Yeats credited the French and Italians with bringing to England the aristocratic sprezzatura that was his ideal, and he attributed to the native Anglo-Saxons the deadening mercantile and Puritan qualities.

Yeats maintained that Spenser's poetry evinces a mixture of these two cultures, and it is the prevalent Anglo-Saxon element that detracts from the beauty of his work. He should have been, Yeats believed, "a Master of the Revels to

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[72] Ibid.

[73] "Edmund Spenser," E. and I., pp. 363-64.

mankind."[74] Instead, he burdened his poetry with allegory, the literary manifestation of the Puritan-merchant ethic.

> He was, I think, by nature altogether a man of that old Catholic feudal nation, but, like Sidney, he wanted to justify himself to his new masters. He wrote of knights and ladies, wild creatures imagined by the aristocratic poets of the twelfth century, and perhaps chiefly by English poets who had still the French tongue; but he fastened them with allegorical nails to a big barn-door of common sense, of merely practical virtue. Allegory itself had risen into general importance with the rise of the merchant class in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and it was natural when that class was about for the first time to shape an age in its image, that the last epic poet of the old order should mix its art with his own long-descended, irresponsible, happy art.[75]

In his art as in his life, Spenser accepted the values of the "new masters"; thus he "had learned to put the State, which desires all the abundance for itself, in place of the Church, and he found it possible to be moved by expedient emotions merely because they were expedient, and to think serviceable thoughts with no self-contempt."[76] He, therefore, created for the pleasure of the court allegories that idealized Anglican ethics, English justice, and Queen Elizabeth.

Allegory, Yeats claimed, was not natural to Spenser but was a prostitution of his art to expediency, to "practical ideals." The basis of this judgement lies in Yeats's own long-standing dislike of allegory: allegory is opposed to symbolism.

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[74] Ibid., p. 368.

[75] Ibid., p. 367.

[76] Ibid., p. 371.

As early as 1897, he examined the distinction between the two forms:

> A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement.[77]

This Coleridgian division between imagination and fancy, the higher and the lower power, is employed to characterize literary devices: the symbol, having the characteristics of the imagination, would be, in Coleridge's terms, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM," while allegory, like the fancy, "must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association."[78] Moreover, Yeats's own definition of a symbol, although taken from the hermetic tradition, emphasizes the repetition in this world of the things beyond this world: "'The things below are as the things above' of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes."[79] Spenser, in choosing allegory as his medium, was content with the lesser power. Although Yeats did not state this contrast explicitly in the essay, it formed the basis for his evaluation of Spenser's work. Yeats's early judgement on The Faerie Queene, made

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[77]"William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy," E. and I., p. 116.

[78]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chap. XIII, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. Elisabeth Schneider (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1956), p. 268.

[79]"Symbolism in Painting," E. and I., p. 146.

before he had read all six books, is implicit in the later essay:

> The Faerie Queene and The Pilgrim's Progress have been so important in England that Allegory has overtopped Symbolism, and for a time has overwhelmed it in its own downfall.[80]

Yeats judged The Faerie Queene from a symbolist position and found it lacking.

Besides criticizing allegory for not being symbolism, Yeats also thought it detrimental to Spenser's poetry because it detracted from the sensuous beauty that Spenser, in his best moments, conveyed. The symbolic element that is present in Spenser's work, the Neoplatonism, Yeats treated summarily, for he believed that this kind of mystical thought was not natural to Spenser.

> He began in English poetry, despite a temperament that delighted in sensuous beauty alone with perfect delight, that worship of Intellectual Beauty which Shelley carried to a greater subtlety and applied to the whole of life.[81]

Spenser in his hymns presented ideas in which Yeats believed, for example, that a beautiful soul "makes for itself a beautiful body,"[82] yet Yeats found such idealism less significant in the corpus of Spenser's work than the moralistic element or the natural delight in beauty.

The poetry that Yeats preferred and included in his selection of Spenser's work is that which reveals Spenser as

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[80] Ibid.

[81] "Edmund Spenser," p. 366.

[82] Ibid.

the poet of "the delighted senses."[83] Yeats's favorite poem was the sensuous celebration of Spenser's coming marriage, "Epithalamion," while from The Faerie Queene he found most beautiful the sections on the islands of Phaedria and Acrasia. He was thus unlike most modern Spenser scholars, who concur with C. S. Lewis' contention that the Bower of Bliss is "a picture, one of the most powerful ever painted, of the whole sexual nature in disease."[84] Instead, with a delight in Spenser's evil gardens comparable to Blake's delight in Milton's Satan, Yeats considered that in these sections, which are "mythological and symbolical, but not allegorical," Spenser most fully displays his pictorial genius: the islands show his "power of describing bodily happiness and bodily beauty at its greatest."[85] Pagan joyousness and the pageantry of the senses were the qualities to which Yeats responded in Spenser's poetry.

Yet his praise of these elements is not unqualified, for he wrote of "those smooth pastoral scenes and lovely effeminate islands that have made him a great poet."[86] In Spenser's poetry, even in the most beautiful passages, Yeats found characteristics of effeminacy and of elaboration for its

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Clive Staples Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 332.

[85] W. B. Yeats, "Edmund Spenser," p. 383.

[86] Ibid., p. 370.

own sake--an embroidery of emblems and images.[87] His implied criticism of this richly visual quality in Spenser foreshadows his rejection of similar elements in his own early poetry and in the poetry that influenced him. He did, in fact, in this essay explicitly object to "the disintegration of the personal instincts, which has given to modern poetry its deep colour for colour's sake, its overflowing pattern, its background of decorative landscape, and its insubordination of detail."[88] These criticisms are equally applicable to Spenser's poetry and to that of Yeats's contemporaries. Opposed to poetry like Spenser's is that of the dramatists:

> Their subject was always the soul, the whimsical, self-awakening, self-exciting, self-appeasing soul. They celebrated its heroical, passionate will going by its own path to immortal and invisible things.[89]

This contrast between languid pictorial and heroic dramatic poetry is the first indication of Yeats's subsequent change of poetic allegiance from poetry which is "colour and music and softness"[90] to that which is "the imagination of personality--to drama, gesture."[91] The change is from poetry that seeks to transcend this world to that which acts within it, that is, from contemplative poetry to the poetry of action.

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[87] Ibid., p. 369.

[88] Ibid., p. 357.

[89] Ibid., p. 370.

[90] "The Tables of the Law," p. 300.

[91] Samhain: 1904, Explorations, p. 163.

Not until 1904, however, did he incorporate the conception of poetry as action into his own practice and extol gesture or action: "Let us have no emotions, however abstract, in which there is not an athletic joy."[92] His criticism of Spenser's softness and indolence thus prefigured his own changing poetics and his later choice of Renaissance models.

Spenser, the allegorist, is almost Yeats's epitome of the English Renaissance civilization though not of Elizabethan literature: he evinced the breaking of the old unity and the advent of the new "practical ideals"; he does not give evidence of the soul going "to immortal and invisible things," as do the dramatists. Yet, since he lived during the final days of the old feudal nation, he retained a few elements of the pagan joyousness of the old faith, of the combination of Catholicism and Neoplatonism, and of the unification of soul and body. He was, as Yeats stated at the beginning of the essay, "full of the spirit of the Renaissance, at once passionate and artificial."[93] He was craftsman and connoisseur, selecting and forming the rich materials at hand to create a panoply of beauty. Yet this initial statement that identifies Spenser with the literary spirit of the age is, by the conclusion of the essay, qualified to assert that Spenser evinced more clearly the decaying civilization of the English Renaissance than its rich culture. His genius was destroyed by his acceptance of the Weltanschauung of the Puritan-merchant nation,

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[92] The Letters . . . , p. 435.

[93] "Edmund Spenser," p. 356.

and his passion was lost through his subordination of will to sensuous perception: "There is no passion in the pleasure he has set amid perilous seas, for he would have us understand that there alone could the war-worn and the sea-worn man find dateless leisure and unrepining peace."[94] Spenser typified for Yeats the poet ruined by his age, by the dominance of moral over aesthetic interests.

In Yeats's early criticism Spenser and Shakespeare stand as contrasting figures of Elizabethan England. Shakespeare, although he lived at the beginning of modern times when unity was fragmenting, became the more passionate for the fragmentation, while Spenser was inundated by the current of new ideas and sank under the weight of middle-class morality. Yeats used these two major poets of the Elizabethan Renaissance as vehicles for his discussions of poetic technique--Shakespeare passionate and symbolic, Spenser languid and allegorical. In this contrast Yeats revealed the symbolist basis for his judgements on poetry, and he also evinced the basis for his interpretation of history. Passion and the supernatural are present in works of the great ages of literature; pragmatic interests and lack of passion indicate declining periods of culture. The formulation of historical cycles--later called objective (primary) and subjective (antithetical)--was beginning to evolve in Yeats's thought, but the formulation was limited to one period, the Renaissance, and the symbolist criteria of excellence were more implicit than explicit.

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[94] Ibid., p. 383.

In this first period of his development, Yeats sought in writings from Dante to Shakespeare a contemplative ideal, a world transcending the materialistic values of his own society. In late adolescence Yeats found this type of world in the settings of Spenser's pastorals, and he used similar settings in his own poetry. A few years later his studies of Blake and of the occult led him to desire a contemplative world not only removed from the materialism of his age but connected with the supernatural. Although in his own poetry he created such a world through the use of Irish legends and folklore, in prose his first main attempt occurred in Rosa Alchemica, in which to create a realm of essences, of living symbols, he used primarily the universe of thirteenth- through sixteenth-century art and literature that Pater described in The Renaissance. Subsequently, Yeats's attempts to develop a coherent classification of symbols led him to use two poets, Dante and Shakespeare, as contrasting types of symbolists: Dante, an intellectual symbolist working within a symbology; Shakespeare, an emotional or fragmentary symbolist. Towards the end of this period, Yeats returned to a consideration of Spenser's poetry, but, with symbolist theories foremost in his thought, he no longer found Spenser's world adequate: symbolism, the connection with the supernatural, was missing. During this period Yeats consistently in his theories moved towards the creation of an ideal world that transcended terrestrial existence. He was concerned not with effecting changes in the material world but with moving beyond that world to a more perfect realm--a contemplative

not an active ideal. Imaginative works from Dante to Shakespear, as well as Pater's work on the Renaissance, helped him delineate this ideal and provided him with examples for his theoretical statements.

The Renaissance also provided Yeats with a standard by which to judge his own society. His choice of this period as the standard was a natural result of the nineteenth-century admiration of the Renaissance. Michelet had discussed the modernity of the Renaissance, Burckhardt had emphasized the growing subjectivity of that time, and Pater had idealized the unity of culture found in fifteenth-century Italy. Yeats was following this general trend of the nineteenth-century in selecting the Renaissance, as opposed to the Middle Ages or some other period, as the cultural touchstone around which to develop his cyclical theory of history. His interest in Dante, which arose from the Pre-Raphaelite concentration on Dante, led him, however, by 1925 to enlarge his cultural ideal to include thirteenth-century Italy in his delineation of the modern age. By 1902 Yeats had assimilated the nineteenth-century attitude towards the culture of the Renaissance, and he had identified the English Renaissance as the time during which unity of culture began to disintegrate because it was mixed with other elements: the rise of the middle class, puritanism, and commercialism. The English Renaissance Yeats thus considered a time of the breaking of culture, and he believed that the decay of civilization had continued until his own time. The culture of his day compared unfavorably with that of the Renaissance.

In this first period of his development, Yeats found in thirteenth- through sixteenth-century writings a contemplative ideal that continued to be of major importance in his later writings, especially in those of his third period, during which he wrote A Vision. In the period from Dante to Shakespeare Yeats saw a world in which symbolism, the relationship of "the things below" to "the things above," was manifested in the works of art. Thus imaginative works of this period provided Yeats with his contemplative ideal. Although other studies were, perhaps, more important to Yeats during this time--his study of Irish mythology and folklore, his study of the occult, and his study of Blake[95]--, it is to the past, to the imaginative works of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries that he looked to find the revelation of the supernatural that constituted his contemplative ideal.

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[95]For example, Yeats considered Blake's philosophy "the root of the cultivated life" while "one-half of the philosophy of Dante is less living than his poetry" ("William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy," p. 134).

CHAPTER II

SHAKESPEARE, JONSON AND CASTIGLIONE AS YEATS'S ACTIVE IDEAL: 1903-1915

From 1903 to 1915 Yeats was concerned primarily with the expressive power of literature, with poetry or drama as the revelation of the complete personality. No longer did he seek a transcendent world, a world apart from the actions and passions of men; instead he presented in theory and in practice a conception of man as an active agent. His own intense involvement in the operations of the Abbey Theatre helped determine this change in focus. Yeats did not reject his symbolist theories, however, even though he changed his ideal from a contemplative to an active one: he sought the universal passions inherent in man, passions that reveal a spiritual energy that comes from the supernatural. In attempting to dramatize this universal passion, Yeats turned to the English Renaissance for models for his drama and for his thought. Shakespeare was a source of Yeats's dramatic techniques and the prototype of passionate and tragic drama; Jonson was a Renaissance exponent of the expressive power of literature.

Yeats's turning to English Renaissance figures for corroboration or examples for his own theories was again a natural result of his assimilation of nineteenth-century thought.

Like the Romantics he found in Shakespeare the supreme example of literary portrayal of passion and imagination. For the Romantics, Coleridge in particular, Shakespeare was modern because he was subjective and because he revealed the infinite through his work; for Yeats, Shakespeare was modern because of his subjectivity and because of his portrayal of the expansion of personality into a supernatural realm. Yeats's choice of Jonson as example also follows the nineteenth-century tendency to turn to the Renaissance, English or Italian, for cultural ideals. Yeats, however, was the first to use Jonson's description of the aristocratic ideal to illustrate the cultural ideal that the nineteenth century generally found in the culture of the Renaissance. Castiglione's description of an ideal society had been mentioned by other writers before Yeats, by Burckhardt, for example. In the Renaissance the nineteenth-century writers found a society in which the aristocracy appreciated and encouraged the arts. Yeats, in his praise of Jonson and Castiglione, indicated that this cultural ideal was his ideal also.

In "The Emotion of Multitude" (1903), Yeats retained his symbolist approach to literature, but his burgeoning interest in dramatic action was reflected in his concern with stagecraft. He turned to the two golden ages of literature--that of Pericles and that of Elizabeth--to find an imaginative dramatic form. The Greeks, Yeats believed, revealed "the emotion of multitude"--the expansion of the "well-ordered fable" to include either an ancient religion or the spectacle of the world--

through the chorus, "which called up famous sorrows, even all the gods and all heroes, to witness . . . some well-ordered fable."[1] Shakespeare, on the other hand, achieved the emotion of multitude from "the sub-plot which copies the main plot":

> We think of King Lear less as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time. Lear's shadow is in Gloucester who also has ungrateful children, and the mind goes on imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured the world. In Hamlet, one hardly notices, so subtly is the web woven, that the murder of Hamlet's father and the sorrow of Hamlet are shadowed in the lives of Fortinbras and Ophelia and Laertes, whose fathers, too, have been killed. It is so in all the plays, or in all but all, and very commonly the sub-plot is the main plot working itself out in more ordinary men and women, and so doubly calling up before us the image of multitude.[2]

This conception of echoing the main plot in the actions of the secondary characters Yeats probably got from Victor Hugo's William Shakespeare,[3] and in his own plays in 1904 he used this Shakespearean doubling of the action.

In The King's Threshold the conflict between the poet Seanchan and the King, who had taken away the traditional right

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[1]"The Emotion of Multitude," E. and I., p. 215.

[2]Ibid., pp. 215-16.

[3]Hugo commented on the "one peculiarity which seems to have escaped, up to this day, the most eminent commentators and critics. . . . It is the double action which traverses the drama and reflects it on a small scale. Beside the tempest in the Atlantic is the tempest in the tea-cup. Thus, Hamlet makes beneath himself a Hamlet; he kills Polonius, father of Laertes,--and there stands Laertes over against him exactly as he stands over against Claudius." (William Shakespeare [Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1887], pp. 274-75.) Yeats read Hugo's book on Shakespeare and, in fact, delighted in it "because he abused critics and coteries" ("What is 'Popular Poetry'?" E. and I., p. 5).

of the poet to sit at the King's table, is repeated in the comic battle between Seanchan's old servant, Brian, and the Mayor, who proclaims his authority and maintains the justice of the King's position. Similarly, in On Baile's Strand there is an echoing of the main conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar in the "complementary conflict between a blind man and a fool, who foreshadow Cuchulain's death, reveal the identity of his youthful victim to Cuchulain, and play the same roles as the great king and the great warrior, only in less dignified terms."[4] In these plays Yeats took the one main tragic action, developed it with Sophoclean simplicity, and imitated Shakespeare in recapitulating the main action in the actions of the minor characters. In this way Yeats gained, through imitating Shakespeare's dramatic technique, the "emotion of multitude" that he believed gave Shakespeare's plays their resonance.

Plays such as those Yeats was writing and those he was imitating contrasted with the realistic drama that was popular around the beginning of the century, drama that Yeats called the literary presentation of the "business will." He rejected this middle class drama and called instead for an aristocratic drama removed from the exigencies of logic or utility:

> How can we create like the ancients, while innumerable considerations of external probability or social utility destroy the seeming irresponsible creative power that is life itself? Who to-day could set Richmond's and Richard's tents side by side on the battlefield,

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[4]Thomas Parkinson, W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), p. 51.

> or make Don Quixote, mad as he was, mistake a windmill for a giant in broad daylight? And when I think of free-spoken Falstaff, I know of no audience but the tinkers of the roadside that could encourage the artist to an equal comedy. The old writers were content if their inventions had but an emotional and moral consistency, and created out of themselves a fantastic, energetic, extravagant art.[5]

The extravagant, imaginative art of Shakespeare and Cervantes is Yeats's example of the seemingly "irresponsible" but actually creative and essential power of life itself. This non-utilitarian art was the Renaissance ideal that Yeats desired to reinstate in his own times.

The decline of the aristocratic way of life and of the strong belief "in an unseen reality" typical of the period before the Renaissance had led, Yeats believed, to a decline in the arts. He therefore called for a return to belief, a belief in the soul that would be evinced by gesture and action, such as those Shakespeare manifested through his tragic characters:

> The arts are at their greatest when they seek for a life growing always more scornful of everything that is not itself and passing into its own fullness, as it were, ever more completely as all that is created out of the passing mode of society slips from it; and attaining that fullness, perfectly it may be--and from this tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy--then the world itself has slipped away in death. We, who are believers, cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself, and seeing it there we cannot do other than rejoice in every energy, whether of gesture, or of action, or of speech, coming out of the personality, the soul's image, even though the very laws of Nature seem as unimportant in comparison as did the laws of Rome

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[5]Samhain: 1904, Explorations, p. 150.

> to Coriolanus when his pride was upon him. Has not the long decline of the arts been but the shadow of declining faith in an unseen reality?[6]

Art is to portray the soul at its moment of greatest expansion, particularly in its tragic conflict with law, convention, morality, or life itself. In describing the soul or imagination escaping the confines of existence, transcending them through death, art gives evidence of an ideal world, of a passionate perfection. Shakespeare's portrayal of Coriolanus was, for Yeats, the epitome of this transcendent expression of personality, and he returned again and again to the scene of Coriolanus "under the canopy" to exemplify completeness of personality and energy.

This same extolling of personality is evident in Yeats's further comments on the higher law that governs the morality of Shakespeare's plays. In great drama a "moment of intense life"[7] is portrayed: "it is an energy, an eddy of life, purified from everything but itself."[8] Yeats, in accordance with his symbolist interpretation of Shakespeare, believed that this movement of the soul transcends the law, the ordinary judgements of right and wrong, and sets in its stead a higher morality:

> The character whose fortune we have been called in to see, or the personality of the writer, must keep our sympathy, and whether it be farce or tragedy, we must laugh and weep with him and call down blessings

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[6] Ibid., pp. 169-70.

[7] Ibid., p. 153.

[8] Ibid., p. 154.

> on his head. This character who delights us may commit murder like Macbeth, or fly the battle for his sweetheart as did Antony, or betray his country like Coriolanus, and yet we will rejoice in every happiness that comes to him and sorrow at his death as if it were our own. It is no use telling us that the murderer and the betrayer do not deserve our sympathy. We thought so yesterday, and we still know what crime is, but everything has been changed of a sudden; we are caught up into another code, we are in the presence of a higher court. . . . If the subject of drama or any other art were a man himself, an eddy of momentary breath, we might desire the contemplation of perfect characters; but the subject of all art is passion, and a passion can only be contemplated when separated by itself, purified of all but itself, and aroused into a perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law, that is the expression of the whole whether of Church or Nation or external Nature.[9]

This conception of the morality of art superseding traditional morality, Yeats found supported in Hugo's work on Shakespeare, a book as filled with occult lore as are Yeats's writings. Hugo, like Yeats, believed in a higher morality, or in Hugo's phrase, a "higher criticism":

> The poet is only limited by his aim; he considers nothing but the idea to be worked out; he recognizes no sovereignty, no necessity, save the idea: for since Art emanates from the Absolute, in Art, as in the Absolute, the end justifies the means. This is, it may be said in passing, one of those deviations from the ordinary terrestrial law which make the higher criticism muse and reflect, and which reveal to it the mysterious side of Art. In Art, above all, is visible the <u>quid divinum</u>.[10]

Both Yeats and Hugo chose Shakespeare as the poet whose characters transcend earthly law, and both considered art a revelation of the supernatural.

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[9] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 154-55.

[10] Hugo, p. 196.

Shakespeare was Yeats's salient example of the tragic dramatist who was beyond conventional morality, whose work was aristocratic, was "the disinterested contemplation or expression of life";[11] Ben Jonson was Yeats's example of the comic dramatist who similarly was detached from common morality and from contemporaneous social problems.

The need of the poet to be disengaged from the morality of his time Yeats had iterated previously in his essay on Spenser. In 1906 he again developed that theme using Ben Jonson as the example of the imaginative creator, the artist who could create without regard for any standards other than those of fine art.

> In the great days of English dramatic art the greatest English writer of comedy was free to create The Alchemist and Volpone, but a demand born of Puritan conviction and shopkeeping timidity and insincerity, for what many second-rate intellects thought to be noble and elevating events and characters, had already at the outset of the eighteenth century ended the English drama as a complete and serious art. . . . The quarrel of our theatre to-day is the quarrel of the theatre in many lands; for the old Puritanism and the old dislike of power and reality have not changed, even when they are called by some Gaelic name.[12]

To oppose the mundane considerations of the middle class Yeats set up standards of extravagance, of energy--aristocratic standards containing the element of sprezzatura, recklessness, which the artist as well as the aristocrat must have.

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[11] Samhain: 1905, Explorations, p. 197.

