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YEATS'S A VISION AND THREE PLAYS

Mary-R. Mony

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ABSTRACT

YEATS'S A VISION AND THREE PLAYS

MARY R. MONY

In a note on one of his plays William Butler Yeats states that he has always longed for a country where all people shared in a "half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief," and that he has always written as though it existed. Yeats's "mythology-philosophy" is detailed in A Vision. In this thesis I examine three of his plays in relation to that work.

The plays are not mere transcriptions of the ideas in A Vision but certain themes and symbols can seem obscure without an understanding of Yeats's philosophy. His "system" encompasses psychology, history, religion and aesthetics. Of particular interest is his concept of the Mask; it symbolizes the conflict of opposites which is the base of his philosophy, and it involves dramatic technique. Two of the plays, The Player Queen and The Only Jealousy of Emer, have literal masks, and all three deal with psychological masks in one form or another. Yeats's historical "cycles" are significant in The Player Queen and Purgatory, and his theories on reincarnation and the after-life shape The Only Jealousy of Emer and Purgatory.

The whole structure of A Vision attests to Yeats's belief in polarity as the pattern of creation and in symbolism as a mode of thought and expression. His characters, plots and imagery all reflect these beliefs and can be better understood when looked at in conjunction with A Vision.

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INTRODUCTION

YEATS AS SYMBOLIST

In "The Symbolism of Poetry" Yeats writes, "All writers, all artists of any kind in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art . . . and now writers have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism in great writers." Yeats was a symbolist in that he always sought "invisible essences" or archetypes, and tried to reveal them in his art. He makes a distinction, along with Blake, between the symbolic imagination or "vision" and allegory, the former "being a representation of what exists really and unchangeably," the latter being merely a technique in which meaning is assigned to something. "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 revelation, the other an amusement."[1] This distinction is important to consider in a study of the plays because some critics look for absolute one-to-one correspondences between Yeats's theories on history

[1] Essays and Introductions (1961; rpt. New York: Collier, 1973) p. 116.

and the personality and his fiction, and their interpretations are misguided or too limited. Yeats studiously avoids allegory by making his characters individual and human, and while his philosophy informs his plays, he is not rigidly bound to it in determining his plots, heroes or heroines.

As a symbolist it was important for Yeats to use archetypal symbols (stored in what he called the "Great Memory"), those which would "evoke and suggest" a meaning rather than be descriptive and limiting. Yeats expresses this intention when writing on the theatre: "I desire a mysterious art, always reminding and half-reminding those who understand it of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement, a complexity of rhythm, color, gesture, not space-pervading like the intellect, but a memory and a prophecy . . . ."[2] Purgatory is a perfect example of such an art. It is mysterious (borrowing its basic form from the Japanese Noh drama in which ghosts appear), and is suggestive on personal and historical levels, being both a personal "memory" and a general "prophecy" for Ireland. The symbols of barren tree and light which appear are traditional, but Yeats manages to have them convey a particular meaning for the characters as well.

Throughout his prose, Yeats asserts his interest in subjectivity, his determination to express the personal and concrete, and to avoid the abstract. Early in his career he wrote, "It is in particulars that wis-

[2] Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 255.

dom exists,"[3] and later, "A poet always writes of his personal life,"[4] and "Revelation is from the self."[5] This emphasis on particulars is not a rejection of universal truths, however, because "self" is identified as the "age-long memoried self." In "A General Introduction to My Work" (1937) Yeats criticizes the young English poets for rejecting dreams and personal emotion and for expressing not "that ancient Self" but individual intellect. "Personal emotion" was not to be transmitted directly, or for its own sake. Yeats says he wrote many poems "where an always personal emotion was woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol."[6] He chose traditional stanzas for his verse, and even what he altered he says he tried to make seem traditional.

Yeats treated soliloquies in plays very much like personal emotion in poetry. He tried to find some natural speech, rhythm and syntax, then he would "set it out in some pattern, so seeming old that it may seem all men's speech."[7] Purgatory is an example of a verse play which within its tetrameter form manages to express two very different voices, incorporating idioms, colloquialisms, meditations, prayers and straight verse. The effect is at once universal and individual.

When Yeats says the poet writes always of his personal life, what is "nature" becomes "art," but it is not just the subject matter which

[3] Essays and Introductions, p. 120.

[4] Ibid., p. 506.

[5] The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (1916; rpt. New York: Collin, 1969), p. 182.

[6] The Autobiography, pp. 101-2.

[7] Ibid., p. 359.

changes. The poet "is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete."[8] This brings us to the concept of the Anti-Self, and the Mask, one of Yeats's most important symbols.

In a letter written in 1892 to John O'Leary, Yeats said that the mystical life was the center of all he did, thought and wrote. In 1887 he had helped Madame Blavatsky open the London branch of the Theosophical Society, which he joined in the same year. Madame Blavatsky's eclectic doctrines are integral to Yeats's own philosophy. She believed in the existence of an eternal immutable principle which cannot be fully understood; the universality of flux and reflux in which the world is a conflict of opposites; and the identity of all souls with a universal oversoul. We will see in A Vision that Yeats's symbols of the Sphere and the revolving gyres correspond to these principles. At the end of the book he too admits that all still cannot be understood.

Yeats practiced meditations and began having dreams or "half-dreams" between 1897 and 1898. Their importance to him cannot be doubted for he attributes to them "the first few simple thoughts that now, grown complex through their contact with other thoughts, explain the world."[9] One of these half-dreams gave him "the Mask." Yeats says he awoke one night to find a voice, seemingly not his own, speaking through his lips: "'We make an image of him who sleeps,' it said, 'and it is not him who sleeps, and we call it Emmanuel.' After many years that thought, others often found as strangely being added to it, became

[8] Essays and Introductions, p. 509.

[9] The Autobiography, p. 252.

the thought of the mask, which I have used in these memoirs to explain men's characters."[10] Yeats first took the Mask to mean a kind of pose, deliberately created and thrust between self and the world, but later it became internalized and stood for the "anti-self": an image of all that is opposite to what one calls "oneself" but is nevertheless a part of the person. We will see this dramatized in Decima, from The Player Queen, when she puts on the mask of Queen. Whether as pose or image, the basis of the Mask is a simultaneous attraction and repulsion of opposites. In explaining some women's characters, Yeats cites his friend who generally judged harshly those whom she disliked, but who wrote comedies in which "the wickedest people seem but bold children." We will see later in A Vision that everyone is subject to conflict of Mask and Will, though it is further complicated by True and False Mask and other Faculties of the personality.

Confrontation with the Mask is essential for happiness, for union with the eternal and for creativity. "I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a re-birth as something not one's self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed."[11] In a 1915 draft of The Player Queen the heroine explains the power of the Mask:

> Septimus told me once that no one finds their genius [until] they have found some role, some image, that liberates something within them, that had else been deaf and dumb. Only by images, he said, do we make the eternal life become a part of our ephemeral life.[12]

[10] The Autobiography, p. 252.

[11] Ibid., p. 340.

[12] Cited in Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 108-9.

Only by the symbol do we tap the Great Memory which unites us all.

When confronted with the image of his anti-self, man is roused to pursue what Yeats calls the Unity of Being. It is this pursuit which gives life its meaning, and makes it an "arduous full life." Men are not just seeking to know themselves but are trying to get beyond "self" to create something better. "If we cannot imagine ourselves different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask."[13] In The Player Queen each of the main characters is seeking to create a second "self" and they succeed to varying degrees. Their success does depend upon discipline, and with Decima particularly, upon the degree to which she can "act the part."

The actual achievement of unity, we learn from A Vision, is only momentary, however. Cessation of the conflict means the end of life. One must separate in order to engender, but the two movements are simultaneous. We see this at the end of The Player Queen when, even after Decima has achieved her goal, her fate seems uncertain and we sense that the cycle of "destruction and rebirth" will repeat itself.

Yeats's vision of life as a conflict of opposites within man and between man and circumstances, his interest in the subjective experience as a source of symbols, and his desire to use archetypal symbols to evoke universal truths are basic tenets of his philosophy which he systematizes in A Vision, and which one should have an understanding of in order to fully appreciate his plays.

[13] Mythologies (1959; rpt. New York: Collier, 1972), pp. 33-4.