[12] "The Controversy over The Playboy of the Western World," Explorations, p. 225.

Yeats's aristocratic ideal is revealed in his interest in Ben Jonson. As Yeats wrote to Bullen in 1906,

> I am thinking of writing something on Ben Jonson, or more likely perhaps upon the ideal of life that flittered before the imagination of Jonson and the others when they thought of the Court. The thought grows out of my Spenser essay which is just out.[13]

Although the essay was never written, Yeats's admiration for Jonson can be seen in part in Discoveries (1906), which was probably named after Jonson's Timber or Discoveries. Both works present the authors' theories of literature and their formulations of a noble life.

Jonson's ideal of the court is best expressed in his address to the court of his time, in words that Yeats remembered and quoted in his Autobiographies:

> Thou art a beautiful and brave spring and waterest all the noble plants of this island. In thee the whole Kingdom dresseth itself and is ambitious to use thee as her glass. Beware then thou render men's figures truly and teach them no less to hate their deformities, than to love their forms. . . . Thy servant but not slave, Ben Jonson.[14]

This admonition to the court to provide a noble example for the kingdom accorded with Yeats's own aristocratic theory of society: ". . . you cannot have health among a people if you have not prophet, priest and king."[15] Both Jonson and Yeats believed that an aristocracy was necessary to set the cultural standards for the people. Moreover, both believed that the

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[13] The Letters . . . , p. 479.

[14] Pp. 545-46.

[15] Discoveries, E. and I., p. 264.

court or the nobility could provide the environment necessary for the pursuit of wisdom or of the arts. Jonson stated that "Learning needs rest: Sovereignity gives it. Sovereignity needs counsel: Learning affords it."[16] Yeats, who found as a member of Lady Gregory's household the leisure necessary for his studies, almost echoed Jonson's sentiment in his later work, On the Boiler: "Somebody has written, 'There can be no wisdom without leisure.'"[17] Both Yeats and Jonson believed that an aristocracy provided the conditions under which learning and the arts could flourish.

In 1906 Yeats was like Jonson also in advocating an expressive theory of literature. Both writers considered poetry most closely related to oratory, to dramatic and persuasive speech;[18] Jonson, like Yeats, believed that the poet's strength lies in showing men in their various emotional states;[19] and both saw a correlation between physical and mental expression. Jonson stated the correlation as follows:

> There cannot be one colour of the mind, another of the wit. If the mind be staid, grave, and composed, the wit is so; that vitiated, the other is blown and deflowered. Do we not see if the mind languish the members are dull? Look upon an effeminate

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[16] Timber or Discoveries, ed. Ralph S. Walker (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1953), p. 75.

[17] (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1939?), p. 23.

[18] Yeats, Discoveries, p. 268; Jonson, p. 88.

[19] Yeats, ibid., p. 265; Jonson, p. 88.

> person; his very gait confesseth him. If a man be fiery, his motion is so; if angry, 'tis troubled and violent.[20]

Jonson, in this description of the bodily expression of mental states, indicated the same power of gesture to reveal the personality that Yeats described in his discussion of two girls, one a guitar player, the other a schoolgirl. The first delighted him, for "her voice, the movements of her body, the expression of her face, all said the same thing." The other girl distressed him, for she had a "shrill monotonous voice and an abrupt way of moving." These characteristics were "the personality, the habitual self."[21] Although Jonson concentrated on the revelation of a particular mood through gesture whereas Yeats believed the essential personality was so revealed, both writers are concerned with the expressive power of gesture and of language as a verbal gesture.[22]

Jonson's Timber or Discoveries and Yeats's Discoveries presented similar views on the expressive power of literature. Both stressed style in literature and life; both followed the Renaissance tradition, clearly evident in Sidney's Defense of Poetry, of classifying poetry with oratory, that is, as concerned with moving men's emotions; and both believed that words, like bodily movements, are an expression of the personality, a gesture. Thus in Jonson's work Yeats found if not the source

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[20]Jonson, p. 25.

[21]Discoveries, p. 269.

[22]Discoveries, p. 266; Jonson, p. 88.

of his ideas at least corroboration for his conception of language as an expression of personality. Both dramatists were concerned with the effect of language and of gesture on reader or audience.

At the same time that Yeats was interested in Ben Jonson's ideal of the court, he was also influenced by the aristocratic society described by Castiglione in The Book of the Courtier. Castiglione, like Jonson, was concerned with perfecting a noble society that would permit the full development of all aristocratic qualities in the individual courtier and that would benefit the prince and thus the kingdom by providing a source of wisdom and good counsel on matters of government. Castiglione is more precise than Jonson in setting up the studies that educate the ideal courtier; for example, he describes the sports, the clothes, the entertainments, the conversation and the arts that should be known perfectly by the nobleman. Most important for Yeats, Castiglione believed that the courtier should perform these actions with sprezzatura, which Yeats translated as "recklessness," and that he should be imbued with the Neoplatonic doctrine of love. It is the latter concept that Yeats referred to in Discoveries as he approved the general tenor of excellence in life and in conversation that characterized Castiglione's ideal: Art, with its personal not general morality,

> approved before all men those that talked or wrestled or tilted under the walls of Urbino, or sat in those great window-seats discussing all things, with love ever in their thought, when the

> wise Duchess ordered all, and the Lady Emilia gave the theme.[23]

Since the theme the Lady Emilia gave was that of love and since Peter Bembo's speech is the central statement on love, Yeats indirectly praised the Neoplatonic philosophy of Castiglione's ideal courtier.

In extolling the conversation directed by the Lady Emilia, Yeats undoubtedly had in mind the climactic and mystical speech with which the conversation ends:

> For like as through the particular beautie of one bodie hee [love] guideth her [the soul] to the universall beautie of all bodies: Even so in the least degree of perfection through particular understanding hee guideth her to the universall understanding.
>
> Thus the soule kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, fleeth to couple her selfe with the nature of Angels, and not onely cleane forsaketh sense, but hath no more neede of the discourse of reason, for being chaunged into an Angell, she understandeth all thinges that may be understood, and without any veil or cloud, she seeth the maine sea of the pure heavenly beautie and receiveth it into her, and enjoyeth the soveraigne happinesse, that can not be comprehended of the senses.[24]

In Castiglione's work Yeats found crystallized his own belief first in a consciously perfected aristocratic way of life and second in a life molded in part by the mystical philosophy that Yeats himself turned to in his early years.[25] He therefore

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[23]P. 293.

[24]Baldassare Castiglione, The Booke of the Courtier, trans. Thomas Hoby (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1928), p. 319.

[25]See Chapter I, pp. 50-52, for a discussion of Yeats's own use of Neoplatonic doctrine.

concluded that art approved of Castiglione's ideal above all others.

Besides setting forth or approving the ideas of Jonson and Castiglione, Yeats, in Discoveries, also stated more explicitly than in previous works his conception of the place of the Renaissance in the cycles of history. Formulating a distinction between observation and imagination, he indicated the passing away of the imagination:

> Shakespeare, Tintoretto, though the times were running out when Tintoretto painted, nearly all the great men of the Renaissance, looked at the world with eyes like his [an old man who "had observed little but had many imaginations"]. Their minds were never quiescent, never, as it were, in a mood for scientific observations, always in exaltation.[26]

With this statement Yeats moved towards the conception of cultural cycles that found complete explication in A Vision, but in 1906 he described only the period from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. Shakespeare's work as well as that of Beaumont and Jonson[27] is characterized by imagination and fantasy, qualities that since have given way to logic. The reason for the times' running out, for the exaltation's ceasing, Yeats indicated in a comment on Shakespeare:

> I have come to think of even Shakespeare's journeys to Rome or to Verona as the outflowing of an unrest, a dissatisfaction with natural interests, an unstable equilibrium of the whole European mind.[28]

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[26] Discoveries, pp. 279-80.

[27] Ibid., p. 280.

[28] Ibid., p. 297.

As in the Spenser essay, Yeats considered the English Renaissance as the time of the fragmentation of the stable world of the Middle Ages, as the decline of the world of belief and imagination. At this point in the development of his conception of the Renaissance, however, he had not distinguished between the unity of the Middle Ages and that of the Italian Renaissance. The English Renaissance was his focus of interest.

After developing his philosophical and historical ideas in Discoveries, Yeats returned in his prose to a concentration on drama, and, as usual during this period, Shakespeare was the figure Yeats used to develop his theories. His earlier interest in the full expression of personality was delineated further in "Poetry and Tradition" (1907); the overflowing of personality, he believed, was a means of uniting man with the supernatural. With Shakespeare the example of supreme artistry, Yeats wrote of the "ecstasy" that transfigures Shakespeare's characters in the face of death, an ecstasy that results from the characters' ability to transcend the personal level of experience.

> Timon of Athens contemplates his own end, and orders his tomb by the beached verge of the salt flood, and Cleopatra sets the asp to her bosom, and their words move us because their sorrow is not their own at tomb or asp, but for all men's fate. That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate, for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity. No new man has ever plucked that rose or found that trysting-place, for he could but come to the understanding of himself, to the mastery of unlocking words, after long frequenting of the great

> Masters, hardly without ancestral memory of the like. Even knowledge is not enough, for the "recklessness" Castiglione thought necessary in good manners is necessary in this likewise, and if a man has it not he will be gloomy, and had better to his marketing again.[29]

The ecstasy, the shaping joy, results from the combination of contraries and brings about the unification of mortal and immortal, as in Shakespeare's tragedies. The daring, the recklessness, that is necessary to create this ecstasy Yeats found exemplified in Castiglione's description of a spontaneous and aristocratic existence. Castiglione's ideal of noble action Yeats expanded into a mystical ideal of noble art. Thus he took an idea from one Renaissance work, transformed it to fit his symbolist theories, and applied it to the work of the foremost Renaissance dramatist.

Yeats's symbolist interpretation of Shakespeare's work was further developed in "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), in which he discussed the function of comic and tragic elements in Shakespeare's dramas.

> In writers of tragi-comedy (and Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy) there is indeed character, but we notice that it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet's gaiety, let us say; while amid the great moments, when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio "absent thee from felicity awhile," when Antony names "Of many thousand kisses the poor last," all is lyricism, unmixed passion, "the integrity of fire." Nor does character ever attain to complete definition in these lamps ready for the taper, no matter how circumstantial and gradual the opening of events, as it does in Falstaff, who has no passionate purpose to fulfil, or as it does in Henry V,

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[29]"Poetry and Tradition," E. and I., pp. 255-56.

> whose poetry, never touched by lyrical heat, is oratorical; nor when the tragic reverie is at its height do we say, "How well that man is realised! I should know him were I to meet him in the street," for it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage.[30]

Tragic characters are individuated in the moments of comedy; they become universal in the tragic moments, they transcend the limits of the individual, and they attain a supernatural condition, that is, "the integrity of fire." With this definition of personality as the revelation of the tragic hero at his moment of "tragic reverie," Yeats began to return to his earlier view of the contemplative essence of poetry. He turned, as always, to Shakespeare's plays for his examples of supreme artistry, but, as in the early discussions of Shakespeare's symbolism, Yeats looked not for gesture or action as the expression of personality but for personality as the revelation of the supernatural.

This changing emphasis is made explicit in "Art and Ideas" (1913), in which Yeats compared the poets whom he considered his contemporaries with Shakespeare and Dante:

> Those poets with whom I feel myself in sympathy have tried to give to little poems the spontaneity of a gesture or of some casual emotional phrase. Meanwhile it remains for some greater time, living once more in passionate reverie, to create a King Lear, a Divine Comedy, vast worlds moulded by their own weight like drops of water.[31]

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[30] "The Tragic Theatre," E. and I., pp. 240-41.

[31] "Art and Ideas," E. and I., p. 353.

Significantly, as Yeats turned from a conception of poetry as gesture and action to a conception of poetry as "passionate reverie," he returned also to his former interest in Dante, the prime example of the intellectual symbolist. This change in poetic theory is presented in dramatic form in "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915), in which the two parts of Yeats's personality argue about the type of life to be sought.[32]

Throughout this period from 1903 to 1915 Yeats turned to the English Renaissance for examples of great drama, which he analyzed in terms of his own symbolist theories, or for sources or corroboration of his ideas on an aristocratic, consciously perfected way of life. The Italian as well as the English Renaissance was for him, as for the nineteenth-century historians, a cultural ideal. Shakespeare, Jonson and Castiglione were the Renaissance figures Yeats was most interested in during these years, for all of them, as Yeats interpreted them, were concerned with or portrayed action and the revelation of personality. In 1903 Yeats turned to Shakespeare to learn dramatic technique, and later he analyzed the means by which Shakespeare's characters reveal fullness of personality, spiritual energy. Jonson's Timber or Discoveries was a Renaissance corroboration of Yeats's theories of the expressive power of literature, although Jonson was concerned with physical or verbal gesture rather than with spiritual gesture. Castiglione, with his description of how the courtier should look, act and

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[32]See Chapter IV, pp. 160-64, for an examination of this poem.

speak, provided Yeats with an ideal of a life of action, self-consciously perfected, as well as with a Neoplatonic spiritual ideal. Yeats, who in these years was seeking to reveal spiritual elements through action and gesture, found inspiration in Castiglione's work. Jonson also described an aristocratic ideal that corresponded to Yeats's typically nineteenth-century conception of an ideal society. By the end of this period, however, Yeats began to move away from his interest in drama and in gesture and to return to his former concentration on the contemplative life. Shakespeare's tragic heroes were Yeats's main examples of spiritual energy, which he called "ecstasy" or "reverie." The great drama of the English Renaissance and the reasons for the decline of drama and the arts after that time were central to Yeats's thought during these years when he was involved in the Abbey Theatre and in writing for the Irish populace. The Italian Renaissance was significant for him primarily as presented in the work of Castiglione, who turned life itself into the perfection of drama, of trained and skillful gesture. Yeats's comments on these figures reflect his involvement in the theatre and his ideal of life and art as action.

CHAPTER III

THE FIFTEENTH PHASE AS YEATS'S CONTEMPLATIVE IDEAL: 1915-1938

After Yeats had ceased about 1911 to be intensely involved in the Abbey Theatre, discouraged by his failure to create a drama that would help create a popular cultural ideal, he also rejected his conception of poetry as action and began again to conceive of great poetry as primarily contemplative. Along with this change in theory, he changed his poetic models and examples. Dante, whom Yeats considered the first modern figure, replaced Shakespeare as supreme example of artistry, for as Yeats returned to his former conception of poetry as reverie, he also reverted to Dante as the leading poet of intellectual symbolism. Dante was Yeats's inspiration as he created his own system of symbols, one that is as complex and as systemized as that which Dante created. Spenser also became important to Yeats again as a model and example, although during these years he concentrated on Spenser's Neoplatonism as well as on his pastoral world. Finally, in delineating the intellectual beauty, the unity of being, of the Fifteenth Phase, he extolled the same fifteenth-century Italian works that Pater focused on in The Renaissance. Yeats, like the nineteenth-century historians, found in the Renaissance a cultural touchstone, and from this conception he, like Michelet, developed

a cyclical theory of history. In this third period Yeats had as models and examples the same three figures that helped to mold or to illustrate his ideas until 1903: Dante, Spenser and Pater. His theory and his art were enriched, however, by his active involvement in the theater and in life.

As Yeats changed his poetic credo from one of action to one of contemplation or reverie, his model for drama changed also. No longer did he turn to Shakespeare's tragedies to find the essence of dramatic art; instead, under the influence of Pound, he discovered in the Noh drama the ideal aristocratic form. In "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916) he indicated clearly his change of allegiance:

> It is natural that I go to Asia for a stage convention, for more formal faces, for a chorus that has no part in the action, and perhaps for those movements of the body copied from the marionette shows of the fourteenth century.[1]

He identified his own practice with that of the Japanese dramatists, who were contemplative and traditional, rather than with that of Shakespeare, who portrayed passionate action:

> The men who created this convention [the Noh drama] were more like ourselves than were the Greeks and Romans, more like us even than are Shakespeare and Corneille. Their emotion was self-conscious and reminiscent, always associating itself with pictures and poems. They measured all that time had taken or would take away and found their delight in remembering celebrated lovers in the scenery pale passion loves.[2]

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[1] E. and I., p. 226.

[2] Ibid., p. 233.

In this movement away from his earlier models, especially from Shakespeare, and towards the "pale passion" of the Noh plays, Yeats revealed in poetic theory the same change from action to contemplation that was shown in his next major prose work, Per Amica Silentia Lunae. Yeats himself defined this new phase as a "more profound Pre-Raphaelitism."[3]

In Per Amica Silentia Lunae, published in 1917, the year of Yeats's marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees, Yeats described the world beyond man, the Anima Mundi, and discussed the means by which man transcends his physical existence. To illustrate this conception Yeats turned, as in his first period, to Dante and to Spenser. First he elaborated his theory of the mask, which was foreshadowed in his portrayal of the poet in Discoveries (1906). In that essay Yeats was exploring the ramifications of Verlaine's statement that the poet should reveal himself fully. For Yeats this theory meant that the poet's essential self should look out as from behind a mask. By 1917, however, Yeats brilliantly synthesized the idea of the mask with his conception of the Anima Mundi. The mask, as he described it in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, is that ideal which is most difficult but not impossible for the individual to achieve. The saint and the hero seek this ideal in their lives; the poet seeks it in his art. To illustrate this conception, Yeats referred to Dante's life and art. Contrasting happy and tragic art, Yeats described the essence of tragic poetry as

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[3]"Art and Ideas," E. and I., p. 355.

the conflict between the actual and the ideal, such as Dante's conflict--not only the external conflict between his desire for Beatrice and her absence in death, but also the internal conflict between his lust and his ideal, spiritual love.

> While reading Dante we never long escape the conflict, partly because the verses are at moments a mirror of his history, and yet more because that history is so clear and simple that it has the quality of art. I am no Dante scholar, and I but read him in Shadwell or in Dante Rossetti, but I am always persuaded that he celebrated the most pure lady poet ever sung and the Divine Justice, not merely because death took that lady and Florence banished her singer, but because he had to struggle in his own heart with his unjust anger and his lust; while, unlike those of the great poets who are at peace with the world and at war with themselves, he fought a double war. "Always," says Boccaccio, "both in youth and maturity, he found room among his virtues for lechery"; . . . Guido Cavalcanti, as Rossetti translates him, finds "too much baseness" in his friend.[4]

As Yeats turned to a study of Dante, reading other thirteenth-century Italian authors as well,[5] the scope of his inquiry broadened: he was no longer interested solely in Dante's symbology; he included Dante's life in his analysis of the tragic elements in the poetry. This inclusion of the poet's life and personality in a discussion of the poet's art resulted from Yeats's adherence during his second period to the expressive theory of literature. In his third period he synthesized that theory with his study of symbologies and arrived at the conception of the mask, the antithetical self.

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[4]Per Amica Silentia Lunae, Mythologies, pp. 329-30.

[5]Yeats read Cavalcanti, Boccaccio and Gino da Pistoia as background for an understanding of Dante (ibid., p. 330).

To illustrate what the mask is and how it is related to the supernatural, Yeats described a passage in the Vita Nuova as well as one in Boehme. Yeats's own antithetical self came to him when he was in a trance-like state, and the conditions of its presence reminded him of

> that place in Dante where he sees in his chamber the 'Lord of Terrible Aspect,' and how, seeming 'to rejoice inwardly that it was a marvel to see, speaking, he said many things among the which I could understand but few, and of these this: ego dominus tuus'; or should the conditions come, not, as it were, in a gesture--as the image of a man--but in some fine landscape, it is of Boehme, maybe, that I think, and of that country where we 'eternally solace ourselves in the excellent beautiful flourishing of all manner of flowers and forms, both trees and plants, and all kinds of fruit.'[6]

The "Lord of the Terrible Aspect" is Love, who appeared to Dante in a dream or vision to reveal to him Beatrice. Although Yeats called this vision a "gesture," the word does not have the same meaning that it did when he used it in Discoveries. Then it meant a revelation of the essence of the personality; in this passage it means the revelation to man of that which is beyond him, which comes to him from the realm of the ideal, from the Anima Mundi, as the figure of Love came from the Anima Mundi to reveal to Dante the ideal that he was to create in his art.

The conflict between the vision of the ideal and the experiences of the poet give rise to tragic art, for the poet is aware of his own inability to attain in his life the ideal that has appeared to him; hence he tries to embody that ideal in his art. Thus Dante, who sang of a divine love, returned

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[6]Ibid., p. 326.

"to his chambering," and Shakespeare, who created heroic, passionate characters, returned "to his 'pottle-pot,' to his drinking.[7] Undoubtedly, although Yeats nowhere stated it, the contrast between Dante's ideal love of Beatrice and the more ordinary loves of his actual existence reminded Yeats of his own idealized love of Maud Gonne and his other more mundane relationships. For Yeats as for Dante ideal love was one means by which the poet could, in his art, create a self most unlike his ordinary self, could create his mask.

Yeats's theory of the mask is not limited to individuals, however, for he expanded the conception to include entire periods of history. He chose from among the many Renaissance leaders Caesar Borgia to represent the period itself. This choice of a strong personality, a dominant political figure, to serve as representative of the Renaissance places Yeats in the Romantic tradition of historical conceptions of the Renaissance, a tradition exemplified clearly in the writing of Stendhal and Nietzsche.[8] Yeats, however, did not extol Caesar Borgia only because he was a man beyond good and evil, but because he chose a mask through which to make himself strong.

> Some years ago I began to believe that our culture, with its doctrine of sincerity and self-realization, made us gentle and passive, and that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were right to found theirs upon the imitation of Christ or of some classic hero. Saint Francis and Caesar Borgia made themselves overmastering, creative persons by turning from the mirror to meditation upon a mask.[9]

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[7]Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 333-34.

[8]Ferguson, pp. 129-31, 208.

[9]Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 333-34.

For Yeats, the civilizations of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance were founded on a conscious striving for some ideal antithetical to the contemporaneous nature of men. The Middle Ages, typified by Saint Francis, found its mask in Christ; the Renaissance, typified by Caesar Borgia, found its mask in the classical hero. This conception of the Renaissance, current during the later nineteenth century, was formulated by Burckhardt as follows: "the rulers [during the Renaissance] . . . , both in their conception of the State and in their personal conduct, took the old Roman empire avowedly as their model."[10] Yeats incorporated this conception into his symbolist theory of the mask.

Yeats made explicit the Romantic tradition he was following in a comment in "If I Were Four-and-Twenty" (1919).

> Nietzsche might have taken, and perhaps did take, his conception of the superman in history from [Balzac's] Catherine de Medici, and he has explained and proved, even more thoroughly than Darwin, the doctrine of the survival of the fittest of the species.[11]

Since Balzac presented Catherine de' Medici as an heroic figure fighting with craft and guile the forces of Calvinism that threatened royalty and religious unity,[12] he, like Nietzsche, extolled the strong, amoral personality. Moreover, Balzac and

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[10]Burckhardt, p. 57.

[11]"If I Were Four-and-Twenty," pp. 269-70.

[12]Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie Humaine, Vol. XXXI: About Catherine de' Medici and other stories, trans. Clara Bell (Philadelphia: The Gebbie Publishing Co., Ltd., 1900), pp. 5-7.

Nietzsche both thought of their heroic figures in relationship to the Renaissance: Neitzsche stated that one "would do better to seek for the Superman in a Caesar Borgia than in a Parsifal";[13] Balzac's heroic Catherine was a French Renaissance woman of the sixteenth century. Thus Yeats, in his reference to Caesar Borgia and in his interpretation of Balzac's About Catherine de' Medici, was in the Romantic tradition of praising the strong, crafty and amoral figures of the Italian Renaissance.

In the first half of Per Amica Silentia Lunae Yeats developed the conception that a man or a civilization seeks a mask in that which is most antithetical to its nature; in the second half of the work he described how the spirits that are beyond man also seek man. First identifying the three realms of the soul, he indicated the relationships among them. There is the "condition of fire," which is "all music and all rest"; the terrestrial condition, where "all opposites meet," where there is "the extreme of choice possible, full freedom"; and the "condition of air," which is between the two, "where images have but a borrowed life, that of memory or that reflected upon them when they symbolise colours and intensities of fire: the place of shades."[14] The movement of the daimons or spirits from the condition of fire to the terrestrial condition to seek choice is Yeats's explanation for the existence of the mask:

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[13]Friedrich Nietzsche, The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Vol. XVII: Ecce Homo and Poems (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), p. 58.

[14]Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 356-57.

"for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts,"[15] and each seeks its opposite.

To illustrate the condition of fire or the Anima Mundi from which the daimons come, Yeats referred to Spenser's Neo-platonic passages in The Faerie Queene, to the description of the Garden of Adonis:

> There is the first seminary
> Of all things that are born to live and die
> According to their kynds.[16]

A subsequent quotation from Canto VI, Book III, of The Faerie Queene makes more explicit the Platonic basis of the passage:

> Henry More thought that those who, after centuries of life, failed to find the rhythmic body and to Pass into the Condition of Fire, were born again. Edmund Spenser, who was among More's masters, affirmed that nativity without giving it a cause:--
>
> > After that they agayne retourned beene
> > They in that garden planted be agayne,
> > And grow afresh, as they had never seene
> > Fleshly corruption, nor mortal payne.
> > Some thousand years so doen they ther remayne,
> > And then of him are clad with other hew,
> > Or sent into the chaungeful world agayne,
> > Till thither they retourn where first they grew:
> > So, like a wheele, around they ronne from old to new.[17]

Spenser's variation on Plato's Myth of Er, Yeats found to be a confirmation of his own theory, an idea deriving from the occult tradition, of the transmigration of souls and of his

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[15]Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, quoted by W. B. Yeats, ibid., p. 335.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., p. 363.

developing conception of the cyclical nature of the progression of a soul or of the world.

Through the influence of Henry More's Neoplatonic writings, Yeats's judgement of Spenser's work changed: no longer did he emphasize the allegorical element in Spenser's poetry; instead he concentrated on the Neoplatonic doctrine. In 1902 Yeats thought that Spenser's natural ability lay in the glorification of the sensuous world, although he began in English poetry the worship of Intellectual Beauty. In 1917, however, after Yeats had studied more thoroughly the esoteric tradition, he used Spenser's poetry to support his own occult theory. Spenser and Dante were the two poets to whom Yeats turned for inspiration and corroboration of his own theories during this contemplative period of his development.

During these years when the ideas and organization of A Vision were developing, Yeats continued his study of Dante. In "A People's Theatre" (1919) he defined Dante's character and fitted him into the cyclical pattern of literary movements.

> Dante in that passage in the Convito which is, I think, the first passage of poignant autobiography in literary history, for there is nothing in Saint Augustine not formal and abstract beside it, in describing his poverty and his exile counts as his chief misfortune that he has had to show himself to all Italy and so publish his human frailties that men who honoured him unknown honour him no more. Lacking means, he had lacked seclusion, and he explains that men such as he should have but few and intimate friends. His study was unity of being, the subordination of all parts to the whole as in a perfectly proportioned human body--his own definition of beauty--and not, as with those I have described, the unity of this in the world; and like all subjectives he shrank, because of what he was, from contact with many men. . . .

> Once such men could draw the crowd because the circumstance of life changed slowly and there was little to disturb contemplation, and so men repeated old verses and old stories, and learned and simple had come to share in common much allusion and symbol. . . . Shakespeare, more objective than Dante--for, alas, the world must move--was still predominantly subjective, and he wrote during the latest crisis of history that made possible a theatre of his kind.[18]

For Yeats, Dante was the poet who, beyond all others, sought and attained unity of being, a spiritual not physical unity; who was predominantly subjective; and who wrote from what he emotionally experienced, what he imagined, rather than from what he observed. Shakespeare, in comparison, was more objective. By attributing to Dante subjectivity and a study of unity of being, Yeats added another element to his former interpretation of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Previously, ignoring the Italian Renaissance, he had attributed to the Middle Ages unity of being and to the English Renaissance fragmentation. In 1919 he determined that Dante was the first figure of the modern age and that Dante's study was of unity of being. This changing focus leads to Yeats's later concentration on the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance as the time of unity of being and on the English Renaissance as the time of the final bursting of that unity. His interest in Dante and in the Italian Renaissance began to influence his interpretation of the entire phenomenon of the Renaissance.

His interpretation of Dante as the first figure of the modern times was not a novel conception, although it differed

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[18] Explorations, pp. 250-51.

from the view held by many nineteenth-century writers. Most of the Romantics, Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelites considered Dante a medieval poet, as did the historian Henry Hallam.[19] Hazlitt, however, in 1815 called Dante "the father of modern literature."[20] Arthur Hallam believed that Dante "was a summary in his individual self" of the elements leading to a change in the human intellect, and that he showed "what direction was about to be impressed upon the human intellect by the 'rushing mighty wind,' the spirit of Christianity, under whose conditions alone a new literature was become possible."[21] Burckhardt thought that Dante marked "the boundary between medievalism and modern times."[22] And Pater considered that "Dante's large-minded treatment of all forms of classic power and achievement marks a stage of progress, from the narrower sentiment of the Middle Ages, towards "humanism," towards the mental attitude of the Renaissance and of the modern world."[23] Yeats's conception of Dante as the first figure of the modern age is thus in accord with this tendency to find modern or

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[19]Henry A. Beers, A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1901), pp. 97-103, 300-01.

[20]Review of Literature of the South, quoted in Weisinger, p. 384.

[21]"The Influence of Italian upon English Literature," The Writings of Arthur Hallam (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1943), p. 225.

[22]Burckhardt, p. 188.

[23]"Introduction," The Purgatory of Dante Alighieri, trans. Charles Shadwell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), pp. xxii-xxiii. Yeats read this edition.

Renaissance elements in Dante's work, but Yeats's choice of the Convito as the major work in which modern elements are present was individual. Yeats's reason for choosing that work was the subjectivity and the revelation of self that it reveals: these elements, for Yeats as for other nineteenth-century writers, characterize the Renaissance.

In Dante's work, Yeats concentrated on the elements that showed Dante's subjectivity, hence his place in the historical cycles. Similarly, when Yeats turned to a discussion of Shakespeare's art, he emphasized the qualities that evinced subjectivity, the qualities that existed in art before the fragmenting effect of the cultural changes that occurred during the Renaissance:[24]

> Shakespeare set upon the stage kings and queens, great historical or legendary persons about whom there is nothing unreal except the circumstance of their lives which remain vague and summary, because he could only write his best--his mind and the mind of his audience being interested in emotion and intellect at their greatest intensity--when he wrote of those who controlled the mechanism of life. Had they been controlled by it, intellect and emotion entangled by intricacy and detail could never have mounted to that union which, as Swedenborg said of the marriage of the angels, is a conflagration of the whole being.[25]

For Yeats, Shakespeare in his presentation of great kings and queens attained the union of emotion and intellect that characterizes unity of being, as Yeats later described it.[26] These

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[24]See Chapter I, pp. 61-64, for a discussion of these changes.

[25]"A People's Theatre," p. 245.

[26]See Chapter III, pp. 137-39, for this description.

figures, unencumbered by the details of life, the objective elements, could rise to a supernatural intensity. Yet in spite of this powerful union of intellect and emotion, Shakespeare's work, Yeats believed, was less subjective than that of Dante.

Continuing his symbolist interpretation of the supernatural elements present at the time Shakespeare wrote, Yeats asserted that "the two great energies of the world that in Shakespeare's day penetrated each other have fallen apart as speech and music fell apart at the Renaissance . . ."[27] The two energies, the objective (intellectual) and the subjective (emotional), were, according to Yeats, unified in Shakespeare's art, but afterwards the world, with the advent of science and political changes, became more and more objective, more intellectual, and the unity was lost. This interpretation is the one Yeats developed in greater detail in A Vision.

To the subjectivity of the great Renaissance poets Yeats added, in "If I Were Four-and-Twenty" (1919), another element that he found essential in great literature--the "Vision of Evil."[28]

> The strength and weight of Shakespeare, of Villon, of Dante, even of Cervantes, come from their preoccupation with evil. In Shelley, in Ruskin, in Wordsworth, who for all his formal belief was, as Blake saw, a descendent of Rousseau, there is a constant resolution to dwell upon good only; and from this comes their lack of the sense of character, which is defined always by its defects or its incapacity, and their lack of the dramatic sense; for them human nature has lost its antagonist.[29]

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[27]"A People's Theatre," p. 258.

[28]Autobiographies, p. 310.

[29]"If I Were Four-and-Twenty," p. 275.

> . . . . . .
> No man believes willingly in evil or in suffering. How much of the strength and weight of Dante and of Balzac comes from unwilling belief.[30]

For Yeats, the Vision of Evil results from man's conflict with his environment or with himself and from his resultant discovery of weakness. Yeats's comments on the Vision of Evil are an extension of his previous formulation of Dante's conflicts with his environment (the government of Florence) and with himself (his lust). From the study of Dante Yeats gained a sense of the conflicts from which great poetry springs. In 1919 he took this conception, developed earlier in relation to his theory of the mask,[31] and applied it to Renaissance figures. The result was his conception of the Vision of Evil, the external and internal conflicts in a writer that give a supernatural power and intensity to his work.

In a discussion of Hamlet Yeats continued this analysis of the conflict manifested in some works of art and indicated that in Shakespeare's plays the conflicts of the poet produced the dramatic tension in the drama.

> I feel in Hamlet, as so often in Shakespeare, that I am in the presence of a soul lingering on the storm-beaten threshold of sanctity. Has not that threshold always been terrible, even crime-haunted? Surely Shakespeare, in those last seeming idle years, was no quiet country gentleman, enjoying . . . the temporal reward of an unvalued toil. Perhaps he sought for wisdom in itself at last, and not in its passionate shadows. Maybe he had passed the threshold,

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[30] Ibid., p. 277.

[31] See Chapter III, pp. 95-98, for a discussion of the mask.

> and nonetheless for Jonson's drinking bout. Certainly one finds here and there in his work praise of country leisure sweetened by wisdom.[32]

Yeats identified Shakespeare with the character of Hamlet and attributed to both a movement through evil and suffering towards some resolution of the conflict between man's desire for an ideal world and his inability to achieve that desire. Shakespeare's own war with the world, Yeats implied, was reflected in the struggle of his tragic hero.

Yeats expanded his conception of the Vision of Evil in the section of the Autobiographies published in 1922 and made explicit the symbolist element in his theory; that is, he described the relationship of the Vision of Evil to the Anima Mundi and indicated the place of the mask in this theory.

> There are, indeed, personifying spirits that we had best call but Gates and Gate-keepers, because through their dramatic power they bring our souls to crisis, to Mask and Image, caring not a straw whether we be Juliet going to her wedding, or Cleopatra to her death; for in their eyes nothing has weight but passion. . . . They have but one purpose, to bring their chosen man to the greatest obstacle he may confront without despair. They contrived Dante's banishment, and snatched away his Beatrice, and thrust Villon into the arms of harlots, and sent him to gather cronies at the foot of the gallows, that Dante and Villon might through passion become conjoint to their buried selves, turn all to Mask and Image, and so be phantoms in their own eyes. . . . In a few in whom we recognize supreme masters of tragedy, the whole contest is brought into the circle of their beauty. Such masters--Villon and Dante, let us say--would not, when they speak through their art, change their luck; yet they are mirrored in all the suffering of desire.[33]

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[32] Autobiographies, p. 522.

[33] Ibid., pp. 272-73.

The evil that Dante and Villon confronted, the crisis to which the Gate-keepers or spirits from the Anima Mundi led them, caused in their lives loss, but in their art the creation of the ideal, for the loss forced them to become united with their instinctive selves, with the Anima Mundi. Yeats formerly had described the way in which Dante's daemon revealed to him the ideal he was to seek;[34] in 1922 he added to that conception a third element, the Image, the poetic construct created as a result of a desire for an ideal. In A Vision Yeats added a fourth element, Creative Mind, to complete the description of the relationship of man to the Anima Mundi and to the various parts of his own being.[35] Yeats, through his study of thirteenth- through sixteenth-century poets, especially of Dante and Villon, developed the theory that he presented in his major metaphysical work, A Vision.

Yeats also made clear in the Autobiographies that men such as Dante and Villon, who could present in their art this passion and this conflict, attained the unity of being that he had previously stated was Dante's study.[36]

> The two halves of their [Villon's and Dante's] nature are so completely joined that they seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens, being at the same instant predestinate and free, creation's very self. We gaze at such men in awe, because we gaze not at a work of art, but at the

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[34]See Chapter III, pp. 97-98, for a discussion of Dante's daemon.

[35]See Chapter III, pp. 125-28, for Yeats's delineation of Creative Mind.

[36]See Chapter III, p. 102.

> re-creation of the man through that art, the birth of a new species of man, and it may even seem that the hairs of our heads stand up, because that birth, that re-creation, is from terror. Had not Dante and Villon understood that their fate wrecked what life could not rebuild, had they cherished any species of optimism, they could but have found a false beauty, and suffered no change at all, or but changed as do the wild creatures, or from Devil well to Devil sick, and so round the clock.[37]

Dante and Villon had the union of intellect and emotion that Yeats considered indicative of subjectivity and of unity of being,[38] and this union, he concluded, was arrived at through terror, through loss, through evil. Moreover, the men who passed through this Vision of Evil and attained unity of being were, for Yeats, the most perfect type of man and they created the most perfect art.

Yeats's preoccupation with the Vision of Evil persisted as he wrote "The Trembling of the Veil," for he enlarged the scope of the discussion to include his contemporaries, the poets of the Savoy, as well as John Donne.

> Certain of my generation delighted in writing with an unscientific partiality for subjects long forbidden. Yet is it not most important to explore especially what has been long forbidden, and to do this not only "with the highest moral purpose," like the followers of Ibsen, but gaily, out of sheer mischief, or sheer delight in that play of the mind? Donne could be as metaphysical as he pleased, and yet never seemed unhuman and hysterical as Shelley often does, because he could be as physical as he pleased; and besides who will thirst for the metaphysical, who have a parched tongue, if we cannot recover the Vision of Evil.

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[37] Autobiographies, p. 273.

[38] See Chapter III, pp. 138-39.

> I have felt in certain early works of my own which I have long abandoned, and here and there in the work of others of my generation, a slight, sentimental sensuality which is disagreeable, and does not exist in the work of Donne, let us say, because he, being permitted to say what he pleased, was never tempted to linger, or rather to pretend that we can linger, between spirit and sense. How often had I heard men of my time talk of the meeting of spirit and sense, yet there is no meeting but only change upon the instant, and it is by the perception of a change, like the sudden "blacking out" of the lights of the stage, that passion creates its most violent sensation.[39]

This opposition of the physical to the spiritual, an almost Manichean conception, and this insistence on the necessity of the opposition for true metaphysical perception, shows Yeats's separation from the Pre-Raphaelitism that he claimed as the early influence upon him. Whereas Rossetti, as Pater interpreted him, considered that "the material and the spiritual are fused and blent," or, in Rossetti's own words, that "Love [knows not] her body from her soul,"[40] Yeats in 1922 claimed precisely the opposite: the spiritual and the physical are completely distinct, yet man must know fully the physical, the "forbidden," in order to desire the spiritual, the metaphysical. Or, as Yeats said of Donne in a letter to Grierson, "His pedantry and his obscenity--[are] the rock and the loam of his Eden."[41] In Yeats's own poetry this conception was most fully explored later in the Crazy Jane poems, in which the physical

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[39] Autobiographies, p. 326.

[40] Walter Pater, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti," Appreciations (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1918), pp. 212-13.

[41] The Letters . . . , p. 570.

and metaphysical aspects of love are delineated. Primarily from his study of Dante, Yeats developed his philosophical ideas on the relationship of evil to great art.

Besides studying these poets and developing metaphysical theories from this study, Yeats during this period displayed a familiarity with Renaissance political figures. This familiarity is shown through Yeats's Renaissance imagery and allusions in the second book of the Autobiographies, "Four Years" (1921). He had read The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini by this time, for in speaking of Oscar Wilde's inability to satisfy his ambitions, Yeats compared him "with Benvenuto Cellini who, coming after Michael Angelo, found nothing left to do so satisfactory as to turn bravo and quarrel with the man who broke Michael Angelo's nose."[42] Subsequently Yeats compared Wilde with his image of the archetypal man of fifteenth-century Italy:

> I think he seemed to us, baffled as we were by youth, or by infirmity, a triumphant figure, and to some of us a figure from another age, an audacious Italian fifteenth-century figure.[43]

Wilde's combination of sexual immorality, artifice, audacity and genius was for Yeats typical of the men of the Italian Renaissance, and he admired this combination. Similarly, he compared Henley's desire to organize the government of Ireland with Cosimo de' Medici's culturally oriented government: "He

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[42]Autobiographies, p. 139.

[43]Ibid., p. 131.

[Henley] dreamed of a tyranny, but it was that of Cosimo de' Medici."[44] Moreover, in a discussion of the mask, Yeats described Napoleon in terms of the Italian military leaders:

> Napoleon was never of his own time, as some naturalistic writers and painters bid all men be, but had some Roman emperor's image in his head and some condottiere's blood in his heart.[45]

This type of reference to the Renaissance is to be found also in Yeats's Senate speeches of the following year. In a speech advocating a particular costume for the Irish judges, Yeats used the Papal Court as the standard by which the Irish Supreme Court and the High Court should guide their actions:

> The designs for the Supreme Court and for the High Court which the Government possess are, in my belief, designs of great dignity, great beauty and simplicity. They would do honour to any country, and in adopting them the country would do as well as the Vatican did when it permitted Michael Angelo to set aside one does not know what historical traditions, to design the costumes of the Papal Guards.[46]

Yeats's attitude toward sexual irregularity in men of genius similarly is indicated by his reference to the immorality of the Renaissance:

> I do not think that the memories of these great men of genius [Parnell, O'Connell and Nelson] were swept away by their sexual immoralities. I still regard them as men of genius, who conferred great gifts on their country. They do

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[44] Ibid., p. 126.

[45] Ibid., p. 152.

[46] The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, ed. Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 127.

> not cease to be men of genius because of these irregularities. To explain the extreme immorality of my mind a little further, I do not think there is any statesman in Europe who would not have gladly accepted the immorality of the renaissance if he could be assured of his country possessing the genius of the renaissance. Genius has its virtue, and it is only a small blot on its escutcheon if it is sexually irregular.[47]

Like Nietzsche or Balzac, Yeats evaluated men and the Renaissance in terms of the energy and genius to be found within them not in terms of conventional morality.

Yeats's ideal of Renaissance life, however, was still the courtly existence described by Castiglione. Although references to The Book of the Courtier are infrequent in the Autobiographies, Yeats continued to use Castiglione as a guide to an aristocratic way of life, and he examined in detail the relationship between the life of the artist and the life of the aristocrat:

> Every day I notice some new analogy between the long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our heads always that form of society aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands, and when we are happiest we have some little post in the house of Duke Frederick where we watch the proud dreamless world with humility, knowing that our knowledge is invisible and that at the first breath of ambition our dreams vanish.[48]

Yeats's longing for the consciously perfected way of life that once existed at Urbino, for a life in which art or craftsmanship

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[47] Ibid., p. 102.

[48] Autobiographies, pp. 473-74.

guided all endeavors, was reflected also in his record of his impressions of the Swedish court, where he received the Nobel Prize. That court reminded him of Coole Park and the noble household of Lady Gregory, a modern counterpart of the Duchess:

> . . . my memory had gone back twenty years to that summer when a friend [Lady Gregory] read out to me at the end of each day's work Castiglione's commendations and descriptions of that court of Urbino, where youth for certain brief years imposed upon drowsy learning the discipline of its joy, and I remembered a cry of Bembo's made years after, "Would that I were a shepherd that I might look down daily upon Urbino."[49]

The conjunction in Yeats's thought of the aristocratic life displayed in The Book of the Courtier and the noble mode of existence upheld by Lady Gregory is implied in this passage, as it is in Yeats's reaction to the news of Lady Gregory's sickness: "All Wednesday I heard Castiglione's phrase ringing in my memory, 'Never be it spoken without tears, the Duchess, too, is dead.'"[50] Yeats found his ideal of a traditional and cultivated society set forth in Castiglione's work and that ideal remained a continuing influence on his thought.

Not only did Yeats develop his metaphysics and his conception of an aristocratic life in The Autobiographies; he also delineated further his cyclical interpretation of history, particularly of literary movements. In 1921, speaking of the ideas he had formulated in 1887 to 1891, he reiterated his

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[49] Ibid., p. 545.

[50] Ibid., p. 478.

"conviction that the world was now but a bundle of fragments," and, using Dante as the point of departure, showed the degeneration of the arts since his time.

> . . . I delighted in every age where poet and artist confined themselves gladly to some inherited subject-matter known to the whole people, for I thought that in man and race alike there is something called "Unity of Being," using that term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the Convito to a perfectly proportioned human body.
> . . . . . .
> Had not Europe shared one mind and heart until both mind and heart began to break into fragments a little before Shakespeare's birth? Music and verse began to fall apart when Chaucer robbed verse of its speed that he might give it greater meditation, though for another generation or so minstrels were to sing his lengthy elaborated Troilus and Criseyde; painting parted from religion in the Renaissance that it might study effects of tangibility undisturbed; while, that it might characterise, where it had once personified, it renounced in our own age, all that inherited subject-matter which we have named poetry.[51]

This conception of the degeneration of unity of being since the time of Dante was in evidence earlier in Yeats's work, but it was not combined with the other themes, which also were mentioned separately before. Dante's unity of being; the subsequent fragmentation of religious belief; the separation in literature of music and verse, in painting of religion and technique; and the change in drama from the portrayal of personality to the portrayal of character--these elements of Yeats's conception of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries are for the first time mentioned together.