CHAPTER I

A VISION

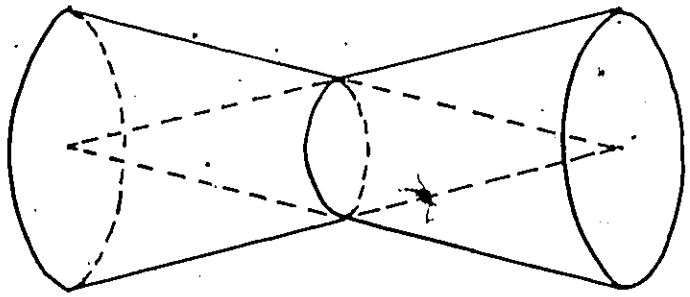
The Principal Symbols

"The whole system is founded upon the belief that ultimate reality, symbolized as a Sphere, falls in human consciousness, as Nicholas of Cusa was the first to demonstrate, into a series of antinomies."[1] The system was revealed to Yeats, he says in A Vision, by "instructors" through his wife's automatic writing. Elsewhere in the book he suggests that it may all have been but a process of remembering. However the system evolved, I think the first statement remains true, that Yeats believed in an ultimate unity which appears to man as a series of antinomies. The system certainly provides him with "metaphors for poetry" and the gyre, Wheel and attendant theories on psychology, history and the after-life are all fundamental to his work.

The principal symbol is that of two interpenetrating gyres, the apex of one touching the base of the other, each revolving in opposite directions, and both moving horizontally, "Dying each other's life, living each other's death."[2]

[1] A Vision (1938; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 187.

[2] Ibid., p. 68.

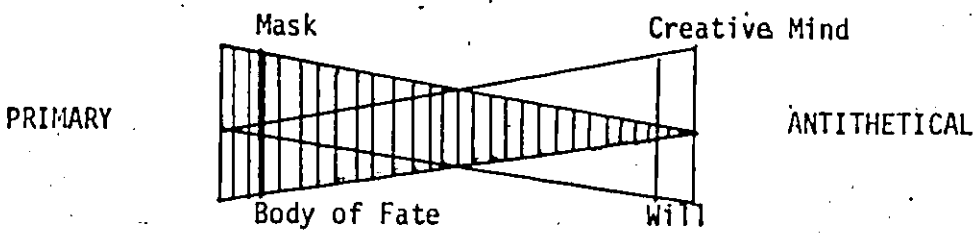


The gyres (sometimes called double cones) are symbolical of all contraries, such as concord and discord, and most importantly for Yeats of subjectivity and objectivity. As Yeats explains it, the gyres expand and contract with time, just as one's thoughts and emotions do, but pure objectivity and subjectivity, at the apex and base of the cone, are abstractions. The subjective cone is of the "antithetical tincture" and the objective of the "primary tincture." "The antithetical tincture is emotional and aesthetic whereas the primary tincture is reasonable. and moral."[3] As the antithetical expands man turns inward to the world of imagination, and becomes more "creative." As the primary expands, he becomes less self-centered and more "serving." The two forces are always in motion, however, struggling against each other, so the personality or historical period is never purely of one quality or the other. In The Player Queen and in Yeats's detailed analysis of history, we have hints of an era to come while the old is decaying, and in The Only Jealousy of Emer, Emer is of an objective phase but struggles to resist the temptation to serve "self" over another.

Within the gyres move the "Four Faculties": Will and Mask, Creative Mind and Body of Fate. Will is the "normal ego," Mask is the "object of desire or idea of the good," Creative Mind is thought and Body

[3] A Vision, p. 73.

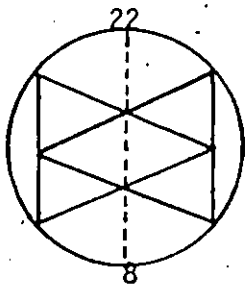
of Fate is circumstance. The first two are "lunar or antithetical or natural, the second two solar, or primary or reasonable." Will and Creative Mind oppose each other in one set of gyres, Mask and Body of Fate in another. The four are superimposed in representation, so that "the Will of the one is the Mask of the other, the Creative Mind of one is the Body of Fate of the other."



In this diagram, for example, Will is approaching complete antithetical expansion, Creative Mind primary contraction, Mask primary expansion, Body of Fate antithetical contraction. Man is classified according to the place of Will in the diagram, so here he is almost completely antithetical in nature. When the Faculties reach complete expansion or contraction, what is called the "interchange of the tinctures" occurs. What was primary becomes antithetical and vice versa. When Will reaches complete antithetical expansion it will pass into the narrow end of the primary cone and expand once more.

The horizontal movement of the gyres progresses in stages called Phases, these being 28 in all, corresponding to the phases of the moon. Phase one, where the primary phases climax, is moonless, and Phase 15, where the antithetical climax, is the full moon. Phases 8 and 22 are antithetical, Phases 1 to 8 and 22 to 28 are primary. These can be represented on the gyres but Yeats chooses another symbol, the "Great Wheel," with which to demonstrate "every possible movement of thought

and of life."



Four of the Phases, numbers 1, 15, 8 and 22, require special discussion. Phases 1 and 15 are significant because they are ideal, supernatural, and because they are the turning points for man and history. At Phase 15 a civilization reaches a pinnacle of glory and then declines. They are ideals because they are absolutes -- absolute objectivity and subjectivity. At Phase 15, Yeats tells us, thought and will are one, effort and attainment are one, and all is beauty: "The Mask as it were wills itself as beauty." Yeats associates absolute beauty with Unity of Being; here it is achieved briefly, then the nature of the person's life is altered. Phases 1 and 15 are supernatural because the opposing faculties come to rest at the same points, and "Human life is impossible without strife between the tinctures." There are no examples, therefore, of mortals at these Phases, but everyone passes through them nonetheless. At Phase 15, the person has "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."[4] The only example in Yeats's fiction of someone "representing" the Phase is Fand, a supernatural creature in The Only Jealousy of Emer. She is supremely beautiful, and permanent unity with her means an end to mortal life.

[4] A Vision, p. 136.

It is interesting that although the "interchange of the tinctures" occurs at Phases 1 and 15, it is the "consummation of a slow process." At phases 8 and 22 there is a kind of equilibrium among the Faculties, but there is also violent change. Unlike Phases 1 and 15 where the opposing gyres, say of Will and Creative Mind, have reached the same point, here they are still in opposition, but are aligned with the other two Faculties, Mask and Body of Fate. There is a temporary balance but the struggle for dominance of the antithetical or primary is great. Up to Phase 8, the primary tincture has occupied 2/3 of the gyres, and after this Phase it will occupy only 1/3. In the section on Phase 8, Yeats describes the turmoil: "Only a shock resulting from the greatest possible conflict can make the greatest possible change, that from primary to antithetical or from antithetical to primary again." It is worth noting, particularly for historical reasons, that change occurs as markedly in these two Phases as at Phases 1 and 15 because as we will see later, Yeats superimposes them so that Phase 15 of one era is Phase 8 and 22 of a "larger era." This has the effect, in the plays, of combining moments of change (Phase 1 or 15) with periods of violent revolution (8 or 22).

There are some contradictions concerning the "tincture" of the Phases, their duration, and how they affect the individual. Generally the half-half division of the Wheel into antithetical and primary is what Yeats relies on when assessing men's characters. At various points he mentions, however, that when looked at differently all the odd numbers are antithetical and the even primary; that all the subjective and objective Phases form their own wheels; that every Phase is itself a

wheel; and that each set of three is a wheel. As to the duration of each Phase, he first states that "the 28 phases constitute a month, of which each day and night constitute an incarnation and the discarnate period which follows,"[5] then more comprehensively, that "the wheel is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought." The time man takes to complete the round is not always measured in fixed intervals either: "Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it is attainable, at Phase 15 and returns to Phase 1 again."[6] One thing that can be said is that the obvious flexibility of the system allows for an equal flexibility in his works; one character, like Decima, will "seek her opposite and return, while others, Cuchulain, Emer or Fand, are stabilized at one Phase or another.

The term "incarnation" raises questions because at times Yeats refers to man being born into each Phase, other times he says that man passes through all the phases in his lifetime at least once, if not an unlimited number of times. It is also not clear to what extent an individual is affected by a particular Phase. It is stated that a man is classified according to the Phase his Will is at, but later Yeats says this is misleading because, "we are always dealing with a particular man, the man of phase 13 or phase 17 let us say."[7] Indeed, when he elaborates on each phase he almost always lists one or more people as representative of that Phase: Nietzche of Phase 12, Dante and Shelley

[5] A Vision, p. 79.

[6] Ibid., p. 81.

[7] Ibid., p. 83.

of 17, Shakespeare, Balzac and Napoleon of 20, etc. All that one can conclude is that man in his lifetime is more affected by one Phase than any other, though he passes through them all, and in later lives he will be more "of" another Phase.