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[51] Autobiographies, pp. 190-91.

In "The Tragic Generation" (1922) Yeats continued his delineation of the Renaissance with more precise historical dating than previously, and he included painting as a salient example of his theory:

> Somewhere around 1450, though later in some parts of Europe by a hundred years or so, and in some earlier, men attained to personality in great numbers, "Unity of Being," and became like a "perfectly proportioned human body," and as men so fashioned held places of power, their nations had it too, prince and ploughman sharing that thought and feeling. What afterward showed for rifts and cracks were there already, but imperious impulse held all together. Then the scattering came, the seeding of the poppy, bursting of pea-pod, and for a time personality seemed but the stronger for it. Shakespeare's people make all things serve their passion, and that passion is for the moment the whole energy of their being--birds, beasts, men, women, landscape, society, are but symbols and metaphors, nothing is studied in itself, the mind is a dark well, no surface, depth only. The men that Titian painted, the men that Jongsen painted, even the men of Van Dyck, seemed at moments like great hawks at rest. . . . There, all was an energy flowing outward from the nature itself; here, all is the anxious study and slight deflection of external force; there man's mind and body were predominantly subjective; here all is objective, using those words not as philosophy uses them, but as we use them in conversation.
>
> The bright part of the moon's disk, to adopt the symbolism of a certain poem, is subjective mind, and the dark, objective mind. The mid-renaissance could but approximate to the full moon "for there's no human life at the full or the dark," but we may attribute to the next three nights of the moon the men of Shakespeare, of Titian, of Strozzi, and of Van Dyck, and watch them grow more reasonable, more orderly, less turbulent, as the nights pass.[52]

The dating of Unity of Being at 1450-1550 as well as the description of Renaissance figures in terms of their location

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[52] Ibid., pp. 291-92.

in the phases of the moon indicates that by 1922 Yeats had already formulated the system of A Vision in some detail even though the first version of the work was not published until 1925. The phase of the full moon, or what Yeats subsequently called the Fifteenth Phase, the phase in which man attains most perfect beauty, is placed in the Renaissance.

In a later passage in the Autobiographies Yeats further described the unity of "supreme art" and mentioned again the individualism that for him characterized the later Renaissance.

> Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned. The revolt of individualism came because the tradition had become degraded, or rather because a spurious copy had been accepted in its stead. Classical morality--not quite natural in Christianised Europe--dominated this tradition at the Renaissance, and passed from Milton to Wordsworth and to Arnold, always growing more formal and empty until it became a vulgarity in our time--just as classical forms passed on from Raphael to the Academicians. But the anarchic revolt is coming to an end, and the arts are about to restate the traditional morality.[53]

Yeats's conception of the cyclical progression of the arts from Dante's time to his own era was complete, and he included also a prophecy of the resurgence of an art based on religious and heroic truth, as were his own poetry and drama. He did not extend the cycle, however, to include the arts of civilizations preceding the thirteenth century. The completed cyclical interpretation of history was reserved for A Vision.

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[53] Ibid., pp. 490.

To exemplify the change that occurred in the world at the time of the Renaissance, the change from subjectivity to objectivity, Yeats referred to Shakespeare, again identifying Shakespeare's mind with the character of Hamlet:

> Shakespeare himself foreshadowed a symbolic change, that is a change in the whole temperament of the world, for though he called his Hamlet "fat" and even "scant of breath," he thrust between fingers agile rapier and dagger.[54]

Hamlet's fatness and lack of breath, the qualities that Gertrude mentions as the final duel between Hamlet and Laertes proceeds, Yeats found indicative of the meditative quality of Hamlet that typifies the unity and subjectivity, the "passionate reverie," of the Middle Ages. Hamlet's rapier and dagger are representative of the action of the objective world, the world of individualism and anarchic activity, of political factions breaking the cultural cohesion of the Catholic state. For Yeats, Shakespeare, through the figure of Hamlet, evinced the fragmentation of the world, the coming deterioration of that unity of being which he believed was characteristic of the early Renaissance.

In A Vision Yeats formulated not only the details of the cultural cycle from Dante to 1927, the outlines of which he had already delineated, but also the entire pattern of cycles from 2000 B.C. to 1927 A.D. The period from Dante to 1927, however, provided the basic pattern for the other periods: civilization moves towards unity of being, a spiritual unity,

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[54] Ibid., p. 142.

and away from it again. Before delineating these cycles Yeats first examined the cycles of the human soul as it passes from life to death and back to life. Although he used the occult tradition as the main source of this metempsychotic progression, in A Vision he indicated that his predecessor and model for this cosmology was Dante.

In the introduction to the first version of A Vision (1925) Yeats made explicit his objective in writing the work and stated that his models were the Greeks and Dante:

> I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul's. The Greeks certainly had such a system, and Dante--though Boccaccio thought him a better partisan and therefore a modern abstract man--and I think no man since.[55]

In A Vision Yeats was seeking to create a philosophical or rather mythic system[56] in which he, like Dante, could depict the movement of the soul after death, as well as its transformations during life. With modesty, however, he disclaimed his ability to construct a system comparable to that of Dante:

> . . . when I examine the life after death and compare it with this life I shall symbolize each state as one half of a double cone for I have neither the knowledge nor the talent for an analysis which would approach the Divine Comedy in complexity.[57]

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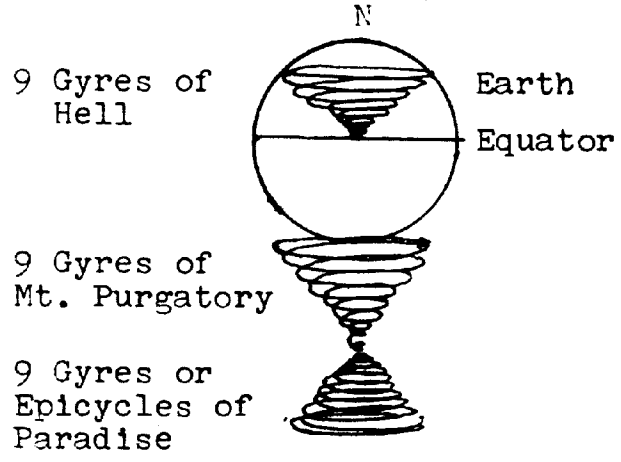
[55]A Vision (London: Privately printed for Subscribers only by T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1925), p. xi.

[56]As Yeats stated in a letter to Olivia Shakespear, "I have constructed a myth, but then one can believe in a myth--one only assents to philosophy." The Letters . . . , p. 781.

[57]A Vision (1925), p. 165.

A comparison of the two systems will indicate that Yeats was unduly humble.

In constructing the symbology of A Vision Yeats used a variation on Dante's geometrical system of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, although there are other influences as well. Dante used the basic figure of the gyre,[58] although in Hell and Paradise the term means a circle rather than a spiral as it does in Yeats's terminology and in Dante's description of Purgatory. A diagram of Dante's gyres is as follows:



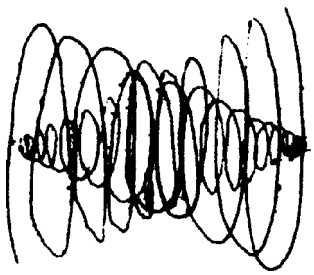
In this system Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are composed of nine separate gyres or rings, or, in Paradise, of epicycles.[59] In Yeats's system, on the other hand, there are twelve gyres in a cone, and the two cones, one primary or objective, the other antithetical or subjective, are intersecting. Moreover, they can be cross-sectioned to show the phases of the moon.[60]

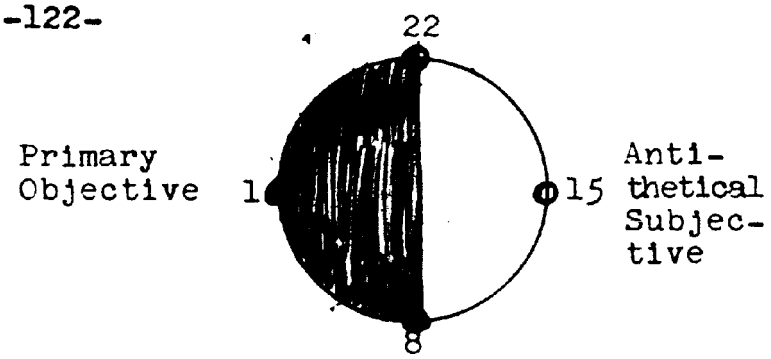
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[58]Dante's word is "giro," which is translated as "gyre" or "circle."

[59]Although Dante used gyres or wheels in Hell and Purgatory, in Paradise he placed the epicycles that Plato described in the Timaeus.

[60]A Vision (New York: Macmillan Co., 1961), pp. 72, 81.





Although diagrammatically Yeats's system may appear more simple than Dante's, an explication of the function of the gyres reveals that it is far more intricate.

First, Dante's system deals only with life after death; Yeats's gyres include both incarnate and discarnate existence. Second, Dante's cosmology depicts a largely static state: a soul is placed in one of the gyres of Hell or Paradise, or it moves up Mt. Purgatory; Yeats's symbology has continuous movement along the gyres to the point of interchange between objective and subjective, and then the movement back.[61] Moreover,

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[61]Yeats's clearest explanation of the gyres is found in the Notes to his poetry. "The figure while the soul is in the body, or suffering from the consequences of that life, is frequently drawn as a double cone, the narrow end of each cone being in the centre of the broad end of the other. It had its origin from a straight line which represents, now time, now emotion, now subjective life, and a plane at right angles to this line which represents, now space, now intellect, now objective life; while it is marked out by two gyres which represent the conflict, as it were, of plane and line, by two movements, which circle about a centre because a movement outward on the plane is checked by and in turn checks a movement onward upon the line, and the circling is always narrowing or spreading, because one movement or other is always moving outward into the objective world or inward into itself; and this movement is double because the human soul would not be conscious were it not suspended between contraries, the greater the contrast the more intense the consciousness. The man, in whom the movement inward is stronger than the movement outward, the man who sees all reflected within himself, the subjective man, reaches the narrow end of a gyre at death, for death is always, they contend, even when it seems the result of accident, preceded by an intensification of the subjective life; and has a moment of revelation immediately after death, a revelation which they

Yeats interchangeably used a wheel with the twenty-eight phases of the moon, half objective, half subjective, as a cross-section of the gyres at any one point. Each phase represents an incarnate and a discarnate period of existence. Third, in Dante's work each ring or gyre represents one characteristic sin, vice, or virtue; Yeats's system has a four part division of interacting characteristics in each phase: during incarnation, the Faculties--Will, Mask, Creative Mind, and Body of Fate; during discarnation, the Principles--Husk, Passionate Body, Spirit, and Celestial Body. Fourth, in Dante's system the only souls to change their condition are those in Purgatory moving towards Paradise; in Yeats's system each soul during life moves through the twenty-eight phases of the moon, and after death through six states: The Vision of the Blood Kindred; the Return, the Dreaming Back (reliving of emotional events), and the Phantasmagoria (exhausting of emotion); the Shiftings (purification of good and evil); the Marriage or Beatitude (complete equilibrium); Purification; and Foreknowledge (acceptance of the vision of the next incarnate life). Moreover,

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describe as his being carried into the presence of all his dead kindred, a moment whose objectivity is exactly equal to the subjectivity of death. The objective man on the other hand, whose gyre moves outward, receives at this moment the revelation, not of himself seen from within, for that is impossible to objective man, but of himself as if he were somebody else. This figure is true also of history, for the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction" (W. B. Yeats, "Notes," The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats [New York: Macmillan Co., 1957], pp. 824-25.

each phase of the moon represents also one period of incarnate and discarnate life in each soul's progress. Twenty-eight such phases constitute one month of 2,000 years, that is, one Great Wheel; twelve such months or wheels constitute a Great Year of 26,000 years. A soul can escape this continuous movement only through the aid of the Teaching Spirits of the Thirteenth Cone or Sphere. With their aid, the soul may enter the Thirteenth Sphere, escape from birth and death, and attain a state comparable to Nirvana.

Thus, although Dante and Yeats both used gyres to depict their metaphysical conceptions, Dante's system is primarily Christian, Platonic and static, while Yeats's system is Eastern, occult and dynamic. Yeats surpassed in complexity the symbology of his master, Dante, but Yeats constructed only the skeleton of the system in A Vision and used only parts of it in his poems and plays. He did not embody his construct in an epic poem as did Dante.

Besides seeking to emulate Dante's creation of a symbology, Yeats also in A Vision used Dante as the example of a man who has attained unity of being:

> He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest. For him fate and freedom are not to be distinguished; he is no longer bitter, he may even love tragedy like those "who love the gods and withstand them"; such men are able to bring all that happens, as well as all that they desire, into an emotional and intellectual synthesis and so to possess not the Vision of Good only but that of Evil. They are described as coming after death into dark and into light,

> whereas primary men, who do not receive revelation by conflict, are in dark or in light. In the Convito Dante speaks of his exile, and the gregariousness it thrust upon him, as a great misfortune for such as he; and yet as poet he must have accepted, not only that exile, but his grief for the death of Beatrice as that which made him Daimonic, not a writer of poetry alone like Guido Cavalcanti.[62]

The man who is able to synthesize the conflicts presented by his environment, the inevitable loss, and accept the Vision of Evil as well as of Good, is the one who, Yeats believed, comes into dark and into light, who escapes the alternation of lunar or antithetical dark and solar or primary light, who "sinks in on that Whole [the Thirteenth Sphere] where the contraries are united, the antinomies resolved."[63] Dante is the prime example of the man who, through the help of his Teaching Spirit, Love, attained a state comparable to Nirvana, who therefore ceased the movement through the gyres.

The phase of the moon in which this Unity of Being is possible is the Seventeenth Phase, the phase of Dante, a Daimonic Man. The phase is delineated in terms of the four Faculties, which are Yeats's completed schematization of the interaction of man with his universe, a schematization that was begun in Discoveries and further developed in Per Amica Silentia Lunae. In A Vision Yeats first defined the Faculties in terms applicable to one incarnation: Will, the Is; Mask, the Ought (or that which should be); Creative Mind, thought or

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[62] A Vision (1925), pp. 28-29.

[63] A Vision (1961), p. 89.

the Knower or imagination; and Body of Fate, the object of thought or the Known.[64] Subsequently, however, he expanded the reference to explicitly include all incarnations through which the "ultimate self" of an individual has moved: the Will is the "normal ego [shaped] out of its memory of all the events of his present life, whether consciously remembered or not"; the Mask "or object of desire or idea of the good, [is shaped] out of [the ultimate self's] memory of the events of his past incarnations"; the Creative Mind is shaped "from its memory of ideas--or universals--displayed by actual men in past lives, or their spirits between lives"; and the Body of Fate, "the series of events forced upon him from without, is shaped out of the Daimon's memory of the events of his past incarnations."[65] These Faculties might be summarized as: Eros, the personal ideal, the universal ideas, and the external world as it has existed and continues to exist, exerting an influence on the individual.

In describing the relationship of the four Faculties to one another in a man of Phase Seventeen, Yeats chose Dante as one of the main examples. The Will in this phase is that of the Daimonic Man, whom Yeats called such "because Unity of Being, and consequent expression of Daimonic thought, is now more easy than at any other phase." The mental images of the Daimonic Man

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[64] Ibid., p. 73.

[65] Ibid., p. 83.

> now flow, change flutter, cry out, or mix into something else; but without . . . breaking and bruising one another, for Phase 17, the central phase of its triad, is without frenzy. The Will is falling asunder, but without explosion and noise. The separated fragments seek images rather than ideas, and these the intellect . . . must synthesize in vain, drawing with its compass-point a line that shall but represent the outline of a bursting pod.[66]

The Mask that this fragmenting Will seeks is from Phase Three. In this phase man may permit

> senses and subconscious nature to dominate intellect. . . . Seen by lyrical poets, of whom so many have belonged to the fantastic Phase 17, the man of this phase becomes an Image where simplicity and intensity are united, he seems to move among yellowing corn or under overhanging grapes. Of what else did Bembo think when he cried, "Would that I were a shepherd that I might look daily down upon Urbino'? Imagined in some antithetical mind, seasonal change and bodily sanity seem images of lasting passion and the body's beauty.[67]

Or, as Yeats described the images, the Mask, in his delineation of Phase Seventeen:

> This Mask may represent intellectual or sexual passion; seem some Ahasuerus or Athanase; be the gaunt Dante of the Divine Comedy; its corresponding Image may be Shelley's Venus Urania, Dante's Beatrice, or even the Great Yellow Rose of the Paradiso.[68]

The Mask of Phase Seventeen is some simple, sensuous, yet ideal image, the opposite of the complex individual himself. The Creative Mind, the thought or universal idea, coming from Phase

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[66] Ibid., p. 141.

[67] Ibid., p. 109.

[68] Ibid., p. 141.

Thirteen,[69] is "complete intellectual unity, Unity of Being apprehended through the images of the mind,"[70] while the Body of Fate, or environment past and present, is "loss." Thus the Daimonic Man, with his variable nature, seeks simplicity or unity of being, for this unification through some one image is what is most difficult for him. This conception is, as was usual with Yeats, somewhat Platonic: the will, or Eros, desire, leads man to seek an idea of the good or of some beauty, which then gives substance to his life, or, for Yeats, to his art.

This analysis of the Daimonic Man is, in effect, an expansion of Yeats's previous statements about Dante. To the earlier delineation of the Mask and the effect of the environment--loss of solitude and of Beatrice--Yeats merely added a fourth element, the Creative Mind, the imagination, which, like the Mask, aids in effecting unity of being. Thus, although Yeats's Instructors may have given him esoteric doctrine through the automatic writing of Georgie Yeats, this type of analysis of an individual, especially of Dante, was evident in essays Yeats wrote before his marriage.

Yeats's description of Shakespeare's phase, Phase Twenty, is also reminiscent of his earlier discussions. The phase is one

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[69]The simplest method of finding the various faculties is, once the phase of the Will is known, to find on the Great Wheel of phases, the phase directly opposite the Will, that is, the Mask; then the phases three phases to the left of the Will and of the Mask are Creative Mind and Body of Fate. Lines drawn connecting these phases give the hourglass shape which Yeats used to discuss the cultural movements of history.

[70]A Vision (1961), p. 129.

> of the breaking up and subdivision of the being. The energy is always seeking those facts which being separable can be seen more clearly, or expressed more clearly, but when there is truth to phase there is a similitude of the old unity, or rather a new unity, which is not a Unity of Being but a unity of the creative act. He no longer seeks to unify what is broken through conviction, by imposing those very convictions upon himself and others, but by projecting a dramatisation or many dramatisations. He can create, just in that degree in which he can see these dramatisations as separate from himself, and yet as an epitome of his whole nature.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> His phase is called "The Concrete Man," because the isolation of parts . . . is overcome . . . ; subordination of parts is achieved by the discovery of concrete relations.[71]

This analysis is a further explication of Yeats's statement of 1901 that Shakespeare is a "fragmentary symbolist," one who is mixed with "the whole spectacle of the world," and who wrote at a time when the unity of the world was falling asunder. Unification through dramatization is a consistent theme in Yeats's analysis of Shakespeare as a man and as an artist. Moreover, Yeats again attributed to Shakespeare's art personality rather than character:

> There is a delight in concrete images that . . . reveal through complex suffering the general destiny of man. He must, however, to express this suffering, personify rather than characterise, create not observe that multitude, which is but his Mask as in a multiplying mirror, for the primary is not yet strong enough to substitute for the lost Unity of Being that of the external world perceived as fact.[72]

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[71] Ibid., p. 152.

[72] Ibid.

In this reference to the multiplying mirror of dramatization that creates multitudes Yeats was echoing again his earlier work, in this case "The Emotion of Multitude." The delineation of Shakespeare as a Concrete Man summarizes Yeats's former comments on Shakespeare--the fragmentation of the world in his time, his reliance on concrete detail or the spectacle of the world, his portrayal of personality, and his summoning up the emotion of multitude--and explains them by the phase of the moon.

After describing the movement of the individual soul through the various antithetical and primary phases, Yeats in the fifth book of A Vision, "Dove or Swan," indicated the movement of civilizations through these phases. Two intersecting gyres represent the interaction of the primary--dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peaceful--and the antithetical--expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh--qualities.[73] The movements of the gyres produce the rise and fall of various civilizations:

> Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound, and it amuses one to remember that before Phidias, and his westward-moving art, Persia fell, that when full moon came round again, amid eastward-moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and that at the outset of our westward-moving Renaissance, Byzantium fell; all things dying each other's life, living each other's death.[74]

As the antithetical gyre increases, the primary gyre decreases; thus civilizations partake of the characteristics of one or

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[73] Ibid., p. 263.

[74] Ibid., p. 270.

the other tincture, depending on which is dominant. Yeats's schematization of these periods is complex however, for there are gyres within gyres. For example, the Christian era of 2,000 years--1 A.D. to 2,000 A.D.--should be visualized as a wheel or gyre, but within that 2,000 year span are two smaller wheels, each of 1,000 years. The Fifteenth Phase of each smaller wheel is Phase Eight or Phase Twenty-Two of the larger wheel. Thus the Fifteenth Phase of a smaller wheel, itself antithetical, is contained within the segment of a larger wheel that is either primary or antithetical. This description of antithetical-in-primary or antithetical-in-antithetical becomes significant in Yeats's later comparison of Shakespeare's and Sophocles' works as well as in his choice of Byzantium rather than Renaissance Italy as the supernatural city.

In describing the movement of the antithetical millenium in the primary dispensation Yeats delineated in his own symbolist terms the phenomenon of the Renaissance. Since he showed the gradual rise of antithetical or subjective elements as far back as 1005 A.D. and followed their growing ascendency to the fifteenth century of the Italian Renaissance, his system can be placed in the modern reaction to the Burckhardtian formulation of the Renaissance. Yeats, like the others in that group, found the beginnings of the Renaissance in the Middle Ages.