As for the Faculties, it is important just to know that everyone has these contradictory aspects of his personality, and that they are always shifting to some predictable degree. They are subject too, to the law of contraries whether one is "in" or "out" of Phase. They do not make everyone identical, however, nor are they absolutely deterministic. Yeats makes it clear that there is still room in the system for choice. Regarding the Will he says: "Everything that wills can be desired, resisted or accepted," and, "Personality, no matter how habitual, is a constantly renewed choice."[8] Two of the choices are between True and False Mask and True and False Creative Mind. During any given Phase an individual can be alternately "in" or "out" of Phase, whether it be primary or antithetical. That is, when the Will is in antithetical Phase the Mask should hold sway over the Body of Fate, and when in primary Phase, vice versa. When "out of Phase" the balance is shifted to False Mask and False Creative Mind which are less desirable. One example of a character "out of Phase" is the Old Queen in The Player Queen who tries to emulate her heroine and have "courage" (her True Mask) but finally acts out of "fear" (her False Mask). Theoretically, one can exercise some control. Although Shakespeare "was the greatest of modern poets, partly because entirely true to phase . . . ," he also "used the

[8] A Vision, pp. 73-4 and p. 84.

False Mask imaginatively, explored it to impose the True . . . ."

In a note to the poem "The Second Coming," Yeats deals with the issue of determinism in his system. His doctrine (attributed to the "Judwalis" or makers of measure or of diagrams) is that , "The mind, whether expressed in history or in the individual life, has a precise movement, which can be quickened or slackened but cannot be fundamentally altered, and this movement can be expressed by mathematical form . . . . This doctrine is, they contend, not fatalistic because the mathematical figure is an expression of the mind's desire and the more rapid development of the figure the greater the freedom of the soul."[9] This "mathematical" figure representing time, space, emotion, intellect and the subjective and objective lives is the double cone, or interlocking gyres. Yeats's detailed description of the personality and its Phases does not, then, absolutely determine the fate of an individual. Some characters seem caught in the conflict of opposites (the Old Man and his mother in Purgatory) but others, Decima, Septimus and Emer, are successful in choosing their roles. Even in Purgatory we shall see that there is an element of unpredictability at the end.

"The Mind's desire," on an individual level, is that Unity of Being which we spoke of earlier, in reference to the Mask concept. In A Vision Yeats translates the same idea into more elaborate terms. Will seeks to unite with its opposite, Mask, and impose itself upon Body of Fate or circumstance. "Only by the pursuit or acceptance of its [the

[9] Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach, eds., The Variorum Ed. of the Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 823.

Will's] direct opposite . . . and by forcing that form upon the Body of Fate, can it attain self-knowledge and expression."[10] This sounds exactly like "imagining" and "assuming" the second self, which was Yeats's doctrine of the Mask. In A Vision Yeats depicts this pattern graphically with the gyres. In his fiction, we see the struggle most clearly in the character of Decima who pursues her direct opposite, and forces her new position upon the circumstances of the moment, although other characters, like Emer, will struggle in different ways to establish their identities. Yeats obviously considered this a universal pattern which "cannot be fundamentally altered." The "mind expressed in history" is dealt with largely in Books IV and V.

The Historical Cycles

"The Great Year of the Ancients," as the title to Book IV indicates, is a survey of the philosophical interpretations of history since Greek and Roman times, with main interest on the "Great Year," or the cyclical nature of history. It was extremely important for Yeats, as we noted earlier, to verify his symbols with tradition, to assure himself that they formed part of the "Great Memory." Yeats states that he knew no philosophy, except a few of the Platonic dialogues, when his instructors began, and he was told not to read any until the exposition was completed. He was encouraged, however, to "read history in relation to their historical logic, and biography in relation to their twenty-eight incarnations."[11] Once the first edition of A Vision was printed,

[10] A Vision, p. 83.

[11] Ibid., p. 12.

he sought widely for confirmation of the symbols and ideas.

For the general state of conflict and the movement between antinomies, Yeats had reference to Hereclitus' thought, "Dying each other's life, living each other's death," and to William Blake. He says, "My mind had been full of Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as a conflict -- Spectre and Emanation. . . ."[12] For the gyres specifically, Yeats finds reference in the writings of Empedocles, Plato, St. Thomas Acquinas, Dr. Dee, Macrobius, Swedenborg, and Flaubert. Empedocles had written about the vortexes of Discord and Concord which, Yeats finds, have the same form as "the fundamental symbol of my instructors." The many contexts in which the gyres appear are dissimilar, but Yeats says he agrees with Swedenborg that "the forms of geometry can have but a symbolic relation to spaceless reality." In other words; the particular use of a symbol may vary from writer to writer, or poem to poem, but that does not deny its validity as an archetype. Some critics have argued that Yeats is not a "visionary" like Blake because he does not always employ his symbols consistently, but this limits the scope or "suggestiveness" of a symbol.

Yeats takes pains to authenticate what his instructors revealed to him by placing them in the mainstream of religious and philosophical thought. The double cone used by his instructors identifies time with subjectivity, an idea which, Yeats notes, is "probably as old as philosophy." What the instructors revealed to him concerning the Faculties and Principles (functioning mainly between death and birth) "their

[12] A Vision, p. 72.

terminology" for the distinction between experience and revelation, he says "has engaged the thoughts of saints and philosophers from the time of Buddha."[13] Concerning the cyclical nature of history, an idea which "has deeply stirred men's minds" he is happy to find confirmation in writers like Henry Adams, Flinders Petrie, Spengler and Vico. He had been unaware of others' attempts to explain history philosophically, but later finds that what has been written corresponds to what his instructors gave him.

Briefly, history is organized according to the turns of the Great Wheel. "A Great Wheel of twenty-eight incarnations is considered to take, if no failure compels repetition of a phase, some two thousand odd years, and twelve such wheels or gyres constitute a single great cone or year of some twenty-six thousand years."[14] (Although this should come to 24,000 years Yeats says elsewhere that the months are 2,200 years apiece and that his instructors are "playing with the period" to align it with a movement from Aries to Aries. This sign occurs in March at the full moon, and marks the period at which civilizations change. "At the Ides of March, at the full moon in March is the Vernal Equinox, symbolical of the first degree of Aries, the first day of our symbolical or ideal year . . . ."[15] Yeats says that Christendom began at the "symbolic full moon in March"[16] and that the next antithetical

[13] A Vision, p. 22.

[14] Ibid., p. 202.

[15] Ibid., p. 196.

[16] Ibid., p. 254.

civilization will commence at the same point.[17]) Every 2000 years the civilization changes, and each is the opposite of its predecessor, being either predominantly antithetical (secular) or primary (religious). These characterizations appear in farcical form in The Player Queen, where the out-going monarch is a Christian of sorts, and the new leader is an actress who sings of pagan deities. In Book V Yeats analyzes history from 2000 B.C. to the present in terms of this system.

Yeats finds references to a Great Year in many ancient writers. Its characteristics were not always agreed upon but "the Great Year and its months pervade the ancient world."[18] He mentions among others the Upanishads and Laws of Manu, Cicero, Virgil, Anaximander, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus and Proclus. The length of the Great Year was one point that was disputed but almost all found it to be cyclical, so that when the constellations, or sun, or whatever, had come full circle, another cycle would begin. Cicero wrote, "When the whole of the constellations shall return to the positions from which they once set forth, thus after a long interval re-making the first map of the heavens, that may indeed be called the Great Year . . . ."[19]

Each cycle is opposite in nature to its predecessor. Empedocles and Heraclitus "thought that the universe had first one form then its opposite in perpetual alteration,"[20] and the Etruscan sages declared

[17] A Vision, p. 254.

[18] Ibid., p. 246.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

that "another sort of men were coming into the world."[21] In the terms of Yeats's instructors, the "primary" and "antithetical" eras predominate over one another. The primary dispensation is characterized as "dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peace its means and end," while "an antithetical dispensation obeys imminent power, is expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical."[22] In Purgatory the "levelling" present dispensation has already destroyed the previous aristocratic or "hierarchical" civilization. The "imminent power" is symbolized in "The Second Coming" by the Rough Beast and in The Player Queen by the Unicorn.

The classical civilization lasted from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, beginning at Phase 1 and dying at Phase 15. Our own civilization, Yeats says, is now almost midway between Phase 15 and 1. At the middle of the classical civilization came the Christian primary dispensation, "the child born in the Cavern." At the middle of our civilization must come antithetical revelation, "the turbulent child of the Altar." Yeats's notes tell us that these symbols were discovered by Leo Frobenius, the German explorer, in Africa. The Cavern was the symbol of nations moving westward, and the Altar the symbol of nations moving eastward. Yeats uses the East-West idea to express the coming change. "When our historical era approaches Phase 1, or the beginning of a new era, the antithetical East will beget upon the primary West and the child or era so

[21] A Vision, p. 253.

[22] Ibid., p. 263.

born will be antithetical."[23] In The Player Queen Africa is said to be the home of the pagan Unicorn, which will be lured to copulation by Eastern music.

Yeats underlines the universality of his symbols by pointing to the Cavern in works by Spengler and in the Hermetic Fragments. He also assures us that his instructors were familiar with Spengler and probably Frobenius. Indeed, if the "Cavern is time" and the radiating roads around the Altar are "Space," then they tie in with the line/plane, time/space, subjectivity/objectivity dichotomies revealed by his instructors and symbolized by the gyre.