The earliest manifestations of these characteristics he placed in the years 1005 to 1180. Like the nineteenth-century historians, Symonds, for example, Yeats considered

the crusades and the romances signs of the coming change in civilization, but he, unlike them, believed these phenomena were representative of a love of physical beauty and of passion, always, for Yeats, focal elements of the Renaissance. The crusaders, he stated, learned from the Arabs the sanctity of beauty, and this sanctity, when it had "come back from the first Crusade or up from Arabian Spain or half Asiatic Provence and Sicily, . . . created romance."[75] This romance element in turn created the Arthurian legends. "What forgotten reverie, what initiation, it may be, separated wisdom from the monastery and, creating Merlin, joined it to passion?"[76] Wisdom became secular, Parsifal prayed to his absent love instead of to God or the Virgin,[77] and the antithetical millenium had begun. For Yeats, the architecture also revealed the change, but subtly: he saw "in Romanesque the first movement to a secular Europe, but a movement so instinctive that as yet there is no antagonism to the old condition."[78]

In the Gothic architecture of the next three phases, 1180 A.D. to 1250 A.D., Yeats found not "as did the nineteenth-century historians, ever looking for the image of their own age, the creation of a new communal freedom, but a creation of authority, a suppression of that freedom though with its consent."[79] The cathedrals and the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas

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[75] A Vision (1961), p. 286.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., p. 287.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

Yeats considered to be revelatory of the moral synthesis that sought to control "the general anarchy."[80] It was this anarchy, produced by the movement of the gyres, but for which Yeats gave no examples, that brought about the conditions that "created modern civilization."[81]

Yeats's descriptions of Phases Eight to Eighteen, 1250 A.D. to 1680 A.D., evince the culmination of his previous ideas of the Renaissance. In this section of A Vision his cyclical conception of the movement of history, his enthusiasm for Renaissance art and literature, and his symbolist's search for elements of the supernatural in art, reach their final major statement in his prose works. The same configuration appears also in his later poems.

The decisive beginning of the modern age Yeats placed in Phase Eight, for from 1250 to 1300

> chivalry and Christendom having proved insufficient, the King mastered the one, the Church the other, reversing the achievement of Constantine, for it was now the mitre and the crown that protected the Cross. I prefer, however, to find my example of the first victory of personality where I have more knowledge. Dante in the Convito mourns for solitude, lost through poverty, and writes the first sentence of modern autobiography, and in the Divina Commedia imposes his own personality upon a system and a phantasmagoria hitherto inpersonal; the King everywhere has found his kingdom.[82]

Referring again to Dante's manifestation of personality, Yeats showed the congruence of this historical phenomenon with the

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[80] Ibid., p. 288.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., pp. 288-89.

loss of naive faith in the Christian religion and with the beginning of antithetical individualism. Dante was, for Yeats, the first modern man.

The next three phases cover the period from 1300 to 1380. The unity of Christendom, which was almost broken in the previous phase, still maintained itself and was characterized by

> painting from Giotto to Fra Angelico, [by] the Chronicles of Froissart and [by] the elaborate canopy upon the stained glass of windows. Every old tale is alive, Christendom still unbroken; painter and poet alike find new ornament for the tale; they feel the charm of everything but the more poignantly because that charm is archaistic; they smell a pot of dried roses . . . The public certainty that sufficed for Dante and St. Thomas has disappeared and there is yet no private certainty. Is it that the human mind now longs for solitude, for escape from all that hereditary splendour, and does not know what ails it; or is it that the Image itself encouraged by the new technical method, the flexible brush stroke instead of the unchanging cube of glass, and wearied of its part in a crowded ghostly dance, longs for a solitary human body? That body comes in the period from 1380 to 1450 and is discovered by Masaccio, and by Chaucer who is partly of the old gyre, and by Villon who is wholly of the new.[83]

The period from 1380 to 1450, Phases Twelve, Thirteen, and Fourteen, is characterized by man's realization of himself as an entity unsupported by the religious faith that bound together the men of the Middle Ages in a common belief and humanity. Thus Villon, for Yeats, was a man "in whom the human soul for the first time stands alone before a death ever present to imagination, without help from a Church that is fading

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[83] Ibid., p. 289.

away."[84] Man has attained solitude, has begun to experience "antithetical sadness."

The increase of the antithetical, subjective tincture brings about, however, the Fifteenth Phase, in which, as Yeats described it, perfect beauty is achieved.

> Contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has bodily form, and every bodily form is loved. This love knows nothing of desire, for desire implies effort, and though there is still separation from the loved object, love accepts the separation as necessary to its own existence . . . Its [being's] own body possesses the greatest possible beauty, being indeed the body which the soul will permanently inhabit, when all its phases have been repeated according to the number alloted. . . . Even for the most perfect, there is a time of pain, a passage through a vision, where evil reveals itself in its final meaning.[85]

The emphasis in this passage, as in all of Yeats's prose during this period, is on contemplation, vision, reverie. His ideal is not passion or gesture, as it was in the preceding period from 1903 to 1915, but action or desire sublimated to a purely aesthetic contemplation of the object. His inclusion of evil as a preparation for this most perfect state of existence recalls his description of the function of the Vision of Evil in the lives and works of the great poets--Dante, Villon, Shakespeare; moreover, there is by implication an explanation of how Yeats himself fitted the Vision of Evil into his metaphysics. Loss, anarchy, war, "old civilizations put to the sword," are

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[84] Ibid., p. 298.

[85] Ibid., p. 136.

a necessary part of the preparation for an eventual perfection; they are, therefore, a part of "a passage through a vision," through Yeats's own A Vision of reality.

The Fifteenth Phase of the historical gyres encompasses the work of the philosophers and painters whom Yeats preferred, those whose works come as close to being or describing perfect beauty as can be attained during incarnation. This "Phase 15 of the Italian Renaissance" is the time of

> the breaking of the Christian synthesis as the corresponding period before Christ, the age of Phidias, was the breaking of Greek traditional faith. The first half [of this gyre] covers the principal activity of the Academy of Florence which formulated the reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity, which to Pope Julius meant that Greek and Roman Antiquity were as sacred as that of Judea, and like it "a vestibule of Christianity," meant to the mind of Dürer--a visitor to Venice during the movement of the gyre--that the human norm, discovered from the measurement of ancient statues, was God's first handiwork, that "perfectly proportioned human body" which had seemed to Dante Unity of Being symbolised.[86]

In the philosophy of Ficino and his students at the Academy of Florence, Yeats found the reconciliation of religions, the "universal" symbolism, that he, since 1897, had praised[87] and had attempted to achieve in his own writings. This reconciliation of religions, which Pater mentioned in The Renaissance, was for Yeats a manifestation of two guises of the "Divine Intellect" rather than of just one; hence the reconciliation of religions was an indication of the supernatural quality of

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[86] Ibid., p. 291.

[87] See Chapter I, pp. 49-50.

the Fifteenth Phase. Yeats also, in this passage, referred again to Dante's conception of Unity of Being, a unity portrayed by a perfect human body. This conception is Yeats's ideal during this contemplative period, and, in his final period, he transformed this vision of the perfectly proportioned human body into the model by which mankind could be regenerated, both physically and spiritually.

In choosing one particular Italian artist to illustrate this reconciliation of Christianity and paganism, Yeats again followed Pater's lead by selecting Botticelli, whom Pater was the first to appreciate fully.[88] Yeats, unlike Pater, was concerned, however, not with the Greek quality of Botticelli's art[89] but with its supernatural essence, which is representative of the Fifteenth Phase.

> Because the supernatural 15th Phase can never find direct human expression, being a supernatural incarnation, it impressed upon work and thought an element of strain and artifice, a desire to combine elements which may be incompatible, or which suggest by their combination something supernatural. Had some Florentine Platonist read to Botticelli Porphyry upon the Cave of the Nymphs? for I seem to recognize it in that curious cavern with a thatched roof over

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[88]Herbert Horne, whom Yeats considered the greatest authority on Botticelli, described "how largely this very essay [Pater's on Botticelli] has contributed towards the discovery of the unique place which Botticelli holds among the great masters of the Renaissance." (Herbert Horne, Alessandro Filipepi commonly called Sandro Botticelli painter of Florence [London: George Bell and Sons, 1908], p. viii.)

[89]Pater stated that "you will find that quaint design of Botticelli's a more direct inlet into the Greek temper than the works of the Greeks themselves even of the finest period." The Renaissance, p. 61.

> the nearer entrance to make it resemble the conventional manger, in his "nativity" in the National Gallery. Certainly the glimpse of forest trees, dim in the evening light, through the far entrance, and the deliberate strangeness everywhere, gives one an emotion of mystery which is new to painting.[90]

The supernatural element of the Fifteenth Phase, as revealed in Botticelli's painting, manifests itself in a sense of strain and artifice, comparable to that existing in man's attempt to reconcile religions. This attempt to bring to harmony diverse yet divine elements Yeats saw as the activity most closely approaching supernatural perfection. In Botticelli's painting, as Yeats saw it, the combination of Christian and Neoplatonic symbolism, a combination typical of the art of the Fifteenth Phase, and the mysterious strangeness of the scene, reveal that which is beyond man, give man a vision of intellectual beauty.

Yeats's concluding description of the Fifteenth Phase shows his own predilections in Renaissance artists and writers, and reveals clearly the Neoplatonic bias that underlies his work.

> Botticelli, Crivelli, Mantegna, Da Vinci, who fall within the period, make Masaccio and his school seem heavy and common by something we may call intellectual beauty or compare perhaps to that kind of bodily beauty which Castiglione called "the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul." Intellect and emotion, primary curiosity and the antithetical dream, are for the moment one. Since the rebirth of the secular intellect in the eleventh century, faculty has been separating from faculty, poetry from music, the worshipper from the worshipped, but all have remained within a common fading circle--Christendom--and so within the human soul. Image has

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[90] A Vision (1961), p. 292.

> been separated from image but always as an exploration of the soul itself; forms have been displayed in an always clear light, have been perfected by separation from one another till their link with one another and with common associations has been broken; but, Phase 15 past, these forms begin to jostle and fall into confusion, there is as it were a sudden rush and storm. In the mind of the artist a desire for power succeeds to that for knowledge, and this desire is communicated to the forms and to the onlooker.[91]

Man's most perfect attainment in art or theory is the "complete beauty" of the supernatural Fifteenth Phase, a beauty that unifies intellect and emotion, that brings the two halves of the soul, the antithetical and the primary, into a momentary unity. This beauty Yeats called "intellectual beauty," the quality he extolled during his first contemplative period in his prose and in the Rose poems. In this passage from A Vision Yeats concentrated on this Neoplatonic element in Castiglione's work--the conception of the body's mirroring the soul--rather than on the conception of sprezzatura that delighted him during his second period, that of action and gesture. Castiglione's Neoplatonic interpretation of bodily beauty Yeats identified with Dante's Unity of Being, which is a spiritual beauty embodied in a "perfectly proportioned human body." Thus Yeats in his description of the Fifteenth Phase not only praised the Renaissance writers' and artists' reconciliation of religions but also showed the underlying similarity between Dante, Christendom's leading poet, and those writers such as Castiglione who sought to unify two disparate religions.

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[91] Ibid.

After the ideal Fifteenth Phase, however, pure contemplation passes, in Yeats's schematization, into a desire for power. The next three phases include the time span from 1550 to 1650, during which time Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian painted,

> and the forms, as in Titian, awaken sexual desire--we had not desired to touch the forms of Botticelli or even of da Vinci--or they threaten us like those of Michael Angelo, and the painter himself handles his brush with a conscious facility or exultation . . . 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, and soon, asking less and less for himself, will make it a matter of pride to paint what he does not at all desire. I think Raphael almost of the earlier gyre--perhaps a transitional figure--but Michael Angelo, Rabelais, Aretino, Shakespeare, Titian--I associate with the mythopoeic and ungovernable beginning of the eighth gyre.[92]

Works of art, the phase of intellectual beauty once past, portray, in words or paint, fleshly beauty or personality. This interpretation of Michelangelo's painting is typical of Yeats's third period of thought, in which he, with his idealization of intellectual beauty, found Michelangelo's figures threatening. In Yeats's last period of development, as shown in "Under Ben Bulben," he changed his impression. Yeats may have derived his interpretation of Michelangelo's works as threatening from direct observation of the paintings and sculpture, or he may have been influenced indirectly by Michelet's description of the threatening quality of "The Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel, for either J. B. Yeats or Ezra Pound, both of whom

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[92] Ibid., pp. 293-94.

read Michelet,[93] might well have discussed his reaction to the work with W. B. Yeats. The other Renaissance figures Yeats mentioned as representative of these phases are ones in whom he found a mythopoeic, hence primitive, power.

Yeats commented further on Shakespeare in this description of the eighth gyre, and the analysis again recalls the earlier consideration of Shakespeare in "At Stratford-On-Avon."

> I see in Shakespeare a man in whom human personality, hitherto restrained by its dependence upon Christendom or by its own need for self-control, burst like a shell. Perhaps secular intellect, setting itself free after five hundred years of struggle, has made him the greatest of dramatists, and yet because an antithetical age alone could confer upon an art like his the unity of a painting or of a temple pediment, had the total works of Sophocles survived--they too born of a like struggle though with a different enemy--not think him the greatest. Do we not feel an unrest like that of travel itself when we watch those personages, more living than ourselves, amid so much that is irrelevant and heterogeneous, amid so much primary curiosity, when we are carried from Rome to Venice, from Egypt to Saxon England, or in the one play from Roman to Christian mythology?
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> Were he not himself of a later phase [Phase Twenty], were he of the 16th Phase like his age and so drunk with his own wine, he had not written plays at all, but as it is he finds his opportunity among a crowd of men and women who are still shaken by thought that passes from man to man in psychological contagion.[94]

As in the earlier essay, Yeats was concerned with the effect of the Zeitgeist on Shakespeare's art, but in A Vision he added

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[93] J. B. Yeats quoted from Michelet in J. B. Yeats: Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, p. 179. Pound's reading of Michelet is indicated by John Hamilton Edwards and William W. Vasee, Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 311.

[94] A Vision (1961), p. 294.

to his previous statements about the "breaking up [of] the old rhythms of life" an intricate metaphysical system that explains the causation as well as the patterns of historical change. The basic conception, however, was present in Yeats's thought in 1901.

After discussing Shakespeare, Yeats briefly analyzed Milton, who sought, too late, to return to "the synthesis of the Camera della **Segnatura** and the Sistine Chapel."[95] In Milton's work the pagan and Christian mythologies have fallen apart, and "his classical mythology is an artificial ornament"[96] not a manifestation of a supernatural reconciliation. The gyre, including Phases Sixteen, Seventeen, and Eighteen, finally "ebbs out in order and reason, the Jacobean poets succeed the Elizabethan, Cowley and Dryden the Jacobean as belief dies out."[97] Yeats concluded his delineation of the Renaissance by showing the final fading of antithetical creativity into reason and objectivity.

In this section of A Vision Yeats brought to culmination his cyclical vision of history, his study of the literary and artistic movements of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and his symbolist approach to artistic creations. Although he had treated these subjects separately even in essays written before the turn of the century, not until the publication

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[95] Ibid., p. 294.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., p. 295.

of A Vision did he unify these conceptions into a coherent symbology. The perfection of art that he discovered in the works of the Fifteenth Phase concluded his search for the supernatural in art and in literature. The Renaissance from 1450 to 1550 is significant as the period in which antithetical creativity reached its highest peak since the golden age of Greece.

The time from Dante to Shakespeare is the period around which Yeats developed a cyclical theory of history. He was most familiar with the literature of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries and of the nineteenth century, and primarily from his studies of these two periods he developed his conception of the deterioration of literature since the Renaissance. By analogy he then fitted other historical periods in similar patterns. His delineation of the period from Dante to Shakespeare in A Vision is longer and more detailed than his discussion of any other period: it is the core of "Dove and Swan" and of his historical conception. He, like the writers and historians of the nineteenth century found in the literature of the Renaissance the subjectivity that made it appear modern, and he, like them, found in the culture of the Renaissance a universal appreciation of art that was lacking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus Yeats followed the lead of the nineteenth-century historians in choosing the Renaissance as a cultural touchstone, but, unlike them, he extended the beginning of the modern age back as far as Dante. His cyclical vision of history had its genesis in his consideration of Renaissance creativity and the subsequent decline of the

arts, and his admiration for the creative works and for the metaphysical ideas of that period, particularly those of Dante and Castiglione, influenced his own art and thought, especially his conception of unity of being.

During this contemplative period of his development, Yeats returned to his early models, Spenser and Dante, as well as retaining his later admiration for Castiglione; and, like Dante, Yeats worked within the framework of a complex system of symbols. He progressively delineated, with ever-increasing intricacy of detail, his symbolist theory of the relationship between a work of art or literature and the supernatural: "Dove and Swan" was the result of this life-long study. The literary works of the period from Dante to Shakespeare were the inspiration and the examples for his metaphysical theory of artistic creation, and the Fifteenth Phase of our dispensation, the Italian Renaissance, contains the works of art that illustrate most perfectly the antithetical ideal, the ideal of intellectual beauty, that characterizes this period of Yeats's thought. A Vision marks the culmination of Yeats's study of the period from Dante to Shakespeare; his most significant references to that period are in the great poetry of his final years.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS REGENERATION; THE PERIOD FROM DANTE TO SHAKESPEARE AS A CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE IN YEATS'S POETRY: 1885-1939

The fruition of Yeats's study of the period from Dante to Shakespeare appears most brilliantly in his poetry. The same patterning is evident in the poetry as in the prose: from 1885 to 1903, the first period of contemplation, Spenser, Dante and Shakespeare were the most significant thirteenth- through sixteenth-century figures; from 1903 to 1915, the period of action, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson were Yeats's primary models; and from 1915 to 1938, the second period of contemplation, Dante and Spenser were again the major figures. Yeats's final period, that of regeneration, appears most notably in the last poems, 1938-1939, particularly in "Under Ben Bulben." Michelangelo is the major figure for this period. Thirteenth- through sixteenth-century writers, especially Dante and Castiglione, were the source of Yeats's conception of unity of being, and, conversely, he judged these writers, as well as all art and literature, in the light of this conception. In his poetry are found the results of his study. These results are evinced in two ways: in the poetry that Yeats modelled after the work of poets from Dante to Shakespeare, and in his references to various

thirteenth- through sixteenth-century poets, painters and fictional characters. These references are more significant in the body of Yeats's poetry than are the imitations of specific poems, for around such references he created some of his finest later poems.

The first literary evidence of Yeats's readings in literature from Dante to Shakespeare appeared in his early plays written "in imitation of Shelley and Edmund Spenser."[1] Although most of these early works were destroyed or remain unpublished, The Island of Statues (1885) gives adequate proof of the materials with which Yeats was working. The pastoral setting of the play as well as some of the characters was imitated from that in Spenser's "Shepheards Calendar." Spenser's theme of Colin Clout's unrequited love for his mistress was used by Yeats as a framework for the dramatic action of The Island of Statues. The opening scene of Yeats's play is a debate between two shepherds, Colin and Thernot, both of whom love the fair Naschina. Colin, like Spenser's Colin Clout, bewails his unrequited love, and both Yeats and Spenser supplemented the shepherds' despair by a melancholy setting: Colin Clout speaks of the "barrein ground, whome winters wrath hath wasted," the "naked trees" that have tears not blossoms, and the feeble sheep;[2] Yeats's

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[1] Autobiographies, p. 66.

[2] Edmund Spenser, "The Shepheardes Calender," The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 421. All quotations will be from this edition.

Colin refers to the owl that is present before dawn.[3] Spenser used the setting of winter, the time before the fulfillment of the warm months, while Yeats used the setting of the hours before dawn, before the arousal of life. Similarly, both poets presented contrasting themes through the words of the two shepherds. Yeats's shepherd Colin sings of "love and sorrow" and is answered by Thernot, who sings of "joy and love" as one existence. Thernot, as the shepherd whose mood opposes that of Colin, is like Thenot in Spenser's second eclogue, whose mood opposes that of Cuddie, another shepherd. Thus Yeats imitated the theme of unrequited love, the bucolic setting, the shepherd's names, and the opposition of their moods from Spenser's work.

In the first two poems in Crossways, the first book of poetry Yeats kept in the definitive edition of his work, the influence of Spenser's pastoral poetry is still apparent, though in a lesser degree than in The Island of Statues. In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" Yeats at once depicted and negated the pastoral setting. Contrasting the dreary present with the Arcadian past, he declared that though "The woods of Arcady are dead" yet "words alone are certain good."[4] The Spenserian pastoral convention is Yeats's means of escaping from the materialism of his own world, the materialism the nineteenth-century historians had rejected also, yet, as he stated in the

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[3]The Island of Statues, The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 646. All future references to Yeats's poems will be to this edition.

[4]Ibid., pp. 64-66.

poem, that idyllic setting no longer exists except through words. In "The Song of the Sad Shepherd" Yeats again used the pastoral figure of the shepherd, but the idyllic world is less important than the emotion of sorrow that the shepherd feels. The pastoral convention, which Yeats admired in Spenser's work, provided him with a traditional means of depicting a plane of existence in which he could display the "austere emotion" he recommended to Todhunter,[5] a form of contemplative detachment from the quotidian. This contemplative mood is characteristic of this period of Yeats's thought.

The influence of Spenser appeared also in Yeats's next book of poems, The Rose (1893). Yeats indicated in a note written in 1925 that ". . . the quality symbolized as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar."[6] Although Yeats qualified the meaning of his symbol to differentiate it from Shelley's or Spenser's conceptions, the underlying similarity of the symbolism is evident. Yeats and Spenser modified the Neoplatonic vision set forth most clearly in Bembo's speech in The Book of the Courtier; both incorporated Neoplatonism into their own religious systems. Spenser in "An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie" described the movement upward through the beauties of the world to the beauty of contemplation of God, but he placed the realm

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[5]"A Sicilian Idyll," Letters to the New Island, p. 112.

[6]"Notes," The Variorum Edition of the Poems . . . , p. 842.

of Plato's ideas or forms between the sky and the yet higher realm of the Powers and Potentates, Dominations and Cherubins, Seraphins and Archangels. Yeats and Spenser both followed the Neoplatonic doctrine, but Spenser combined it with Christianity while Yeats combined it with Rosicrucianism.

In the higher levels of the Golden Dawn ritual, the Rosy Cross, the rose of heavenly love and beauty and the cross of sacrifice, is a major symbol. The title poem in The Rose, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," gives evidence of Yeats's eclecticism. The title of the poem is strongly Rosicrucian with the combination of the rose and the cross, while the poem itself shows Yeats's unique melding of disparate elements. Addressing the "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days," the poet calls upon the rose to

> Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
> I find under the boughs of love and hate,
> In all poor foolish things that live a day,
> Eternal beauty wandering on her way.[7]

The poet wishes to seek eternal beauty in the things of this world rather than in "the strange things said / By God to the bright hearts of those long dead." Since Yeats characterized the beauty as eternal, it is beyond the mutability of this world, and is thus similar in conception to Plato's beauty, which is found first in the figures and forms of earth but which then leads man to an idea of a higher beauty. Yeats's "eternal beauty" is in effect the first and second rungs of

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[7]"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," p. 101.

Plato's ladder that leads to the sea of beauty. Since Yeats used figures from Irish mythology to exemplify this beauty he sought, the poem extends its circumference to include Irish legends as well as Neoplatonism and occult lore. This unification of elements of various beliefs Yeats attempted to achieve throughout his life and succeeded magnificently in attaining in "Under Ben Bulben." In this poem, however, Yeats used the rose to symbolize those things that lead man to God. Yeats's and Spenser's conceptions of the function of beauty are similar, for each poet conceived of beauty as an ideal that causes man to aspire towards God. Both conceptions are therefore variations on the Neoplatonic tradition.

In another poem in The Rose Yeats turned even more specifically to an imitation of Renaissance literature. "When You Are Old" (1893) is a modification of Ronsard's poem, "Quand vous serez bien vieille." The two poems differ, however, in form and in content. Ronsard's admonitory sonnet to his mistress contains two main themes: that of carpe diem and that of the eternizing effect of Ronsard's poetry. The octave describes the poet's mistress as an old woman crouching beside the fire, chanting Ronsard's verses to a dozing servant girl. The power of Ronsard's poetry is depicted in the servant girl's reaction, for she, on hearing his name, will awaken, "Bénissant vostre nom de louange immortelle."[8] In the sestet Ronsard reminded his mistress that "Je seray dans la terre" while she

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[8]The Oxford Book of French Verse, xiii th Century--xx th Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 69.

will be "au fouyer une veille accroupie / Regrettant mon amour et vostre fier desdain." The poem concludes with Cavalier-like advice: "Cueillez dés aujourd'huy les roses de la vie." Yeats's curtal sonnet has the same setting as Ronsard's sonnet, but Yeats included neither the eternizing theme nor the carpe diem advice. Instead he focused on the beauty of the woman when she was young, and on the ideal nature of the poet's love for her.

> . . . many loved your moments of glad grace,
> And loved your beauty with love false or true,
> But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
> And loved the sorrows of your changing face.[9]

The poet's love for his mistress is idealized, as love is frequently idealized in the sonnets of Petrarch or Dante, for he loves her soul not her physical attributes. The conclusion to Yeats's poem is both Neoplatonic and hermetic, for the poet wishes his mistress to remember the past and

> Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
> And paced upon the mountains overhead
> And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Like Dante in the Vita Nuova, Yeats personified love and, in describing his actions, symbolized the mood of the lover. A similar description is found in a poem Yeats wrote for one of the Golden Dawn rituals:

> It is time to be done with it all
> The stars call & all the planets.[10]

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[9]"When You are Old," p. 121.

[10]Quoted in Virginia Moore, The Unicorn (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 170.

In both poems, the experience described is a turning from earthly things to union with natural objects representative of higher states of being, of existences closer to God than man is. This mystical element appertains to the Neoplatonic tradition as well as to the occult, and characterizes Yeats's eclecticism during this first contemplative period. Thus Yeats imitated Ronsard only in the setting and opening line of the poem, not in the moods and themes that structure it.

In this first contemplative period of poetic and conceptual development, 1885-1903, Yeats's poetry reveals the same ideas and models that appear in the prose of that period. He was seeking to create in his poetry a world of "knowledge and beauty and serenity" such as that he praised in Todhunter's pastoral.[11] To create this idyllic world Yeats used the Spenserian pastoral setting and thereby gained an objective distance from the passions delineated within that setting, gained a world of reverie and contemplation. Moreover, during this period Yeats employed in his poetry the same universal symbolism that he discovered and extolled in the works of Shakespeare and Dante. With the combination of Neoplatonism, Irish mythology and Rosicrucianism, Yeats's poetry attained this universal quality, the association with the supernatural, that he believed essential to great art. Yeats's early poetry exemplifies his early poetic theories; and Renaissance traditions and poems, especially those of Spenser, are, as Yeats

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[11]"A Sicilian Idyll," Letters to the New Island, p. 112.

stated, among the models for his early work. He, like the nineteenth-century writers, turned to the Renaissance as the period in which an ideal could be found.

The poetry of Yeats's second period, 1903-1915, the period during which he was developing his conception of poetry as gesture and as action, shows the influence of Shakespeare and Jonson, as does the prose of that period. Shakespeare's influence is evident in two of Yeats's plays, in which the Shakespearean technique of doubling the action was used.[12] Jonson's influence is noticeable particularly in the poems that Yeats published after 1906, the year in which he began his intensive study of Jonson's work. Both prose and poetry give evidence of Jonson's expressionistic theory of literature, of the conception of the poem as a dramatic vehicle for portraying the poet's reaction to specific situations. Jonson's satiric, epigrammatic style also appeared in Yeats's poetry during this period.

Yeats's choice and treatment of subject matter were strongly Jonsonian in one poem published in 1912, in which Yeats achieved the "personal and capricious writing" for which he praised Jonson.[13] "To a Poet, who would have me Praise certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine" (1910) is written in Jonson's witty, epigrammatic style:

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[12]See Chapter II, pp. 76-77.

[13]Autobiographies, p. 204.

> You say, as I have often given tongue
> In praise of what another's said or sung,
> 'Twere politic to do the like by these;
> But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?[14]

Although Jonson has no poem on precisely the same subject, the same witty and ironic mode is present in many of his occasional poems; for example, "To My Muse," a poem written about a lord whom Jonson had praised earlier has this quality. After complaining that his muse betrayed him into committing "most fierce idolatrie" to "a worthlesse lord," Jonson ironically proclaims that he welcomes his new muse, poverty, who will instruct him to write manly things. The poem concludes with a dry and witty statement, however, that sums up the poet's reaction to the situation as Yeats's conclusion sums up his attitude:

> But I repent me: Stay. Who e're is rais'd,
> For worth he has not, He is tax'd, not prais'd.[15]

Although Jonson was not the only possible source for Yeats's new epigrammatic and ironic style, the similarity in form and in the satiric comments on contemporaneous events and Yeats's known familiarity with Jonson's works, make them the most probable influence on Yeats's poetry at that time. Jonson's concrete and conversational presentation of situation as well as his decisive expression of personality are techniques that Yeats was seeking to develop in his own poetry during this period of gesture and self-expression. A Renaissance poet served Yeats as master as he perfected his craftsmanship.

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[14]The Poems of Ben Jonson, ed. Bernard Newdigate (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), p. 262.

[15]Ibid., p. 20.

Besides using Jonson as a model for satiric commentary, Yeats turned again to Ronsard, this time to provide the basic statement for a satiric attack on the audience at the Abbey Theatre. In this second period of development, Yeats's choice of a poem to translate was entirely different from that he had chosen in his first period. "A Pontus de Tyard," like Yeats's translation, "At the Abbey Theatre (Imitated from Ronsard)" (1910), is a criticism of the fickleness of the people's taste. Although Ronsard was critical of his readers while Yeats directed his attack towards the audience at the Abbey Theatre, each poet was concerned with the protean nature of the people, who first condemn "high and airy" works, and next, perversely, condemn art made of "common things."[16] Each poet called upon a particular critic who could teach him the trick of pleasing the popular taste, Ronsard addressing Pontus de Tyard and Yeats addressing Craoibhin Aoibhin, the Gaelic name by which Yeats referred to Douglas Hyde.[17] Ronsard, and Yeats after him, concluded with a defiant question:

> Is there a bridle for this Proteus
> That turns and changes like his draughty seas?
> Or is there none, most popular of men [the critic]
> But when they mock us, that we mock again?

In this translation of Ronsard's poem, Yeats evinced the general trends found in his poetry during this period: an involvement

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[16]"At the Abbey Theatre," p. 265.

[17]George Brandon Saul, Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), p. 87.

in contemporaneous activities, especially in the Abbey Theatre, and a resultant desire to change the common taste, to take a stance that would affect the public.

In "The Realists" (1912) Yeats again criticized the contemporaneous intellectual attitudes, but indirectly through a contrast to early literature and art rather than by direct criticism as in "At the Abbey Theatre."

> Hope that you may understand!
> What can books of men that wive
> In a dragon-guarded land,
> Paintings of the dolphin-drawn
> Sea-nymphs in their pearly wagons
> Do, but awake a hope to live
> That had gone
> With the dragons?[18]

By contrasting the vibrant life portrayed in the "dragon-guarded land" of the Arthurian tales and romances[19] as well as in the mythic scene in Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" to the barren and scientific existence of the realists, Yeats effected, again, a condemnation of his own times and a glorification of the vivid world that existed before the fragmentation of the English Renaissance. His criticism of his own times and his delight at the richness of eleventh- through sixteenth-century art and literature are evident in all periods of his development, but, especially during this second period, he utilized such works to give sharp focus to his criticism of his contemporaries.

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[18]"The Realists," p. 309.

[19]See Chapter III, pp. 131-32, for Yeats's placement of these works in his historical cycles.

A similar contrast of Renaissance and modern times is found in "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures" (1913). Yeats scorned the pragmatic values of the wealthy man who demanded a large public response to art to induce him to subscribe money to the gallery, and he contrasted this attitude to that of the Italian nobility during the Renaissance.

> What cared Duke Ercole, that bid
> His mummers to the market-place,
> What th'onion-sellers thought or did
> So that his Plautus set the pace
> For the Italian Comedies?
> And Guidobaldo, when he made
> That grammar school of courtesies
> Where wit and beauty learned their trade
> Upon Urbino's windy hill,
> Had sent no runners to and fro
> That he might learn the shepherds' will.
> And when they drove out Cosimo,
> Indifferent how the rancour ran,
> He gave the hours they had set free
> To Michelozzo's latest plan
> For the San Marco Library,
> Whence turbulent Italy should draw
> Delight in Art whose end is peace,
> In logic and in natural law
> By sucking at the dugs of Greece.[20]

Besides showing Yeats's desire for a society in which art is more important than practical considerations, this poem also indicates Yeats's growing knowledge of the historical details of the Renaissance. This knowledge Miss Salvadori attributes to Yeats's close reading of the footnotes in Opdycke's edition of Castiglione's The Courtier,[21] for there is no indication

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[20]"To a Wealthy Man . . . ," pp. 287-88.

[21]Salvadori, p. 20, n. 89.

that Yeats at this time had read any other historical works about the Renaissance. He used this knowledge about the Renaissance love of art to make specific his desire for a culture comparable to that of the Renaissance and to underline his protest at the materialism and populism present in the Ireland of his day, a protest similar to that of nineteenth-century historians who also used the Renaissance as a cultural touchstone.

His protest against popular taste found voice again in "While I, from that reed-throated whisperer" (1914), a poem influenced by Jonson's similar protest in "An Ode. To Himself." In this poem Yeats found solace from the contumely of the crowd by turning to his true companion, his inward voice, the "reed-throated whisperer."

> While I, from that reed-throated whisperer
> Who comes at need, although not now as once
> A clear articulation in the air,
> But inwardly, surmise companions
> Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof
> --Ben Jonson's phrase--and find when June is come
> At Kyle-na-no under that ancient roof
> A sterner conscience and a friendlier home,
> I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,
> Those undreamt accidents that have made me
> --Seeing that Fame has perished this long while,
> Being but a part of ancient ceremony--
> Notorious, till all my priceless things
> Are but a post the passing dogs defile.[22]

The spiritual companions who Yeats surmised do exist are those such as Ben Jonson, who complained about the crowd in a similar manner:

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[22]"While I, from that reed-throated whisperer," pp. 320-21.

And since our Daintie age,
Cannot indure reproofe
Make not thy selfe a Page
To that strumpet the Stage,
But sing high and aloofe,
Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull Asses hoofe.[23]

Yeats and Jonson both endured the crowd's disfavor and both, like Ronsard before them, were scornful of common opinion. As a model for this type of bitter, occasional poem, Yeats again turned to a satirist of the Renaissance, Ben Jonson.

During this second period of Yeats's development, when he was concerned with poetry as a form of action and as an expression of personality and when he was committed strongly to his work with the Abbey Theatre, he often found inspiration for his lyric poetry in Ben Jonson's work, for Jonson similarly was involved in the theatre, was critical of his own age, and was committed to a theory of poetry as the expression of the poet's personality. In Jonson's poetry, as well as in that of Ronsard, Yeats found evidence of companions "beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof," and in imitating their poems and their satiric tone he gave concrete proof of his admiration of these Renaissance poets. Yeats's approbation of the Renaissance took the form not only of his conscious imitation of its poets but also of his acceptance of its attitudes towards art for contrast with the attitudes current in Ireland. Thus his admiration of the Renaissance included both the works of art and literature that were created then and the culture that encouraged the production of such works of art. During this second period Yeats

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[23]"An Ode. To Himself," p. 125.

emulated the tone and techniques of certain Renaissance poets, and he sought to effect a change in Irish values that would stimulate a cultural renaissance in Ireland. Yeats's criticism of his society and his growing disillusionment about his ability to create that change heralded his return to poetry of a contemplative nature, to poetry as reverie.

Yeats made explicit his changing perspective in "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915), the poem that serves as an introduction to Per Amica Silentia Lunae. The debate between Hic and Ille (or, as Pound phrased it, between Hic and Willy,[24]) reveals the "two parts of the soul" brought face to face: the active and the contemplative parts. This debate between the two ways of life is comparable to the Renaissance conflict between "the claims of the active and the contemplative life which were involved in man's view of his place in the universe, the search for leisure and concentration of energy," and for Yeats, as for some Renaissance thinkers, these claims "from time to time gave renewed rise to the thought of retirement from the world."[25] In later poems of this period Yeats not only followed this "tradition of the retired life";[26] he also chose a figure from English Renaissance poetry, Milton's Platonist,[27] to represent this choice. In "Ego Dominus Tuus" Yeats rejected the active life:

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[24]Ellmann, p. 127.

[25]Wallerstein, p. 184.

[26]Ibid., p. 183.

[27]See Chapter IV, pp. 170-71.

> For those that love the world serve it in action,
> Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
> And should they paint or write, still it is action:
> The struggle of the fly in marmalade.[28]

Instead of action Yeats, Ille, seeks the image or Mask most antithetical to his nature, that which is attained through reverie or contemplation:

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

Hic asserts that Ille walks "in the moon," and still traces, "Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion, / Magical shapes." Ille, however, is convinced that he has found in these occult studies a reality truer than the common life of action:

> The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
> The sentimentalist himself; while art
> Is but a vision of reality.
> What portion in the world can the artist have
> Who has awakened from the common dream
> But dissipation and despair?

The artist with his knowledge of the ideal, of that which is unattainable by him except in his art, has no use for the life of action, for the disparity between the actual and the ideal leaves him in despair. In his art, however, the poet can portray the "condition of fire,"[29] a reality of the imagination that is free from the conflicts between choice and chance, between will and environment, upon which human life is founded. By 1915 Yeats had rejected poetry as a form of action and

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[28]"Ego Dominus Tuus," p. 369.

[29]Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 356-57.

similarly had given up his intense involvement in the Abbey Theatre, through which he attempted to improve the taste of the people. Instead he returned to his study of the occult and to his conception of art as contemplation, as "a vision of reality."

In delineating his theory of the mask, in which art presents the ideal unattainable through action, Yeats named Dante as one of the two major examples of this conflict between the claims of action, of life, and the claims of the ideal. Hic suggests that Dante found himself, not an image. Ille replies:

> And did he find himself
> Or was the hunger that had made it [Dante's face] hollow
> A hunger for the apple on the bough
> Most out of reach? and is that spectral image
> The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?
> I think he fashioned from his opposite
> An image that might have been a stony face
> Staring upon a Bedouin's horse-hair roof
> From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned
> Among the coarse grass and the camel-dung.
> He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
> Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,
> Derided and deriding, driven out
> To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
> He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
> The most exalted lady loved by a man.

Ille sets forth the doctrine of the Mask as Yeats described that doctrine in Per Amica Silentiae Lunae: Dante sought to create in his art that which was most antithetical to his daily existence. Living a lecherous life, Dante sang in his poetry of an ideal love. Similarly, Keats, "being poor, ailing and ignorant, / Shut out from all the luxury of the world," made "Luxuriant song." Through the contemplative activity of the mind, the artist can create the "vision of reality" that he is unable to create otherwise.

The title of the poem, "Ego Dominus Tuus," implies the way in which the poet gains his "vision of reality." The title Yeats took from Dante's Vita Nuova, in which the spirit Love appears to Dante and announces "I am thy Lord."[30] This appearance of Love, which Yeats called a gesture, and Love's presentation of the ideal which Dante is to seek, Beatrice, is the source of Yeats's conclusion to the poem, for Yeats calls for a similar appearance or gesture to come to him:

> I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double,
> And prove of all imaginable things
> The most unlike, being my anti-self,
> And, standing by these characters, disclose
> All that I seek.

This antithetical self that Yeats calls upon is like Dante's Love insofar as that self reveals to the poet his ideal, all that he seeks, yet the description of the "mysterious one" indicates that Yeats was using at this time a conception that he later developed in A Vision, that is, the conception of the Thirteenth Sphere. This sphere, which brings release from the cycles of incarnation and discarnation, is that phase which is the same as the phase of the man, but which is in the opposite gyre. Thus Yeats's antithetical self is a spirit of the Seventeenth Phase, as was Yeats, but of the primary or objective gyre rather than of the antithetical gyre. This spirit is therefore Yeats's double in appearance, but in its essence it

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[30]Dante, The Vita Nuova, trans. Frances de Mëy (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), p. 6.

is his opposite. Yeats is summoning his opposite spirit to appear to him in a gesture and to indicate to him, as Love did to Dante, the Mask he should assume. Yeats's modelling of his visionary doctrine on Dante's experience is as evident in this poem as it is in A Vision itself, although at this time Yeats was using as text the Vita Nuova rather than The Divine Comedy. Dante was Yeats's choice of model and example as he consciously chose a life and a poetry of contemplation rather than of action.

The ideal way of life that Yeats desired during this third period of his development was further described in "The People" (1916). He again turned to the noble society described in The Book of the Courtier to find his example of a noble society, one that contrasted to the "unmannerly town"[31] and the uncultivated society of his own time. The poem opens with a criticism of the people similar to that found in the Jonsonian poems of Yeats's second period. He condemns the town "Where who has served the most is most defamed," and describes as an alternative life that he might have lived the type of existence that once prevailed at Urbino:

> And you know well how great the longing has been,
> Where every day my footfall should have lit
> In the green shadow of Ferrara wall;
> Or climbed among the images of the past--
> The unperturbed and courtly images--
> Evening and morning, the steep street of Urbino
> To where the Duchess and her people talked
> The stately midnight through until they stood
> In their great window looking at the dawn;

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[31]"The People," p. 351.

> I might have had no friend that could not mix
> Courtesy and passion into one like those
> That saw the wicks grow yellow in the dawn;

As always, Castiglione's ideal was Yeats's ideal. The noble life at Urbino was a recurring motif in Yeats's work during his middle two periods, and the ideal was one that he most nearly attained in his own life at Coole Park under Lady Gregory's tutelage.[32]

Yeats's appreciation of the rich culture of the Renaissance is evident also in "Her Courage" (1917), one of a series of poems written about the dying Mabel Beardsley. Using his theory of discarnate existence Yeats portrayed the scene he would have the newly dead woman come upon:

> . . . let her come face to face,
> Amid that first astonishment, with Grania's shade,
> All but the terrors of the woodland flight forgot
> That made her Diarmuid dear, and some old cardinal
> Pacing with half-closed eyelids in a sunny spot
> Who had murmured of Giorgione at his latest breath--
> Aye, and Achilles, Timor, Barbar, Barhaim, all
> Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death.[33]

The quality of Renaissance culture that Yeats admired is evident in his description of the cardinal, for he extolled the secular interests of the religious leader, the elevation of art to a sacred position--the Cardinal's last words are of Giorgione not of God. This poem gives indirect evidence of Yeats's belief in the supremacy of art, almost in the religion

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[32]See Chapter III, pp. 114-15. Corinna Salvadori in her book on Yeats and Castiglione came to the same conclusions that I arrived at independently before her work was available to me.

[33]"Her Courage," p. 366.

of art, for he placed in his "predestined dancing place," his version of heaven, the cardinal who placed art above religion. Yeats's description of the value, almost the sanctity of art is typical of his attitude and of the attitude he attempted to inculcate in his fellow Irishmen.

The Renaissance ideal of culture is found also in Yeats's elegiac poems on Robert Gregory, although in these poems Yeats's praise was for the perfect courtier rather than for the lover of art. "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (1918) presents Lady Gregory's son as the Renaissance man, "Our Sidney and our perfect man."[34] Sir Philip Sidney, the epitome of the courtier, was Yeats's epithet for Robert Gregory, who had the same mental, physical, and spiritual development that the Renaissance poets noted in Sidney. Although Yeats's Renaissance ideal of the courtier, with his versatility, his perfection of manners and abilities, was derived largely from Castiglione, in this poem Yeats referred to the Elizabethan ideal courtier. The qualities, however, that Yeats mentioned in the poem as characteristic of Robert Gregory are among the qualities depicted by Castiglione as well as those admired by the Elizabethans: love of nature or landscape and skill in horsemanship, in painting, in sculpture, in literature, in architecture, in scholarship, and in warfare. Or, as Yeats summarized the ideal man: "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he, / As 'twere all life's epitome." Yeats turned to the Renaissance

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[34]"In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," p. 325.

and drew from both Castiglione's and the Elizabethan's conception of the ideal courtier.

In the following year, 1919, Yeats published another elegy for Robert Gregory, and again Yeats found his model in the Renaissance. As he described "Shepherd and Goatherd" (1919) in a letter to Lady Gregory, it was a poem

> . . . about Robert, a pastoral modelled on what Virgil wrote for some friend of his and on what Spenser wrote of Sidney. . . . A goatherd and a shepherd are talking in some vague place, perhaps the Burren Hills, in some remote period of the world. It is a new form for me and I think for modern poetry.[35]

Yeats used the pastoral setting and the dialogue form of "A pastorall Aeglogue upon the death of Sir Phillip Sidney Knight, etc." Spenser's pastoral opens conventionally with nature mourning the death of Sidney; Yeats avoided the pathetic fallacy, but he portrayed the shepherd and goatherd as so sorrowful that nature hardly affects them. The "Aeglogue" follows the pastoral convention closely; the shepherds Colin and Lycon praise the perfection of Sidney and his songs:

> Unhappie Albion
> When shalt thou see emong thy shepheards all,
> Any so sage, so perfect? Whom uneath
> Envie could touch for vertuous life and skill;
> Curteous, valiant, and liberall.[36]

Spenser's major technique for showing grief, however, was to present all nature saddened at the loss of Phillisides, that

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[35]"To Lady Gregory (March 19, 1918)," The Letters . . ., p. 647.