It is interesting to note for its use later in The Player Queen the manner in which the change in civilizations may be heralded. The Etruscans thought that when the sound of a trumpet came out of the sky this meant "the mutation of the age and a general revolution of the world."[24] Yeats tells us there is a "loss of control over thought," followed by "a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation -- the scream of Juno's peacock."[25] In terms of the phases, there is "revolution" at Phase 22, and a change "equivalent to the interchange of the tinctures." One should note from the diagram facing Book V that Phase 15 is in the usual place of Phases 8 and 22, so any change which occurs could be characteristic of any of these Phases.

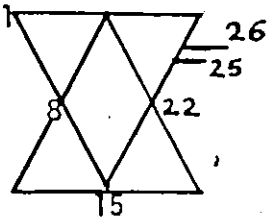
[23] A Vision, p. 257.

[24] Ibid., p. 243.

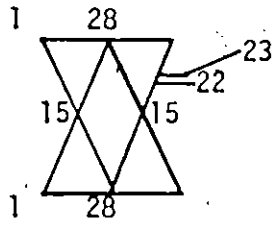
[25] Ibid., p. 268.

At the beginning of Book V: Dove or Swan, Yeats explains the simultaneity of the Phases on the Historical Cones diagram. Each era of 2000 years is an entire wheel but each millenium is also considered a wheel. When the half-era reaches Phase 28, it reaches Phase 15 or 1 of the entire era. This places the coming of Christ, which we noted before as at Phase 15, also at Phases 28 and 1 of the sub-eras. This simultaneity is felt in The Player Queen when unity of being coincides with a change of civilizations and a "revolution," and in Purgatory where the murder of the Boy recalls the murder of the grandfather, the Old Man's conception (the dream relives this moment), and the death of the mother in childbirth.[26] The diagram also helps to visualise our present state. We are at Phase 23 on the cone of Civilization but are between Phases 25 and 6 on the cone of the Era.

ERA



CIVILIZATION



Although Yeats had said in Book IV that the classical period was from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D., he starts here with 2000 B.C. and the "annunciation to Leda" which founded Greece. Yeats does not really concern himself with the Classical civilization until 1000 B.C., so perhaps he mentions Leda to draw a parallel to Christ and the Rough Beast. He does use the myth of Leda and the swan later in The Player Queen to suggest a union between the "harlot" Decima and the Unicorn, which will inaugurate a "New Dispensation."

[26] This last conjunction of images is noted by David R. Clark, W.B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality (Pennsylvania: Dufour, 1965), p. 88.

In the period 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. we have Homer and the beginnings of "personality." At 500 B.C. is Phidias and the full moon (Phase 15) where "all abounds and flows." Yeats reminds us then of the cyclical nature of history, in which civilizations rise and fall, and thought moves alternately towards the West and East: "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, and 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."[27]

Yeats then traces a pattern of decline of the Greek civilization from Phases 19 to 28, with a rise in the religious movement beginning in the last three. After the coming of Christ is the Roman decay, the conversion of Constantine (Phase 8) and the rise of the Byzantine State. The artisans of this time seem to typify "primary" qualities of unity and collectiveness. They were "almost without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of the whole people."[28] Phase 15 coincides with Justinian's reign in which "Byzantine art was perfected." At Phase 22 we have the break-up of Charlemagne's Empire and in the last quarter "secular intellect has gone" and the "spiritual life is alone overflowing." It is important to remember that when we are at Phase 28 of the millenium we are at

[27] A Vision, p. 271.

[28] Ibid., p. 280.

Phase 15 of the greater era; and when the Classical Era is at its end, the Christian is at its peak. Just after this we see a glimmer of the antithetical beginning again, with something "obscure or uncertain that could not find its full explanation for a thousand years."

The period from 1005 to 1180 corresponds to the Homeric period of 2000 years before and is of interest for its Arthurian Tales and Romanesque architecture. In the latter too, Yeats sees signs of "the first movement to a secular Europe." The period 1250 to 1300 corresponds to Phase 8 and in Dante's works, the Convito and the Divina Commedia, he sees "the first victory of personality" because Dante imposes his own personality on Christian dogma. Phases 9, 10 and 11 cover the period 1300 to 1380, in which there is "hesitation" in the gyre, as it moves toward the antithetical but has not yet shaken off the primary. In the period 1380 to 1450 the "Church is fading away" and the "general movement grows more and more westward in character."

At Phase 15 (1450 to 1550) we see the Italian Renaissance, characterized by Leonardo Da Vinci and Botticelli. It is a phase of unity: "Intellect and emotion, primary curiosity and the antithetical dream, are for the moment one."[29] But since it is also Phase 22 of the entire era (the phase of "revolution"), there is separation as well: "The breaking of the Christian synthesis as the corresponding period before Christ, the age of Phidias, was the breaking of Greek traditional faith."[30] From this time on the secular begins to supercede the religious. "All

[29] A Vision, p. 293.

[30] Ibid., p. 291.

is changed, and where the Mother of God sat enthroned, now that the Soul's unity has been found and lost, Nature seats herself."[31] Phase 22 covers the period 1875 to 1927 when Yeats published the first edition of A Vision. It corresponds to period 8 (1250 to 1300) and like it is "a period of abstraction." As the primary closes, art and the individual take precedence over science and the collective.

Given this interpretation of history, there are certainly several questions which arise: exactly how repetitive are the cycles; is there any escape; to what extent can their coming be determined; and how literally is one supposed to take the historical analysis? The first question is similar to the one we posed concerning men's characters and the Faculties, and the answer is the same. No two civilizations are exactly alike and there will be no return to the cave man. But the pendulum does swing first one way, then the other, and in general the antinomies prevail. Yeats says, "Each age unwinds the thread another age has wound," and that "every phase returns, therefore in some sense every civilization,"[32] but I think "in some sense" should be emphasized. As we noted earlier, the system is flexible and really allows for any eventuality. Yeats himself says it may seem too broad and too theoretical to be practical, but it is necessarily so "if we are not to suggest, as Vico did, civilization perpetually returning to the same point."[33] In The Player Queen the Christian era comes to an end and in Purgatory

[31] A Vision, pp. 293-4.

[32] Ibid., p. 206.

[33] Ibid., p. 255.

an age of aristocracy and luxury is over. Their successors are opposite in many ways, but resemblance to any preceeding civilization is not detailed.

The answer to the second question lies in what Yeats at times calls the 13th cycle, or cone, or sphere. He also identifies it as the "unique" and as man's "freedom." It is this which creates differences in the dispensations, and which may deliver man from the twelve cycles. At the end of Book IV Yeats predicts that the coming antithetical influx will reverse our era, but "what else it must be no man can say, for always at the critical moment the Thirteenth Cone, the sphere, the unique intervenes."[34] The thirteenth cone is also the symbol for ultimate reality, the "phaseless sphere," wherein live "all souls that have been set free."[35] I had said that the attraction and repulsion of opposites went on unceasingly, and this is true for man during his lifetime and even for a while in the after-life. There is obviously also an end envisioned, an escape from the Wheel, but when this comes or what it is like precisely cannot be told. "It knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret."[36] This same uncertainty is felt at the end of Purgatory when escape from the cycles in the afterlife is at issue.

The third and fourth questions are really the same: to what extent is the system verifiable? In the Introduction to A Vision Yeats

[34] A Vision, p. 263.

[35] Ibid., p. 210.

[36] Ibid., p. 302.

says his instructor laid out the geometrical design in order to answer his question "whether some prophet could not prick upon the calendar the birth of a Napoleon or a Christ." In Book II Yeats sees that Plato's "Golden Number" of 36,000 years is like his Great Wheel of twelve cycles. But Plato's ideal year is understood as "myth" whereas Yeats's instructors have insisted on the reliability of their system in making predictions. He asks, "Will some mathematician some day question and understand, as I cannot, and confirm all, or have I also dealt in myth?" Yeats really answers the question himself in several ways. First of all, he says explicitly that as concerns the division of history into periods of equal length, he regards these periods as "stylistic arrangements of experience." For the rest, it is "plainly symbolical." Secondly, in the history sections themselves Yeats says several times that the terms are symbolical of the human condition. "A millenium is the symbolic measure of a being that attains its flexible maturity and then sinks into rigid age."[37] He had said that "A wheel of the Great Year must be thought of as the marriage of symbolic Europe and symbolic Asia,"[38] but two pages later he asks, "Is that marriage of Europe and Asia a geographical reality? Perhaps, yet the symbolic wheel is timeless and spaceless." Yeats's symbolic interpretation of history is consistent with his treatment in the plays, where the changing civilizations are parallel but remain subordinate to a more personal drama. The detailed analysis of history according to the Phases is of interest

[37] A Vision, p. 268.

[38] Ibid., p. 203.

because it demonstrates a cyclical pattern which is reflected in the plays. But even in Purgatory where contemporary events enter in, the symbols relate finally more to the spiritual condition of the characters than to their political state.

What interests Yeats primarily is the conflict of opposites which he sees in himself, his friends, and which is reflected in the universe in general. In the Upanishads Yeats found a lightening and darkening symbolism for antithetical and primary periods. Their description of the Great Year and its months was complicated, and it is only the basic pattern which really mattered: "but it is only the simpler, more symbolic form, with its conflict of light and dark, heat and cold, that concerns me most."[39] To some extent this conflict can be expressed by mathematical form, but as Yeats said it is not fatalistic and there is "freedom of the soul." Yeats symbolizes this unknown quantity by the thirteenth sphere.

Lastly, Yeats comments on his system in the chapter "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends: An Extract from a Record Made by His Pupils." It might seem from the first reading of this section that Yeats is mocking his own book, but I think if anything is being poked fun at it is his supposed sources and not the ideas. And even if one is supposed to be skeptical about his "instructors," one should never doubt the seriousness with which Yeats looks to tradition to authenticate his symbols.

[39] A Vision, p. 246.

The source of Robartes' ideas is an ancient book called Speculum Angelorum et Hominum written by one Giraldus. It had twenty-eight allegorical pictures, including a unicorn and a wheel with phases of the moon marked on it. Robartes is visited by an old Arab who claims he is a member of the Judwalis or Diagrammatists. The Arab says the wheel is the doctrine of his tribe and draws two interlocking "whorls" which he says have the same meaning as the wheel. Later on with his friends Robartes speaks of the coming "end" or "transformation" of our civilization and shows them the "lost egg of Leda" which when hatched will bring about the change. He also gives his friends a discourse based on the philosophy of the Judwalis and of Giraldus. He affirms that "reality is a congeries of beings and a single being," and that "After an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace comes an age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war."[40] Obviously all the principal elements of A Vision are included here, the Wheel, gyres, and cycles of civilization based on primary and antithetical characteristics. A letter to Yeats follows, written by John Aherne, as fictional a character as Robartes. Aherne confirms that there is no essential difference between Yeats's book and Robartes' material. He does, however, take exception to the sources of both. The automatic script could well be "but a process of remembering" and the portrait of Giraldus looks suspiciously very much like Yeats himself.

Even if Yeats's instructors did not exist and he did not take the calendar literally, it does not follow that the system is just a set of

[40] A Vision, p. 52.

gimmicks, as one critic has described it. Yeats was a symbolist and the mystical life was "the center of all he did, thought and wrote" for over forty years. The geometrical forms may not always accurately describe reality, but they were only intended to express what Yeats saw as a general pattern of creation and he was obviously not alone in his beliefs.

CHAPTER II

THE PLAYER QUEEN

The Player Queen is closely related to A Vision because both deal with antinomies, Phases, and cycles as manifested in men's personalties and in history. In the play we see the main characters searching for their "anti-selves," and a concomitant approaching reversal of the cycles of civilization. The human aspect of the conflict of opposites is ultimately more important than the historical, however, just as it was in A Vision. Yeats himself said several times, as we noted, that the historical terms were really symbolical of the human condition. This is significant for an interpretation of the play because some critics would have us believe that Yeats's theories on the Mask are secondary here to those on the historical cycles.

I would like to show how Yeats's system informs the play while at the same time keeping in mind, as Becker says, that "Yeats is primarily trying to write a play."[1] In a note to the play Yeats says he wanted to avoid allegory, and thought he had finally succeeded by turning "tragedy" into a "farce." He admitted: "I wasted the best working months of several years in an attempt to write a poetical play where every character became an example of the finding or not finding of what

[1] William Becker, "The Mask Mocked: Or, Farce and the Dialectic of Self," Sewanee Review, LXI (1953), p. 85.

I have called the Antithetical Self; and because passion and not thought makes tragedy, what I made had neither simplicity nor life . . . . At last it came into my head all of a sudden that I could get rid of the play if I turned it into a farce . . . ."[2] The play is infused with humor so we are not allowed to take the ideas too seriously, and the main characters are multi-dimensional, with passions for, or against, each other as well as for their ideals.

The story is divided, as Becker notes, into two parts, one concerning a troupe of actors led by the poet Septimus, including his wife Decima and his mistress Nona, the other concerning a Queen, a Prime Minister and a discontented populace on the point of revolution and murder. The stories are connected because the Prime Minister engages the players to perform a play and because Decima eventually becomes the new Queen. The play is "The Tragical History of Noah's Deluge." Although it is never performed, the characters act out in the larger structure of The Player Queen their "roles" of Noah, his wife and sister, and the animals, as the era ends.

The end of an era, according to Yeats, is marked by revolution, confusion, and a general degeneration of previously revered values.[3] In this play we see the impending end of the Christian era in which everyone is acting in a decidedly unchristian manner, and there seems

[2] Introduction to The Resurrection, London, 1934, Russell K. Alspach, ed., The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 932.

[3] A Vision, p. 268.

to be a general state of unrest. We are alerted at the very beginning to the state of affairs by two old men in grotesque masks who complain about the "world grown very wicked" and about people who are always "in a passion about something or other." More obviously, when Septimus first appears he speaks of "An uncharitable place, an unchristian place," and he repeats this five times in the course of Scene I. All doors are closed to him, as they were before Christ's birth, and no one wants to help him. He is left, as he exaggeratedly puts it, like the man in the parable about the good Samaritan, "Robbed . . naked . . . bleeding . . . and they pass by on the other side of the street." The suggestion of a revolution comes when the Citizens and Countrymen enter portending "a bloody day's business." None of them has seen the Queen in her seven year reign, and now she is accused of being a "bad evil-living witch." Opinion is actually divided as to whether she is a witch or holy woman, demonstrating their confusion, and the extreme opposites characteristic of either Phase 28 or 22 (the phase of revolution).[4] The First Citizen says, "We'd have no man go beyond evidence and reason" but in the same sentence says they should murder the Queen because of some questionable, third-hand report which is their only "evidence." After deposing the Queen they would make their Prime Minister king. All this is clearly an example of the decay characteristic of the end of an era.

There is another indication that we are going through a situation similar to Phase 22, in Septimus's behavior and complaints. The suggestion is not confirmed until much later in the play, but a knowledge of

[4] A Vision, p. 205.

Yeats's A Vision brings it to one's attention. At Phase 22 there takes place "an interchange between portions of the mind which resembles the interchange between the old and new primary, the old and new antithetical at Phase 1 and Phase 15 . . . . The mind that has shown a predominantly emotional character, called that of the Victim, through antithetical phases, now shows a predominantly intellectual character, called that of the Sage . . . ."[5] In Scene I Septimus considers himself, and is, the "victim." He complains that although others have "bad wives" they were not left like him, "shivering in the pale light of dawn, to be run over, to be trampled upon, to be eaten by dogs, and all because their wives have hidden themselves." But in Scene II, after he sees the "advent of a New Dispensation" he declares repeatedly, "I am extraordinarily wise." He is unmoved by his wife's pleas, and actually calls for a "trampling." He says of the Unicorn, "I will bid him trample mankind to death and beget a new race." So far in Scene I the "physical" revolution is more prominent than the "personal," but ultimately we will see that the latter is the more significant type.

The Unicorn, like the revolution, also has at least a dual significance in the play. When Septimus defends the Unicorn in Scene I, we have a glimpse of a pagan civilization to come. At one point Septimus had likened himself to Christ, asking to be brought to a stable, but when Christian charity failed, he aligned himself with the pagan: "What do I care for any one now except Venus and Adonis and the other

[5] A Vision, p. 159.

planets of heaven?"[6] This new allegiance portends change for the civilization and for himself. In "the midst of this uncharitable town" Septimus has a vision of a pure Unicorn. For him the Unicorn is chaste, noble, beautiful, religious, dangerous and flighty. It is not, however, "religious" in a Christian sense. Septimus associates it with pagan astrology, the "great Bear" constellation, rather than Christian mythology, as was done in the Middle Ages.[7] Septimus also says he is not drunk but "inspired" and he even compares himself to a pagan god in the form of a swan. This recalls the rape of Leda by the swan (Zeus) which later produces Helen and the fall of Troy and is the "annunciation" of the Classical Era. These images taken together certainly suggest a return of such an era.