[36]"A pastorall Aeglogue . . . ," p. 554.

is, Sidney. The rivers, the nymphs, the woods, even the flowers mourn his death. Like Spenser, Yeats praised the dead: "He that was best in every country sport / And every country craft, and of us all / Most courteous to slow age and hasty youth, / Is dead." Yeats, however, broke the very convention he was using by adding realistic descriptions and details: the news of the death is brought by the "boy that brings my griddle cakes"; the mother accepts the death with tearless nobility; and the dead youth is compared not to a godlike creature but to the cuckoo, which, knowing it will not remain long, does not change the nest in which it is reared. The song of the shepherd in Yeats's elegy continues the comparison with a bird, for the dead flier is like a "speckled bird" that only stays for a while. Since the bird is one of Yeats's and Virgil's symbols for the soul, the shepherd's song takes on metaphysical dimensions that are developed explicitly in the goatherd's song. Spenser mentioned the metaphysical only in a conventional manner as a "heav'n with blessed soules"; Yeats, on the other hand, invoked his own mythology to bring comfort to the mourners. The dead youth "grows younger every second" until he reaches "his own dayspring" where he "unpacks the loaded pern / Of all 'twas pain or joy to learn." Robert, in other words, passes through the six stages of discarnate existence; he has moved to another realm of existence, not better, not worse, merely different.

Yeats took from Spenser the conventional form for the poem, the pastoral elegy, and through this form Yeats achieved

a remoteness and "austere emotion," yet he altered the tradition to conform to his own thought by including realistic details and by using blank verse rather than a regular rhyme scheme. Moreover, Yeats added to the pastoral form his own occult beliefs. The poem is representative of his work during this contemplative period of his insofar as he used his metaphysical system to assuage the sorrow of death, and insofar as he turned, as in his first period of development, to Spenser as the model for contemplative poetry.

In another poem published in the same year, "To a Young Beauty" (1919), Yeats turned again to the English Renaissance to support his own ideas. After telling the girl she has a beauty that should be "passionate not bountiful,"[37] Yeats discusses the difficulties inherent in the possession of beauty, and uses an analogy between the girl, who serves physical beauty, and the poet, Yeats himself, who serves ideal beauty, intellectual beauty.

> I know what wages beauty gives,
> How hard a life her servant lives,
> Yet praise the winters gone:
> There is not a fool can call me friend,
> And I may dine at journey's end
> With Landor and with Donne.

The difficulty of the poet's service to the ideal is not only stated in the poem, it is also indicated in Yeats's choice of dinner companions. He has chosen two men of the Seventeenth Phase, two Daimonic men, to dine with him in the afterlife.[38]

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[37]"To a Young Beauty," p. 335.

[38]Yeats placed Landor in Phase Seventeen in A Vision, p. 141, and Donne, who passed through the Vision of Evil to unity of being, also fits this phase. See Chapter III, pp. 110-12.

Men of this phase, among whom Yeats classified himself, have attained the Vision of Evil and conceive of the world "as a continual conflict."[39] By the conclusion of the poem the import of the comparison has changed: the difficult life the beautiful girl lives serves to illustrate the dedication of the poet to his ideal, to the Mask he seeks, and a Renaissance poet, one who has attained the Vision of Evil, is one of Yeats's spiritual companions. The conclusion of the poem is another indication of Yeats's frequent identification with Renaissance figures.

In "The Phases of the Moon" (1919) Yeats again identified himself with a Renaissance figure. The framework of the poem is a conversation between Aherne and Robartes, the two antagonists, the aesthete and the occultist, in Rosa Alchemica. As they discuss Yeats, who sits in his tower at night, Robartes alludes to the Platonist in Milton's "Il Penseroso" to give Yeats's reason for choosing such a place:

> Because, it may be, of the candle-light
> From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
> Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince . . .[40]

This comparison makes explicit the type of contemplative activity, the kind of Platonic reverie, that Yeats was engaged in during this period from 1915 to 1938. Like Milton's Platonist, Yeats sought a life opposed to the life of action. In "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1923) Yeats again employed this

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[39] A Vision, p. 144.

[40] "The Phases of the Moon," p. 573.

comparison, and indicated further the type of study the Platonist followed:

> Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on
> In some like chamber, shadowing forth
> How some daemonic rage
> Imagined everything.[41]

Milton's Platonist, believed Yeats, was engaged in the same Platonic study of creation that Yeats himself was involved in as he wrote A Vision. At this time in his life, Yeats identified himself with the contemplative, solitary figure that Milton described.

Yeats's ideal of supernatural beauty is described in "The Phases of the Moon" as the beauty of the Fifteenth Phase, a beauty that is beyond mortality:

> Robartes. All thought becomes an image and the soul
> Becomes a body: that body and that soul
> Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
> Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
> Body and soul cast out and cast away
> Beyond the visible world.
> Aherne. All dreams of the soul
> End in a beautiful man's or woman's body.

As in A Vision, Yeats described supernatural perfection in terms of the Neoplatonic conception, which he derived from his study of Dante and Castiglione, of physical beauty symbolizing spiritual beauty. The beauty of the Fifteenth Phase is what Castiglione described as a beauty that is "the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul."[42]

This supernatural beauty Yeats presented in terms of Renaissance art in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" (1920).

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[41] "Meditations in Time of Civil War," p. 418.

[42] A Vision, p. 293.

Debating with a dancer on whether or not a beautiful woman should be well educated, Robartes invokes the beauty of Renaissance art to prove that beauty alone is sufficient.

> 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.[43]

This interpretation of the work of Veronese and Michelangelo foreshadows Yeats's later use of Michelangelo in "Under Ben Bulben," but he had not yet added the conception of life imitating art to the belief in the supernatural quality of the perfect human body. That Yeats referred to Michelangelo rather than to one of the artists of the Fifteenth Phase indicates that even at this point the "mythopoeic" turbulence of Michelangelo's work was becoming more prominent in Yeats's thought than the intellectual beauty, the static perfection, of the artists of the Fifteenth Phase. This development prefigures Yeats's final period, that of action or regeneration.

Besides evincing a growing admiration for Michelangelo though yet envisioning himself as a figure similar to Milton's Platonist, Yeats also turned to Donne for inspiration and modelled "Chosen" (1926) after Donne's "A Nocturnall upon

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[43]"Michael Robartes and the Dancer," p. 386.

S. Lucies day."[44] Yeats's interest in Donne began in 1912 when H. J. C. Grierson sent his edition of Donne to Yeats. At that time Yeats commented on the poem in a letter to Grierson:

> I find it difficult to believe from the evidence you give that Donne was not the lover of Lady Bedford. . . . The poem written on the supposition of her death, if it indeed refers to her, seems to me conclusive. No courtly compliment could go so far, no courtly beauty accept such compliments--and then he thinks her dead so may well speak out.[45]

After receiving Grierson's edition, Yeats continued his study of Donne, as is evident from the references to Donne that appeared in Yeats's prose after that year. In 1926 Yeats returned to the poem written on Lady Bedford's death, and his delight in the poem led him to emulate its form and part of the content. As he wrote to Grierson:

> I have been rereading your Donne again-- . . . especially that intoxicating 'St. Lucies Day' which I consider always an expression of passion and proof that he was the Countess of Bedford's lover. I have used the arrangement of the rhymes in the stanzas for a poem of my own, just finished.[46]

Not only the rhyme scheme--abbacccdd--but also the meter is the same in the two poems, except that in the sixth line Yeats used iambic tetrameter instead of the iambic pentameter of Donne's poem. The rhythmical texture of Yeats's poem approaches

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[44]This fact was first brought to my attention by Giorgio Melchiori (The Whole Mystery of Art [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960], pp. 180-85).

[45]"To H. J. C. Grierson (Nov. 14 [1912])," The Letters . . . , p. 571.

[46](Feb. 21 [1926]), ibid., p. 710.

the movement of natural speech, as does that of Donne's poem. In fact, in the letter to Grierson Yeats described the effect for which he was striving:

> The over childish or over pretty or feminine element in some good Wordsworth and in much poetry up to our date comes from the lack of natural momentum in the syntax. This momentum underlies almost every Elizabethan and Jacobean lyric and is far more important than simplicity of vocabulary.[47]

Yeats was attempting to employ the speech movement of Donne's lines--an effect gained in part by enjambement and a logical thought pattern uniting the lines--as well as Donne's form.

Besides emulating Donne's poetic technique, Yeats also employed the astrological imagery found in "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day." Donne, however, used the imagery tangentially while Yeats based his entire poem on an astrological image. Donne's central image is St. Lucy's Day, the shortest day of the year, "the yeares midnight," which is appropriate for the mourning he and the world share. The poem concludes with the contrast between the lovers, ". . . for whose sake, the lesser Sunne / At this time to the Goat is runne / To fetch new lust, and give it you,"[48] and Donne himself, who is preparing to meet his dead lady by keeping vigil during the year's midnight. Yeats's poem, on the other hand, develops the theme of love

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[47] Ibid.

[48] "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day," The Poems of John Donne, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), I, 45. All future references will be to this edition.

from a woman's point of view rather than from that of the man, and love itself in its various manifestations is attributed to astrological influence.

> The lot of love is chosen. I learnt that much
> Struggling for an image on the track
> Of the whirling Zodiac.[49]

Donne indicated that the stars heighten the sexual impulses of others; Yeats attributed to the speaker as well as to all others an astrological cause of love. At the conclusion of "Chosen" the greatest pleasure in love is described as that

> 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.

Yeats's notes to the poem indicate that Macrobius is the astrologer who described the meeting place of the Zodiac and the Milky Way as the place where the soul moves from the sphere, "the sole divine form," to the cone,[50] or, as Yeats used the image in the poem, from cone to sphere. Macrobius' description thus coalesced with Yeats's discussion in A Vision of the change from the cones or gyres of incarnate and discarnate life to the Thirteenth Sphere, Nirvana. Love is thus the highest mystical experience. "Chosen" is entirely occult in its metaphysical basis, while "A Nocturnall" is primarily Christian, though with astrological references. Yeats's choice of this poem as a model is consistent with his practice during this contemplative period of his development.

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[49]"Chosen," pp. 534-35.

[50]"Notes," The Variorum . . . , p. 831.

In 1927 Yeats attempted in "The Tower" a comprehensive statement of the sources of his poetic faith, that is, of his symbolist creation of a transcendent ideal. In this poem he delineated precisely his departure from the abstract philosophies of Plato and Plotinus, and described man's creation of an ideal world. Furthermore, he indicated the sources of his own self-created ideal:

> I have prepared my peace
> With learned Italian things
> And the proud stones of Greece,
> Poet's imaginings
> And memories of love,
> Memories of the words of women,
> And all those things whereof
> Man makes a superhuman
> Mirror-resembling dream.[51]

Yeats's creation of his own ideal world or dream is comparable to the Greeks' creation of the Olympians, as Nietzsche described that creation:

> The same impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing to a continuation of life, caused also the Olympian world to arise, in which the Hellenic "will" held up before itself a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man, in that they themselves live it--the only satisfactory Theodicy![52]

Poetry for Yeats, like the Greek gods for Nietzsche, reflects and at the same time idealizes man's life. Among the elements Yeats included in his listing of the significant things from

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[51]"The Tower," p. 415.

[52]Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. by William A. Haussmann (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 35.

which the poet creates his ideal world are "learned Italian things." This phrase refers to the various studies of Italian works that influenced Yeats's thought: his study of Castiglione's Neoplatonism and ideal mode of life; of Dante's symbology; of Pico della Mirandola's mysticism; of the intellectual beauty of Botticelli, Da Vinci, Mantegna and Crivelli; of Michelangelo's turbulence; and of the unity of being that Yeats, like Pater, thought characteristic of the fifteenth century. These Italian Renaissance works and conceptions combined in Yeats's thought with Greek and personal elements to form Yeats's ideal, which mirrors reality yet transcends it. Man creates his own "Trans-lunar Paradise," and Yeats's unique paradise contains among the other most important influences on his thought the "learned" things of thirteenth- through sixteenth-century Italy.

Like "The Tower," "Among School Children" (1927) also shows the effect of Yeats's Renaissance studies and expresses his idealization of the period. In portraying Maud Gonne as she was in 1927, Yeats compared her image to a painting of the fifteenth century.

> Her present image floats into the mind--
> Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
> Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
> And took a mess of shadows for its meat?[53]

In an early version of the poem, the Quattrocento painter was identified as Da Vinci, one of the painters Yeats included in his delineation of the Fifteenth Phase. This portrayal of Maud Gonne thus gives to her image the quality of intellectual beauty

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[53]"Among School Children," p. 444.

that Yeats found in the paintings of the Fifteenth Phase. His comment about the contemplative mood created by that art applies also to his own attitude toward Maud Gonne: "Thought has been pursued, not as a means but as an end--the poem, the painting, the reverie has been sufficient of itself."[54] By 1927 Yeats envisioned Maud Gonne not as Helen of Troy, the woman all men desire, but as a beauty of the type that men contemplate without desiring to possess. Yeats perceived Maud Gonne as he perceived the women painted by the Quattrocento painters:

> Does not one discover in the faces of Madonnas and holy women painted by Raphael or Da Vinci, if never before or since, a condition of soul where all is still and finished, all experience wound up upon a bobbin.[55]

Maud Gonne, like Da Vinci's faces, inspired in Yeats not passion, as she once did, but reverie and contemplation.

A similar use of the symbolism of A Vision occurs in "Her Vision in the Wood" (1933). The poem opens with a woman too old "for a man's love" yet imagining men tearing her flesh to assuage "A greater with a lesser pang." In the midst of her frenzy she has a vision of her "heart's victim and its torturer," a beast-torn man carried by grieving women. The vision is described in terms of a painting by Mantegna:

> All stately women moving to a song
> With loosened hair or foreheads grief-distraught,
> It seemed a Quattrocento painter's throng,

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[54] A Vision, p. 135.

[55] "The Holy Mountain," E. and I., p. 472.

> A thoughtless image of Mantegna's thought--
> Why should they think that are forever young?[56]

The mythical horror of the vision, the wounded body of Actaeon, torn by beasts because he saw Artemis bathing, is described as an image, as an object of contemplation. Even though the subject matter of the vision is mythic and terrible, a study of the ambivalence of human desire and passion, the portrayal of the vision in terms of Mantegna's thought gives the scene a quality of remoteness, of fulfillment, of all things brought to contemplation; for Mantegna was a painter of the supernatural Fifteenth Phase. The image of the throng of women "moving to a song" supports the quality of reverie as does the emphasis on the immortality of the women. This detachment from the human passions portrayed sets the vision in the framework of the contemplative, of the supernatural perfection of the Fifteenth Phase.

During this contemplative period Yeats did not concentrate solely on the Italian Renaissance. In a short poem, "Three Movements" (1933), he used Shakespeare as the representative figure of the English Renaissance, and he contrasted that period to the subsequent ones:

> Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land;
> Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand;
> What are all those fish that lie gasping on the strand?[57]

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[56]"Her Vision in the Wood," p. 485.

[57]"Three Movements," p. 485.

Since for Yeats the sea or water was symbolic of experience, of immediate sensation,[58] Shakespeare and the poets of his time are characterized by a fullness of experience, or, as Yeats wrote earlier, by "the spectacle of the world." The Romantics were less rich in experience, while Yeats's contemporaries were "gasping on the strand," or, as Yeats phrased it in A Vision, were characterized by "abstraction."[59] Yeats showed his usual admiration for the literature of the Renaissance, and he used his conception of the decline of literature since the Renaissance to structure the poem.

In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" (1937-1938), Yeats turned again to Spenser for inspiration, as he often did in this contemplative period. He indicated his indebtedness to Spenser by crediting him with a particular image:

> No fox can foul the lair the badger swept--
> (An image out of Spenser and the common tongue).[60]

As in the poems on Robert Gregory, Yeats chose as model for the elegy one of Spenser's elegies. In this poem, however, Yeats either misquoted Spenser or changed the image to fit the theme of his own poem, for Spenser in "The Ruines of Time" wrote:

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[58] Discoveries, p. 284. Yeats was discussing Blake's system of correspondences, but his own is similar, for example, in "The Wanderings of Oisin" or "Byzantium."

[59] A Vision, p. 299.

[60] "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," p. 603. Although the poem was not published until 1939, the first version was read by Yeats in a "Speech delivered at the Banquet of the Irish Academy of Letters, on 17th August, 1937" ("Notes," pp. 838-39).

> Spite bites the dead, that living never baid.
> He [Leicester] now is gone, the whiles the Foxe is crept
> Into the hole, the which the Badger swept.[61]

For Spenser as for Yeats the fox was an interloper, a chaotic element obtruding into order: in "Mother Hubbard's Tale," a beast fable about true and false sovereignty, the fox and the ape temporarily prevail over the noble lion and misrule the kingdom until overthrown by the divinely inspired rage of the true king, the lion. In "The Ruines of Time" Spenser used the image of the fox's creeping into the lair to represent the eventual decay of all earthly glory, a major theme of the poem. Against the setting of this earthly decay Spenser described the eternal glory of heaven and the eternizing effect of great poetry.

Yeats's central theme, however, is the glory of friendship:

> Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
> And say my glory was I had such friends.

This theme Spenser satirically minimized: "and after death all friendship doth decaie." Yet his poem itself is a gesture of friendship to immortalize Leicester, Pembroke, and Sir Philip Sidney. Yeats took Spenser's conventional elegiac theme--the eternizing power of poetry--and modified it. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" the poet gains glory from his friends. Thus Yeats's inversion of Spenser's image of the fox and the badger can be attributed either to his conscious contradiction

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[61] "The Ruines of Time," p. 474.

of Spenser's conception--for Yeats the glory of his friends' lives cannot be destroyed or fouled in time--or to a lapse in Yeats's memory of Spenser's poem, in which the fox can creep into the badger's lair and foul it. At the conclusion of this contemplative period of Yeats's thought he turned again to his early model, Spenser, but he imitated the elegiac rather than the pastoral element in Spenser's work.

"Lapis Lazuli" (1938) serves as a coda to this period of Yeats's thought, and it also leads into the conceptions of the final period. Yeats's symbology, which was developed in A Vision; his conceptions of tragic ecstasy and of the Vision of Evil, which were developed in the prose writings; and his admiration for Shakespeare, all find magnificent poetic expression in this poem. Yeats's historical vision is present implicitly in the structure of "Lapis Lazuli" and explicitly in the central theme. The poem opens on a scene of modern chaos and destruction, a destruction that Yeats perceived in historical terms as necessary before the beginning of the new antithetical dispensation that will begin in 2000 A.D. The Renaissance, the most ideal antithetical period of the present dispensation, is exemplified next through the characters of Shakespeare's great tragedies:

> All perform their tragic play,
> There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
> That's Ophelia, that Cordelia:
> Yet they, should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

> All men have aimed at, found and lost;
> Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
> Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
> Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,
> And all the drop-scenes drop at once
> Upon a hundred thousand stages,
> It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.[62]

Yeats chose passionate personalities from the great tragedies of Shakespeare to represent man at his moment of transcendence; Shakespeare's dramas, coming at the end of the Renaissance, the period of greatest subjectivity, are symbolic for Yeats of man's movement through terror to an ultimate overflow of the soul, to sanctity. Hamlet and Lear, Ophelia and Cordelia, conscious of their roles, suffer and in time are destroyed, yet the destruction that comes to them brings not despair but a tragic ecstasy, "Heaven blazing into the head."

This experience of tragedy is the moment when spirit separates from the physical body, when the essence of the passion alone remains:

> How often had I heard men of my time talk of the meeting of spirit and sense, yet there is no meeting but only change upon the instant, and it is by the perception of a change, like the sudden "blacking out" of the lights of the stage, that passion creates its most violent sensation.[63]

The freeing of the spirit that occurs at the moment of mystical perception or of death is a release of energy; hence it brings joy. Yeats followed Blake in believing that energy in itself is good, but he modified Blake's conception by including even

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[62]"Lapis Lazuli," pp. 565-66.

[63]Autobiographies, p. 326.

the passion of sorrow, of tragedy, among those things that are joyful:

> . . . because the will, or energy, is greatest in tragedy, tragedy is the more noble [more noble than comedy]; but I add that 'will or energy is eternal delight', and when its limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object.[64]

The Shakespearean characters in "Lapis Lazuli," representing the highest antithetical achievement of this primary dispensation, evince gaiety or ecstasy in the face of destruction, either personal or universal destruction, for tragedy, even death itself, is a freeing of energy. Yeats found his supreme example of this tragic ecstasy in the literature of the English Renaissance.

Like tragic heroes, civilizations also perish while others come into existence, and the creators, with gaiety, with a tragic ecstasy, contemplate this cycle of civilizations: "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay." After symbolizing the overflowing subjectivity of the Renaissance through the tragic ecstasy of the Shakespearean characters, Yeats expanded the cycle to include the rise and fall of Greek culture. Callimachus, like Shakespeare a figure of the eighth gyre, is representative of the flowering of Greek civilization as Shakespeare's characters are representative of the fullness of the Renaissance, and Callimachus' work, like Shakespeare's heroes, "stood but a day."

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[64]"On the Boiler," Explorations, p. 448.

After showing the pattern of history in past ages, Yeats then turned to an eastern culture, in which subjective personality, in the persons of the Chinamen, contemplates the inevitable tragedy.

In this historical and occult vision of the flowering and decay of civilizations, "Lapis Lazuli" is Yeats's final and most beautiful statement of the symbology of A Vision, a symbology that Yeats claimed was given him to provide "metaphors for poetry."[65] The poem also contains Yeats's most elaborate poetic development of Shakespeare's significance as the foremost poet of the Renaissance, for it is Shakespeare's heroic characters that are chosen to represent the Renaissance culture. Although Yeats's use of the symbology of A Vision and his description of the mystical tragic moment when spirit is freed from sense place this poem in Yeats's contemplative period, his choice of Shakespeare rather than the Quattrocento painters, Dante or Spenser to represent his symbolic ideal foreshadows the more dynamic conception of his last period of development, that of regeneration.

During the period from 1915 to 1938 Yeats was disillusioned with the life of action that he had sought during the preceding period of his development, and, as he rejected his former attitudes, he also ceased looking to Ben Jonson and Ronsard as examples of poets as men of action, of poets as social or aesthetic critics. Instead, as he searched for truth

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[65] A Vision, p. 8.

not in action but in the occult, he found in the rich diversity of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries examples and models for these conceptions. Dante, Spenser, Castiglione, Milton's Platonist, and the Quattrocento painters provided him with examples of mystical intuitions or with models for the type of contemplative poetry that he was writing during those years. Yeats's own occult theories, developed fully in A Vision, formed the background or the structure of several of his contemplative or mystical poems. During this period in which he was concerned with reverie, with the relationship between man the supernatural rather than with that between man and man, he returned to a study of many of the same figures from Dante to Shakespeare that had been prominent in his thought during his first contemplative period. Having moved during his first three periods from a concern with the superhuman to an interest in the human and back to a concentration on the superhuman, Yeats in his final period found a means of uniting these two realms of interest.