Despite the crowd's hostility, Septimus persists in defending the Unicorn's reputation, and in that does seem to rise above his drunken stupor. Septimus's struggle between self and anti-self is already manifested here. He wants to distinguish himself from the "bad popular poets" who are coming, probably, from a brothel, and we sense he is superior, but at the same time he is something of a buffoon. At this

[6] Adonis is not a planet, but one must remember that Septimus is drunk when he makes this speech. Yeats relates an episode in his Memoirs in which a drunken man came up to him and said "I care for nobody now but Venus and Adonis and the other planets of heaven." Memoirs, p. 111, cited in A. N. Jeffares and A. S. Knowland, A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 147.

[7] Margaret B. Freeman, The Unicorn Tapestries (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), p. 17, and Canon John Arnott MacCullock, ed., The Mythology of All Races (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), IV, V, VI, 426-28, 276, 109.

point he does not seem capable of handling either his "bad wife" or the crowd, some of whom merely knock him down and shove him aside. Peter Ure rightly suggests that the Unicorn is Septimus's mask because it is his vision of all that he is not -- chaste and noble; and the image of the Unicorn (it never actually appears) does shape his character. It "inspires" him to defy the crowd, to see the coming of the New Dispensation, and to leave Decima rather than be compromised. We will see that later Septimus continually compares himself to the Unicorn, and even eventually can say that he is "a violent virginal creature" like the Unicorn.

In defending the Unicorn, Septimus is also preparing to assume "the mask of Noah" (a pre-Christian figure). Decima is beautiful and flighty like the Unicorn, and she previously had "inspired" him to write poetry. Now he feels "victimized" by her. Although he says she was once in need of protection when she was "a frail child . . . in the midst of a flood, in danger of drowning, so to speak,"[8] now that she may have "drowned herself" to avoid playing a part, he no longer cares. Instead it is the Unicorn which he declares "I will protect."

I would like to point out that Septimus's predicament, his vision, and the revolution are treated humorously, so the viewer does not become bogged down in philosophical allusions. Although Septimus likens himself to Christ, he does not seem Christ-like, and his declaration that he is a dramatist and poet who has played before Kubla Khan meets only with a bucket of cold water being thrown on him. His vision of

[8] Collected Plays (1934; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 255.

the pure Unicorn, while ennobling, is comically out of place. In the midst of a group heatedly discussing the Queen's chastity, Septimus launches into a tirade about the Unicorn's chastity, a point which no one had thought of or cares about. The revolutionaries are even more ridiculous. The Big Countryman is obtusely bent on strangulation, and although the group is supposedly intent on the overthrow of the monarchy, they all flee in terror before an old beggar who is seeking straw and who foresees the very thing they wish for.

The beggar serves at once as the best means of authenticating the change in civilizations, and of mocking it. The last time he went into a trance and brayed like a donkey, the crown did change hands, and now he feels the donkey's "itch." Donkeys are traditionally associated with prophecy[9] but this man-donkey is an obvious farcical figure. His braying also has none of the solemnity of the Etruscan's trumpet or "Juno's peacock" with which, Yeats tells us in A Vision,[10] the change was announced in antiquity. When the two "inspired" men, the beggar and Septimus, leave the stage together, there seems a possibility their two visions may coincide, but since they are talking "at" rather than "to" each other, there is also some doubt.

Scene I is largely devoted to Septimus and his vision of the Unicorn, but there are also hints of other mask plays to come with Decima and the Queen. Decima is referred to repeatedly as a "bad wife," and she has run away to avoid performing in the play, although she is the principle actress. The Queen is certainly a recluse and possibly "a

[9] Giorgio Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960) p. 195.

[10] A Vision, pp. 243, 253, 268.

witch." Before they even appear we sense that neither of these women is suited to her present role.

The main characters' struggles between self and anti-self dominate Scene II, and through them the "destruction and rebirth" of civilization is achieved. The story of Noah's ark symbolizes the change on both levels. The Prime Minister announces immediately at the opening of Scene II that the players are to perform "The Tragical History of Noah's Deluge" in order to appease the people, but ironically it cannot be performed and so the "deluge" or revolution proceeds to gather momentum. Decima, displaying the "mulish obstinacy" of Noah's wife, refuses to play this role, and is even believed to have drowned herself to avoid doing so. The Queen, whom we meet shortly, also seems inclined to self-destruction but both of these women are also seeking to be "reborn" as their ideals, whether it be queen or saint. In the end it is the assumption of those masks which brings about the "New Dispensation."

The chosen play is a slap-stick comedy, and here too we are not allowed to take the themes too seriously. The Prime Minister chooses it because it demonstrates the obstinacy of women and because it is not "a dull, poetical thing." Decima pops her head out from under the throne at the mention of her drowning and the Queen appears pathetic and silly rather than tragic.

The Queen displays a conflict of opposites but it is presented on a comic level. She makes it apparent from her first appearance that she would rather imitate her idol, "Holy Saint Octema," than be a Queen. She says she longs to seclude herself and pray but she is motivated by

timidity rather than by any religious conviction. In fact she has not the courage to be saintly or queenly because she is only "almost certain" she's ready for martyrdom, and she exits anxiously asking the Prime Minister for his plan to appease the people. Her ill-fitting clothes and "unmajestic walk" create the impression of silliness and unsuitability for her role.

In the Queen's discourse with the Prime Minister she mentions a Unicorn but it does not have the same significance for her as it did for Septimus or the populace. All of them project images of it which reflect something of themselves, however, indicating that the importance of the Unicorn in this play lies in the image people have of it more than in its actual existence (if it has one). The vulgar people view it only as a beast acting from instinct, the Queen sees in it her own ideal of "austerity" and self-mortification, and Septimus his ideal of the pure and noble. Later Septimus will say that "Man is nothing till he is united to an image" and that the Unicorn should be the "new Adam" but at the end it is only in the former function, as image, that the Unicorn is significant.

Decima also has an Image to which she aspires. Her conflict between self and ideal is symbolized by a literal choice of masks. She was assigned the role of Noah's wife but she refuses to put on that mask because although she is Septimus's wife, and acts obstinately like Noah's, she does not want to have the same fate, which is ultimate submission. She enters the scene fully when she is comically lured from her hiding place by the prospect of food, but even hunger does not weaken

her determination. She tells Nona, "the only part in the world I can play is a great queen's part" and she sings the song of the "mad singing daughter of a harlot" in which the harlot dreams her daughter is destined to wear a crown. (The harlot, we may recall from "The Adoration of the Magi," will indeed preside over the new era. This association becomes pertinent later in the play.) Although Nona reminds her of her "lowly birth" and says she is only fit for "low comedy" Decima insists that it is not a matter of birth but of creating the right part. She says, "The Queen cannot play at all, but I could play so well." She wants to determine her own life, to be in a position of command, and so she refuses to be subject to her husband. "I am not to eat my breakfast unless I play an old peaky-chinned, drop-nosed harridan that a foul husband beats with a stick because she won't clamber among the other brutes into his cattle-boat." Decima is free to choose her masks, and circumstances or fate later confirm her choice. This is entirely consistent with A Vision in which one is free to choose one's Mask, which in turn influences the Body of Fate.

Aside from the general pattern of opposites which is the same in A Vision as in this play, the names of the characters and their general traits fit with the corresponding phases in the Great Wheel. Each character is "of" his particular phase and each seems to be approaching Phase 15, or unity with his opposite. They are all at the same "historical" point on the Great Wheel, approaching the end of a cycle. At phase 10 (Decima) we have "more desire of action and of command" than at Phase 9, and "the man (Creative Mind from Phase 20, phase of greatest

dramatic power) sees all his life as a stage play where there is only one good acting part." Decima clearly indicates her desire for command and for playing only a queen's part. Her insistence on the latter shows how "theatrical" is the attainment of one's opposite. Decima also has the "greatest dramatic power" of all the characters, the power to choose and assume a leader's role. If he is "true to phase," Yeats tells us, he is "proud, masterful and practical," and "if he triumph, may end ambition through the command of multitudes."[11] At the end Decima is clearly in control and "commands the multitudes" as the new queen. She is proud of her new role, and practical in accepting the Prime Minister and banishing Septimus. At Phase 8 (St. Octema) we have a person whose True Mask is courage and False is fear. Out of phase a condition of terror; when true to phase, of courage unbroken through defeat."[12] St. Octema may have been "in phase" but the Queen is clearly "out." At phase 7 (Septimus), the man performs "a last act of courage, a defiance of the dogs that must soon tear the man into pieces. Such men have a passion for history, for the scene, for the adventure."[13] His True Creative Mind is Heroic sentiment, his False, Dogmatic sentimentality. Septimus acts bravely (though with bravado) when defending the Unicorn's reputation, and later shows courage before the revolutionaries coming to defeat what he sees as the "servants of the Unicorn." He is eager to seek out the Unicorn in Africa and is an actor. At the same time Septimus can be highly emotional and illogical. Being drunk, he affirms, is

[11] A Vision, pp. 122-3.

[12] Ibid., p. 117.