In the last period, from 1938 to 1939, Yeats brought together the ideas and examples of his earlier periods, and in "Under Ben Bulben" he not only stated but also exemplified in his own life's work the unity of being that he proclaimed as the goal of mankind. The figures from Dante to Shakespeare that he used as examples or symbols in the last poems evince this fusing of active and contemplative conceptions. Dante and the Quattrocento painters are significant, but Shakespeare and Michelangelo, figures from the eighth, mythopoeic gyre, are

more important than they, for in Michelangelo's work in particular Yeats discovered the sexual ideal of the Western world, an ideal that could lead to the regeneration of the race. The powerful and beautiful figures of the art of the later Renaissance were the ideal that Yeats would set for mankind.

"An Acre of Grass" (1938) gives evidence of Yeats's emphasis on regeneration, although in this poem the regeneration is personal not universal. Rejecting as a means to the truth "loose imagination" or the "mill of the mind / Consuming its rag and bone,"[66] that is, rejecting undisciplined imagination or experience, Yeats instead would "remake" himself after the pattern of Shakespeare's tragic heroes or of Blake or of Dante, all of whom Yeats believed experienced old men's frenzy and became superhuman figures.[67]

> Grant me an old man's frenzy,
> Myself must I remake
> Till I am Timon and Lear
> Or that William Blake
> Who beat upon the wall
> Till Truth obeyed his call;
>
> A mind Michael Angelo knew
> That can pierce the clouds,
> Or inspired by frenzy
> Shake the dead in their shrouds;
> Forgotten else by mankind,
> An old man's eagle mind.

Using these figures climactically, Yeats moves from Shakespearean characters who undergo transformation and catharsis, to Blake

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[66]"An Acre of Grass," p. 575.

[67]See Chapter III, pp. 124-25, for Yeats's discussion of the "new breed of men" that result from such intense subjectivity.

and Dante, the master symbologists. Yeats's desire to regenerate himself by means of his vision of reality, and to depict truth as masterfully as did Blake or Dante, is manifest in Yeats's identification with the vitality of these old men, all of whom, except for Blake, are thirteenth- through sixteenth-century figures. The phrase that would seem to be Yeats's indirect method of designating Dante, "a mind Michael Angelo knew,"[68] brings in by implication the art work of the later Renaissance, especially the powerful figures of the Sistine Chapel, which, like Dante's Divine Comedy--a work Michelangelo knew[69]--portrays heaven and hell. This reference to Michelangelo is typical of Yeats's last period, in which he considered the sexually potent figures of Michelangelo an ideal instead of finding them a threat.[70] Yeats's final period is characterized by complete acceptance of the human condition as the foundation from which to rise to unity of being, an attitude that finds full development in "Under Ben Bulben."

Yeats's desire for the regeneration of the race is clearly formulated first in "The Statues" (1938). In that poem the historical cycles of A Vision are used to complement Yeats's theory of art as the catalyst for regeneration, for the perfecting

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[68]Yeats never used this type of awkward and redundant circumlocution to designate someone; the allusion therefore must be to some contemporary of Michelangelo. Dante is the only other figure of the period before Michelangelo who portrayed heaven and hell as did he.

[69]John Addington Symonds, The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1901), II, 336. Symonds stated that Michelangelo particularly admired Dante and knew almost all his poems by heart.

[70]A Vision, p. 293.

of the race through eugenics. He described the transition from the primary dispensation with its "Asiatic vague immensities,"[71] to the fifteenth phase of the antithetical dispensation, the Age of Pericles, in terms of the creation of a new human ideal delineated by the works of Pythagoras and the Greek sculptors. These men formed the Western ideal of beauty. The sculptors, applying Pythagorean measurements to the human form, created figures that served as the models by which men selected their mates; they sought to create in flesh the beauty the artists created in stone. This conception of art providing the model for life Yeats developed fully in his final poem, "Under Ben Bulben."

The classical period in which this creation of ideal beauty occurred, like all fifteenth phases including the Renaissance, was characterized by a supernatural beauty. The phases preceding the fifteenth phase are marked by the "introspective knowledge of the mind's self-begotten unity,"[72] which leads to the pure subjectivity of the fifteenth phase. In "The Statues" Yeats used Buddha, 600 B.C., as the example of this developing subjectivity as well as using the statues of Buddha as examples of the type of art that resulted when Alexander carried Phidian art to the east. Buddha, of phase twelve, thirteen or fourteen, is, as Yeats remarked in discussing "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," like one of

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[71]"The Statues," p. 610.

[72]A Vision, p. 207.

the "heraldic supporters guarding the mystery of the fifteenth phase."[73] Buddha's philosophic mode of thought is representative of these phases; Yeats in discussing the phases immediately preceding the Renaissance described in terms equally applicable to Buddha the effect of these phases on philosophy:

> With the approach of solitude bringing with it an ever-increasing struggle with that which opposes solitude--sensuality, greed, ambition, physical curiosity in all its species--philosophy has returned driving dogma out.[74]

Buddha is "a fat / Dreamer of the Middle Ages," not a "Hamlet thin from eating flies." Buddha is on the opposite side of the fifteenth phase from Hamlet, moving towards subjectivity rather than away from it. Buddha symbolizes philosophy leading into subjectivity, while Hamlet symbolizes the beginning of objectivity and the fragmentation of the world.

In the conclusion of "The Statues" Yeats prophesied, as he did in "Under Ben Bulben," the coming Irish Renaissance, in which man again will find his ideal of beauty in "The lineaments of a plummet-measured face," in the supernatural perfection of art. "The Statues" thus foreshadows the organization and theme of "Under Ben Bulben": Yeats moved from discussions of previous fifteenth or surrounding phases to the advent of the Irish Renaissance, and he asserted the idea that life should imitate art for the regeneration of mankind, and,

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., p. 290.

specifically, of the Irish. In On the Boiler he stated in prose the import of "The Statues":

> There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers, those faces which are divine because all there is empty and measured. Europe was not born when Greek galleys defeated the Persian hordes at Salamis; but when the Doric studios sent out those broad-backed marble statues against the multiform, vague, expressive Asiatic sea, they gave to the sexual instinct of Europe its goal, its fixed type.[75]

Yeats desired for the regeneration of the Irish and of mankind an art based on regularity of proportions determined by the Pythagorean mystical numbers, as were the works of the Phidian sculptors. This type of regularity is found in the works of Phidias and, as Yeats indicated in "Under Ben Bulben," in the works of Michelangelo, who turned to the Greeks for his models. In "The Statues" Yeats described the way in which the sculptor or artist reveals the supernatural to the senses and presents to mankind these measurements for a perfect breed of men. In this conception Yeats combined the contemplative desire for communion with the supernatural, typical of his first and third periods, with the desire to effect a change in mankind, typical of his period of action; the result is a unification of conceptions. The artist, fleshing out the mystical numbers in form, effects a change in mankind, regenerates the race of men.

"Long-legged Fly" (1939) similarly emphasizes the regenerative nature of art and prefigures "Under Ben Bulben"

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[75]"On the Boiler," p. 451.

in the use of Michelangelo as the salient example of the artist who creates that which life should imitate:

> That girls at puberty may find
> The first Adam in their thought,
> Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
> Keep those children out.
> There on that scaffolding reclines
> Michael Angelo.
> With no more sound than the mice make
> His hand moves to and fro.
> Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
> His mind moves upon silence.[76]

As in "The Statues," the artist is to provide the measurements by which the sexual instinct of mankind is guided. Michelangelo's Adam on the Sistine Chapel roof is to be the model by which "girls at puberty" choose their mates. The supernatural element in Michelangelo's work is implied in the refrain: as the fly, transient like man, moves over the stream, symbolic of the flow of life, so Michelangelo's mind, the mind of the artist attuned to supernatural revelation, moves over the silence, over the "Condition of Fire."[77] From this silence, from this condition antithetical to man's ordinary existence, Michelangelo draws inspiration, and he in turn inspires the regeneration of the human race.

This theme of the artist as go-between, as the one who, revealing supernatural perfection, brings together the boys and girls who are to propagate a perfect race, is central in "Under Ben Bulben" (1939) also. In both poems the artist Michelangelo

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[76]"Long-legged Fly," pp. 617-18.

[77]See Chapter III, pp. 100-01, for a discussion of man's seeking the Condition of Fire.

serves as eugenical agent to unite the best specimens of the race. This conception of the supernatural quality of physical beauty Yeats derived from his study of Castiglione and of Dante as well as from his interest in eugenics; and he applied it to the work of Michelangelo. Castiglione, as Yeats quoted him in A Vision, considered beauty "the spoils or monument of the victory of the soul,"[78] while Dante used physical perfection as a symbol of unity of being. Yeats similarly used the perfect human body as literally and symbolically representative of unity of being, and he chose Michelangelo's figures as symbolic of this perfection.

Unity of being has other implications, however, than merely physical beauty. Since it is in general terms "the subordination of all parts to the whole,"[79] it can refer to a well-balanced body, a well-balanced state,[80] a well-balanced personality,[81] or a well-balanced religion.[82] In A Vision Yeats specifically praised the well-balanced religion, that is, the reconciliation of Christianity and paganism that he found present during the fifteenth century, and indicated that to Dürer at least it meant "that the human norm, discovered from the measurement of ancient statues, was God's first handiwork,

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[78] A Vision, p. 293.

[79] "A People's Theatre," p. 250.

[80] "The Introduction to 'The Words upon the Window-pane,'" Explorations, p. 356.

[81] A Vision, pp. 140-45.

[82] Ibid., p. 291.

that 'perfectly proportioned human body' which has seemed to Dante Unity of Being symbolised."[83] Thus unity of being, for Yeats, implied these various elements in perfect balance.

In "Under Ben Bulben" Yeats used a reconciliation of religions to lead into his main examples of unity of being. Early Christianity or Neo-Pythagoreanism (the sages "Round the Mareotic Lake"),[84] Neoplatonism (the Witch of Atlas, Shelley's Neoplatonic spirit of beauty), and Irish legends ("those horsemen" and "those women / Complexion and form prove superhuman"), all indicated to Yeats the same thing: that measurement or perfect physical beauty was "the purpose set / Before the secret working mind."[85] In this poem Yeats effected a reconciliation of philosophies or religions like that he found during the Fifteenth Phase, and he, like Dante, presented his conception of unity of being in terms of the perfect human body.

In the second section of the poem Yeats set up his own variation on the traditional dichotomy between sense and soul:

> Many times man lives and dies
> Between his two eternities,
> That of race and that of soul.

On the physical level, the level of sense, mankind progresses in a linear movement towards perfection of the race; on the

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[83] Ibid.

[84] David Daiches, ed., "Since 1890," The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1962), II, 1370, n. 2.

[85] "Under Ben Bulben," p. 638.

spiritual level mankind moves towards the supernatural, towards the moment of greatest beauty. In the rest of the poem Yeats delineated these two movements. He led into this delineation by positing the violence that must precede the critical moment at which man becomes aware of his condition and chooses his fate:

> Even the wisest man grows tense
> With some sort of violence
> Before he can accomplish fate,
> Know his work or choose his mate.

As the individual reaches a moment of violence, similarly the race reaches a comparable stage, a stage the Irish attained as they fought for the Irish Free State and Mitchel prayed, "Send war in our time, O Lord."

But how are the Irish to know their work or choose their mates? The answer is given by reference to the past, to the great periods in the history of art and literature: poet, sculptor and painter are to provide the models by which man can know and choose his proper destiny, can move towards perfection of the race and of the soul. They are to "Bring the soul of man to god, / Make him fill the cradles right." The historical process by which these figures have effected changes in mankind is then described:

> Measurement began our might:
> Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
> Forms that gentler Phidias wrought.

These measurements that inform the works of the Egyptian and of Phidias are the mystical Pythagorean numbers, which in creating a supernatural perfection of form give to the work

of art a supernatural quality, a unification of human and superhuman.

Like the Egyptian and Phidias, Michelangelo brought this same perfection of measurement to the world. Michelangelo is the sculptor and painter whose works lead modern man towards unity of being.

> Michael Angelo left a proof
> On the Sistine Chapel roof,
> Where but half-awakened Adam
> Can disturb globe-trotting Madam
> Till her bowels are in heat,
> Proof that there's a purpose set
> Before the secret working mind:
> Profane perfection of mankind.

This profane perfection is Yeats's phrase for what Dante called "the perfectly proportioned human body" or unity of being. Mankind is to progress, by the aid of Michelangelo's paintings, towards a physical perfection, which is symbolic of perfect harmony, of unity of being. Thus Yeats used a Renaissance painter and sculptor to illustrate a thirteenth-century conception of beauty, a conception that was Yeats's ideal. This ideal may also be in the tradition of Renaissance Neoplatonism, for the entire ceiling of the Sistine Chapel may be interpreted to reflect "the ascent of the soul in the hierarchy of being as it was outlined by Ficino and Pico"; that is, the movement from the imprisonment of the soul in the material condition, as shown in the Drunkenness of Noah, to its almost pure spirituality, as shown in the Creation of Adam. "The progress of the ascent . . . is one from materiality to the highest spirituality."[86] Thus Yeats used a Renaissance sculptor and painter

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[86]Myron P. Gilmore, The World of Humanism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 241.

who was imbued in Renaissance Neoplatonic doctrine[87] to illustrate a conception of unity of being that derived from the Neoplatonic tradition.

Besides using the human figures of Renaissance art to illustrate perfection of the race, Yeats also found in Renaissance art his example of perfection of the soul. Referring to the works of the Quattrocento painters, the works of the supernatural Fifteenth Phase, he described the vision of reality, the intellectual beauty, that brings the soul of man to God:

> Quattrocento put in paint
> On backgrounds for a God or Saint
> Gardens where a soul's at ease;
> Where everything that meets the eye,
> Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,
> Resemble forms that are or seem
> When sleepers wake and yet still dream,
> And when it's vanished still declare,
> With only bed and bedstead there,
> That heavens had opened.

The backgrounds of these paintings, believed Yeats, are like the visions that sleepers see in the trance-like state between waking and sleeping. The trees and sky and grass are a concrete illustration of the supernatural essence of the Fifteenth Phase. Renaissance painters provided Yeats with his example of perfection of the soul.

The dichotomy Yeats set up at the beginning of the poem between race and soul is resolved in subsequent sections as his formulations of perfection of the race and of the soul are unified through the Neoplatonic conception of perfect bodily

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[87] Ibid.

beauty. Perfection of the race he envisioned in terms of a "perfectly proportioned human body" that will come into existence as man seeks to reproduce in flesh the measurements of Michelangelo's or of Phidias' works. But perfection of the soul also is evinced by physical beauty, "of the kind Castiglione called 'the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul.'" Soul and sense, spirit and body, conjoin in a mutual perfection, bodily beauty giving evidence of spiritual perfection. The unity of being that is the result of this perfection is the ideal that Yeats set before mankind and before the Irish of his day.

He exhorted the Irish poets to perform for their race the function that the poets, sculptors and painters have performed for mankind in the past:

> Irish poets, learn your trade,
> Sing whatever is well made,
> Scorn the sort now growing up
> All out of shape from toe to top,
> Their unremembering hearts and heads
> Base-born products of base beds.

These poets are to provide the models by which mankind, specifically the Irish, can learn to "fill the cradles right." The Irish poets, like Michelangelo, are to portray "profane perfection of mankind," yet in singing of perfect physical beauty they are to choose their subject matter from Irish history and legend:

> Sing the peasantry, and then
> Hard-riding country gentlemen,
> . . . . . .
> Sing the lords and ladies gay
> That were beaten into the clay
> Through seven heroic centuries.

Although they are to sing of Ireland's past, they are also to sing of "whatever is well made"; they are to portray the supernatural measurements that lead to perfection of form, such as that found in the figures of Michelangelo. Thus the Irish poets are to portray the past in a manner that will lead the present Irishry to a future renaissance, to a rebirth or regeneration of the race.

In the central sections of "Under Ben Bulben" Yeats sang, as he would have the Irish poets sing, of physical perfection; thus he set the model by which the Irish youth might find their mates and move towards perfection of the race, a physical perfection that is ultimately indicative of a similar spiritual perfection. In the last stanza of the poem Yeats moved to a consideration of his own soul. Making a sudden dramatic gesture that unifies the entire poem as well as the thoughts of his lifetime, he described his own grave in Drumcliff churchyard, a place made meaningful to him by his family ("An ancestor was rector there") and by his country, whose history and future are symbolized by Ben Bulben itself. The epitaph leads the reader to a consideration of the individual soul:

> Cast a cold eye
> On life, on death.
> Horseman, pass by!

The reader of the epitaph, and of the poem, is enjoined to refrain from sentiment when contemplating life or death; he is encouraged instead to exhibit an heroic discipline, "something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and

cold."[88] The implications of the lines are similar to those in "Lapis Lazuli" in which Hamlet and Lear in the face of the inevitable tragedy "Do not break up their lines to weep" but are "gay" in the face of destruction. Although the reader may well experience some sense of tragedy on contemplating the death of the poet W. B. Yeats, there is to be no sorrow, for in Yeats's heroic discipline not only is this death a part of the universal historical cycles, in which "All things fall and are built again," but also it is part of Yeats's individual cycle, in which he merely moves from incarnate to discarnate existence. Thus the horseman, representing the aristocratic, antithetical Irishman Yeats wished to create, is ordered to "pass by," for Yeats himself is not in the grave; he is elsewhere in the gyring movements of time and space.

Yeats's gravestone with its epitaph thus serves as a signpost pointing towards that perfection of the race and of the soul that he sought during life and, presumably, after death. The reader is prepared to accept this vision of Yeats's grave with its universal message, for early in the poem Yeats analyzed the meaning of burial:

> Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
> Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
> They but thrust their buried men
> Back in the human mind again.

The buried men return not only through their works but also in their next incarnations.[89] Hence, in the conclusion of the

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[88]"To Dorothy Wellesley (July 6, 1935)," The Letters . . . , pp. 836-37.

[89]See Chapter III, pp. 120-24, for a description of Yeats's belief in reincarnation.

poem the reader is enjoined to pass by the irrelevant dust under the tombstone, and, by implication, to accept his own and Yeats's place in the universal process of incarnation and discarnation, moving with the help of artists and poets towards physical and spiritual perfection, towards unity of being.

In "Under Ben Bulben" Yeats depicted unity of being, and he exemplified it by the poem itself. As he stated in 1919, a sentence formed in his head when he was twenty-three or twenty-four:

> 'Hammer your thoughts into unity.' For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence. I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. . . . Now all three are, I think, one or rather all three are a discrete expression of a single conviction.[90]

"Under Ben Bulben" was Yeats's final, magnificent expression of this unity. He created his own form of literature, a literature that describes ideal beauty and leads to profane perfection of mankind; his own form of philosophy, the occult system of primary and antithetical gyres with the supernatural perfection of the Fifteenth Phase; and his belief in nationalism, a nationalism based on an admiration for the heroic figures in Ireland's past and on the hope of a future perfection of the Irish race. The poem itself is a gesture, a concrete expression of the unity of being that Yeats desired,[91] and his

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[90]"If I Were Four-and-Twenty," Explorations, p. 263.

[91]See Chapter IV, pp. 195-97, for a discussion of Yeats's own concrete image of the perfect beauty he extolled.

death is a symbol of the potentiality of regeneration of race and of soul. He brought into balance the significant elements of his life's work and created from the unity of being, "the subordination of all parts to the whole."

In this last period of his development, in which he brought his life to unity and indicated the way to regeneration, the period from Danto to Shakespeare is more important in his poetry than in any previous phase of his thought, for not only does this period provide the main source of Yeats's ideas on unity of being, it also provides him with the symbol of this unity of being: Dante's "perfectly proportioned human body" was for Yeats best exemplified in the paintings of Michelangelo. Through this conception and this example of unity of being, Yeats in this final period united the active and the contemplative life: man's search for a transcendent reality leads him to reproduce in flesh the supernatural element he discovers. Action and contemplation culminate in regeneration, in the reproduction of the perfect human body, the body painted by Michelangelo. Thus the period from Dante to Shakespeare was not only a constant influence throughout Yeats's lifetime; in the last, most vital and creative period, it was the central influence.

The art and literature of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries exerted a shaping influence on Yeats's imagination throughout his life: first, Shakespeare with his dramatic expressions of personality, Spenser with his pastoral world, and Dante with his universal symbolism; second,

Shakespeare with his transcendent, passionate heroes and Jonson with his complete expression of the individual, often in epigrammatic form; third, Spenser again with his Neoplatonism and his pastoral elegies, the Quattrocento painters with their intellectual beauty, and Dante with his symbology; finally, Shakespeare with his vital, heroic old men, and Michelangelo with his portrayal of the perfect human figures; and in the second and third periods Castiglione with his ideal, courtly world. Thus in each period of his development Yeats turned for inspiration to the period from Dante to Shakespeare, although certainly there were other literary or artistic influences that were as strong or stronger in all but the final period. Irish legends or folklore, however, is the only matter as constant in Yeats's thought as the works of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and the Irish material influenced only the content of Yeats's plays or poems, not the form. Works from Dante to Shakespeare, on the other hand, influenced the form of Yeats's poetry as well as its content, for he experimented with the poetic techniques of Spenser, Jonson and Donne, and with the dramatic technique of Shakespeare.

The Renaissance was a constant source of inspiration and joy to Yeats, for in the works of that period he found in England the greatest literature since that of Greece, and in Italy the greatest antithetical visual art since that of Greece. In the first two periods of his life, until 1915, he studied, wrote about, and emulated the works of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, especially the literature of the

English Renaissance. In the third period he continued these activities, but he also sought a philosophical explanation for the creative excellence of the period from Dante to Shakespeare and concluded that the predominance of the antithetical influx caused the flourishing of creativity found in the periods leading to and from the Fifteenth Phase. Thus Yeats gave philosophical and occult reasons to explain the great periods of literature and art and to explain why art and literature have declined since the Renaissance. In his last period, 1938-1939, he elevated Renaissance art even above the art of Greece, for it is the figures of Michelangelo that are to be models for the human race.

Thus during his life Yeats moved from admiring and imitating the works of the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries and deriving symbolist theory from Dante's and Castiglione's works, to explaining the reasons for the beauty of the Renaissance works, to finally advocating that the Irish and mankind model themselves after the figures of Michelangelo. As in his period of action, Yeats again wished to effect a change in society, and again his cultural touchstone was the Renaissance. As Yeats brought his own life and interests into unity, he symbolized that unity of body and soul by the art of Michelangelo and of the Quattrocento painters. Yeats's study of the Renaissance was one major source of his poetic and philosophical inspiration; its measurements, its forms and ideas, implemented his might.

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