[13] Ibid., p. 116.

infinitely superior to being sober. He warns Decima, "Never trust a sober man. All the world over they are unfaithful." And earlier he says, "There is courage in red wine, in white wine, in beer, even in thin beer sold by a blear-eyed potboy in a bankrupt tavern, but there is none in the human heart." At Phase 9 (Nona) we see: "It may even be that he is haunted by a delusive hope, cherished in secret, or bragged of aloud, that he may inherit the Body of Fate and Mask of a phase opposed to his own."[14] Nona has secretly been Septimus's lover, and in Scene II finally brags of it to Decima. She is more than willing to play the part of Noah's wife and even alters the costume to fit herself, thus assuming the fate and mask which should be Decima's.

All this is not to say that the characters are completely delimited by the phase examples, or that the examples are not different in other respects, but the similarities seem too close to be accidental. The first edition of A Vision was published after The Player Queen (1922), but Yeats had begun it or his instructors had first appeared as early as 1917. In another play, The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919), most of the characters are clearly in a particular phase, and one of them participates in one of the stages of the after-life described in A Vision. It is possible then that the correspondences here were intentional, and are examples of the ways in which the system provided "metaphors" for his plays.

In the first section of this thesis when I was explaining the concept of the Mask, I said that the anti-self was an image of all that

[14] A Vision, p. 120.

is opposite to what one calls "oneself" but is nevertheless a part of the person. We can see this illustrated in the character of Decima because although as low born actress (and possibly "harlot") her "opposite" is a queen, she is already queenly in nature. She only needs to play the part to become that "self." She is really a born ruler, beautiful, forceful, manipulative and vain. In discussing Septimus's possible fate if she does not play her assigned part, Decima displays regal qualities. She is proud of her power over Septimus and admits it arises from her manipulation and the suffering she brings him. She is right in thinking that Septimus would refer to her as his "beautiful flighty wife" for those indeed are the adjectives he uses. He describes the Unicorn the same way, and both are sources for his poetic inspiration. In his poem Decima wears "the mask of burning gold" which "sets his heart to beat,"[15] but which also taunts him.

Decima's vanity is fed by Septimus's poems, but she also holds them "upon her heart" and seems genuinely stricken when she discovers how they were composed. In a comic comment on poetic creation, Nona tells her Septimus has been tapping out the rhythm of the poems on her shoulder. Decima is not just a two-dimensional character, and her reaction is quite human. She suddenly changes her tune and declares she deliberately threw her husband away, although later she tries to win him back.

What happens next suggests a link between Decima, the changing cycles and the Unicorn. After the players enter dressed as animals she

[15] The Collected Plays, p. 261, and The Collected Poems (1956; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), p. 93.

"begins cutting through the breast-feathers of the Swan." Since Septimus had referred to himself as a divine swan in Scene I, this symbolizes her rejection of him. She then turns to the "animals," saying she will choose among them a new man. Peter Ure interprets this as a "clinging to the old life" and an attempt to "clamber among the other brutes into (Noah's) cattle-boat."[16] I do not find, however, that Decima gives the impression she feels helpless without Septimus. It seems more as though in rejecting Septimus as a lover and in seeking a new one, she is attempting to make a "new life." She does not find any of the animals satisfactory but does "stretch and yawn as if I loved." (This phrase is used by Yeats to suggest the lassitude that follows sexual intercourse.)[17] She repeats the phrase in connection with Queen Leda and the Swan. I agree here with Wilson that the beasts in her song are symbols for the divine and that she is "making a sexual invitation to Godhead."[18] The song refers to Queen Pasiphae (though, as Wilson notes, Yeats may have meant Europa) choosing a bull as she was wooed by Zeus in the form of a white bull. Zeus, of course, also took the form of a swan and coupled with Leda, a myth related by Yeats in his poem "Leda and the Swan." She is no longer the "mad singing daughter of a harlot," but the harlot herself: "Any bird or brute may rest/ An empty head upon my breast." Just

[16] Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 141.

[17] Jeffares and Knowland, p. 249.

[18] F. A. C. Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958), p. 182.

as she finishes Septimus enters announcing "the end of the Christian Era, the coming of a New Dispensation, that of the new Adam, that of the Unicorn . . . . I will rail upon the Unicorn for his chastity. I will bid him trample mankind to death and beget a new race." The implication is that the Unicorn, representing the pagan deity, will couple with the harlot, Decima, and start a new civilization. The harlot, we recall, in symbolizing "all that our age had rejected," is the next in Yeats's series after Leda and Mary to launch a new era.

Even without making the connection between Decima and the harlot, it seems plain that if anyone inaugurates the New Dispensation it will be Decima and not the Queen. Melchiori maintains that the "imaginary union" of the Queen with the Unicorn, invented by the populace, is "meant as a new myth: the end of an era and the beginning of a new one symbolized in the conjunction of a woman and a fabulous animal . . . ." [19] I agree that this union was imaginary, but as such it could hardly symbolize propagation. Later in Scene II the Queen speaks to Decima about love, and what she says indicates that she has had nothing to do with it. She says, "I was afraid it would come in at the eye and seize upon me in a moment." This could mean love, or it could also refer to the Unicorn. The Unicorn had been seen by the people near the castle, but given the Queen's nature and her declarations, was probably not coupling with her. In any case, the New Dispensation of which Septimus speaks is not likely to be born from a union with the Queen, who is a last relic of the Christian Era.

[19] Melchiori, p. 66.

Septimus in Scene II still maintains that the Unicorn is chaste, but that he "hesitates." Instead of defending to the death the Unicorn's chastity, Septimus now says the Unicorn deserves death if it is not filled with desire. This is humorous, but what is more important is the obvious contrast. The Unicorn has traditionally been and is associated here with chastity, and as Melchiori points out, "the consummation by the Unicorn of an act of lust would mean reaching its own opposite, its mask."[20] From A Vision we know that it is the attainment of one's opposite which brings about the reversal of the gyres, the dominance of the "antithetical" personality or age. Septimus, like his "brother" the inspired beggar, senses that a change is imminent, and it is symbolized for him by the Unicorn's copulation.

The change does come about because someone unites with his Mask, but it is not the Unicorn. At the end of Scene I Septimus thought the mob was stirred up by the "bad popular poets" who were jealous of his fame. In Scene II he thinks the attack is coming because they are "servants of the Unicorn." This time it is the players in Septimus's company who think the mob has been stirred up by other players' jealousy. They speak of the play "The Fall of Troy" and the Stage Manager says the crowd may "burn the place down as if it were Troy." Though Troy was not the whole world, its total destruction suggests that of the Great Flood. This link is reinforced when the players escape dressed as the animals in Noah's Ark. But the crowd is not any more concerned with the Unicorn and "his servants," or the players, than it was with Septimus earlier.

[20] Melchiori, p. 67.

If there is going to be a change in civilizations it seems doubtful that it will be effected, at least directly, by Septimus or the Unicorn.

Septimus in any case is really more concerned with himself and his art. As one of the "last artists" he wants to "save the images and implements of our art," particularly the "high-crowned hat of Noah," and at this point the mask of the sister of Noah. He has not yet completely rejected Decima whom he later associates with this mask. He tells Nona and Decima that "Man is nothing till he is united to an image" and he then proceeds to realize this. He compares himself to the Unicorn when he says, "Never trust a man who has not bathed by the light of the Great Bear," something the Unicorn does and which Septimus had said even made it "drunk." At the present moment the water is "cold" and the Unicorn reluctant, but Septimus is fully drunk and "inspired." He declares, "I am extraordinarily wise." He refuses to lie to Decima in order to escape. He, like Decima earlier, refuses to play a role he feels is untrue or degrading in some way. The "Victim" has become "Sage." He says, "Am I a rascally sober man, such a man as I have warned you against? . . . What I promise I perform, therefore my little darlings, I will not promise at all." When Decima warns him they will all perish if he does not swear never to see Nona again, he still refuses, even if it means he cannot seek the Unicorn: "I shall die railing upon that beast. The Christian era has come to an end, but because of the machinations of Delphi he will not become the New Adam." The Unicorn will not, as we suspected, play a part in the new civilization, but as Image it does affect a change in Septimus. He has realized his

union with his mask: "Because I am an unforsworn man I am strong: a violent virginal creature, that is how it is put in 'The Great Beastery of Paris'." His rejection of Decima, his former source of inspiration, is symbolized in his final decision to leave behind the mask of Noah's sister. His wife is beautiful, bad and flighty and the mask is beautiful, drowned, wicked and flighty. He decides to save Noah's hat which he will carry "with dignity." "I will go slowly that they may see I am not afraid."

Whether or not Septimus will actually go off to Africa to seek the Unicorn is not clear. The beggar enters and tells Decima the time is near for him to bray, and for the crown to change. When the Queen enters Decima is about to kill herself, but the Queen stops her. The Queen confesses that although she wanted to be a martyr she was afraid of the angry crowd and ran away. Decima offers to exchange clothes so the Queen can escape and she can die dressed like a Queen. "If only I could wear that gold brocade and those gold slippers for one moment, it would not be so hard to die." The only thing that matters for Decima now is the destruction of the old self and the creation of the new. She exemplifies at this moment Yeats's thoughts on the Mask: I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a re-birth as something not one's self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed."[21] The Queen leaves wearing a "nun-like dress," an attire more suited to her "self," and is happy to realize

[21] W. B. Yeats, "Anima Hominus," Mythologies (1917; rpt. New York: Collier, 1972), p. 334.

her goal of seclusion, though she never gains courage. She suggests Decima turn away from the crowd but she need not. "In a moment" Decima has become Queen and no longer wishes to die.

When the Prime Minister, the Bishop, and others enter Decima declares, "I am Queen," and she takes to command as though born to it. She agrees to marry the Prime Minister but makes it clear he will be subject to her. When the Prime Minister avows his loyalty she says she will "have a good look at my new man" recalling her earlier words when she was choosing among the beasts. At this point the bray of a donkey is heard. The crown has changed, the New Dispensation is presumably inaugurated, and the Prime Minister is the "New Adam." He declares "there has been a miracle" and "Sleep of Adam, I must have that woman for wife. The Oracle has settled that."

It is interesting to note how Septimus's presentiments about the future turn out. Both he and the Prime Minister mention the Oracle in relation to the New Adam. Because of the "machinations of Delphi" the Unicorn's place is filled by another "number one," the Prime Minister. The latter throughout has been a comic opposite to the image of the majestic Unicorn. He has blustered about muttering "Sleep of Adam," bemoaning the "prank" played upon Adam by "the Old Man in the Sky" when He created Eve. Although the Prime Minister attains his goal of marrying the Queen, he too has certainly been played a prank because he will be dominated by Decima. He is a farcical figure who mocks the notion of an "Anti-Christ," so our attention is directed back to Decima who really brings about the change.

At the end of the play the masked Decima tells the players that their lost friend (herself) "seeks destruction somewhere and with some man she knows nothing of." Two critics, Wilson and Vendler, feel the implication is that the Unicorn, who has been copulating with the Old Queen, will transfer his affections to Decima and inaugurate the New Dispensation, though Wilson thinks only Septimus will survive the destruction and Vendler thinks the same of Decima. Other critics disagree. Ure points out that the change of crowns is effected by Decima's uniting with the mask of her anti-self, that she never mentions a Unicorn, nor marries one. He thinks the Unicorn as "beast-deity" is the property of Septimus's imagination and goes off with him. J. R. Moore feels that Wilson's interpretation suggests "the real drama lies entirely outside the play Yeats has given us."[22] I agree with this last statement because the play centers around Decima and her personal conflict, more than the historical change. I think Wilson is incorrect when he says Yeats's theory of opposites is not central to the play, and that it is more "about" his cyclic theory of history.[23] The "miracle" occurs because of her and though the historic element is there, it is really symbolic of the human condition.

It is important to remember that the play is a farce, and that Yeats has stated his intention to mock his own ideas. While the Unicorn

[22] John Rees Moore, Masks of Love and Death (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p. 188.

[23] Wilson, Yeats and Tradition, p. 177.

is ultimately more important for Septimus as his Mask than as an Anti-Christ, he does proclaim him as the New Adam and Decima is set up as a "harlot figure." The New Dispensation should be inaugurated by their coupling, but it is not. There is no indication that the Unicorn will displace the Prime Minister. There are no "servants of the Unicorn" besides Septimus, no one to bring about another "revolution." In his protestations at the end Septimus does not demonstrate any inclinations to pursue his adventure to Africa. The oracle settles the question as Septimus had predicted and the Prime Minister confirms. Both the Prime Minister and the old beggar give a strong farcical tone to the changing civilization. If it were not for their presence one might possibly speculate on the Unicorn's coming, but as such it is really outside the realm of the play.

The Unicorn can be a symbol not just for physical destruction and rebirth but also for a spiritual one. Melchiori emphasizes the physical aspect when he equates the "Rough Beast" of Yeats's "The Second Coming" with the Unicorn in Yeats's prose and earlier plays, Where There is Nothing and The Unicorn from the Stars. In this last play the Unicorn does symbolize destruction, but at the end the main character realizes that he had misinterpreted his dream, and that his "business is not reformation but revelation." Martin Hearne says, "The battle we have to fight is fought out in our mind. There is a fiery moment, perhaps once in a lifetime, and in that moment we see the only thing that matters" (III, l. 363-68). In The Player Queen too there is no revolution, only revelation. We have seen that the Unicorn was Septimus's

mask, his ideal of nobility, purity, and strength. At the end he carries off the "noble hat of Noah" and is strong like the "violent virginal creature" because he is unforsworn. Decima understands "in the wink of the eye" that she was born to be a queen and has the principal "revelation" of the play when she indeed becomes the player queen. In Septimus's mind the Unicorn would initiate the new era by uniting with its "anti-self." As Melchiori says, the Unicorn is chastity itself, and copulation and begetting are its opposite, its Mask. "Consummation by the Unicorn of an act of lust would mean reaching its own opposite, its Mask; this is outside the range of natural possibilities, it is a miracle."[24] Instead the new era and the "miracle" is accomplished by Decima. Septimus frequently compares the Unicorn and Decima as "flighty," "beautiful" and "terrible" and though Decima is not "image and beast" these are the qualities which enable her to establish her position.

There are various suggestions in the play that some kind of "antithetical" revelation is coming. The "primary" Christian era is obviously at an end, to be replaced by one predominantly pagan. At one point Septimus says they will seek the Unicorn in "the high tablelands of Africa" where they will make "Ionian music -- music with its eyes upon that voluptuous Asia." In A Vision we saw that East symbolizes "antithetical," West "primary," and that these symbols originated in Africa.[25] Septimus's references to Africa and the East, though obscure,

[24] Melchiori, p. 67.

[25] A Vision, p. 259.

add to the evidence an approaching "antithetical" change. That this occurs because of Decima and not the Unicorn should not surprise us too much. Yeats also says in A Vision that East and West and their alternating dominance are really symbols for the relations between men and women. He says all his symbols "can be thought of as the symbols of the relations between men and women and of the birth of children . . . . We may think of the wheel as an expression of alternations of passion, and think of the power of woman beginning at symbolical East or Aries . . . and of the power of man . . . beginning at symbolical West."[26] At the end of the play Decima has clearly taken control of the kingdom, dominating the former real ruler the Prime Minister, and banishing Septimus. In A Vision and in this play, the historical terms and upheavals, the "division into periods of equal lengths" are subordinate to the conflicts within and between individuals.

In the first section I cited a letter from Yeats to John O'Leary in which he said the mystical life was the center of all he did, thought and wrote. Yeats's emphasis on internal battles over external is consistent with a mystical philosophy. The scholar Gershom Scholem, for example, distinguishes between two strains of eschatological sensibilities: the apocalyptical and the mystical. In the apocalyptic mode, the revelations of "cataclysmic messianic advents" are taken to represent actual physical upheavals. In the mystical mode, these upheavals and battles between Good and Evil are said to be "waged internally -- within

[26] A Vision, pp. 211-12.

the mystical body (corpus mysteriosum) of the believer -- for possession not of the world but of the soul."[27] In this play history moves in cycles, and the change is precipitated by a "would-be" revolution. But as I said before, the only real revolutions in the play are personal ones, battles fought within Decima, Septimus, and even the Queen, for destruction of the old self, and creation of the new.

But the cycle repeats itself unendingly. When Decima puts on the mask of the drowned sister of Noah, at the end of the play, we can foresee her end. Decima does not sound very optimistic when she speaks of destruction and the "foolish smiling face" of her mask. She has reached her goal, but she is saddled with the Prime Minister, and her reign will not last forever. Septimus, as "Noah," will undoubtedly manage despite his banishment, but he exits as he entered, speaking of his "bad, flighty wife," showing that he has come full circle. Decima and Septimus both have new mates, and the new era will not be exactly like the old because, as Vendler notes,[28] the new Queen does not imitate her predecessor. As we saw from A Vision, people and civilizations do not exactly duplicate one another but the cycle of change persists unchanged.

Vendler says that "The Player Queen is like a chapter from A Vision read with an eyebrow cocked."[29] This is true because the basic

[27] Ron Rosenbaum, "The Subterranean World of the Bomb," Harper's, vol. 256, March 1978, p. 89.

[28] Helen Hennessy Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 126.

[29] Ibid., p. 128.

elements in both are the same and Yeats does mock his ideas. The characters conform generally to the personalities of their Phases, demonstrating the closeness of Yeats's philosophy and art. But the characters are not simply allegorical. Decima at times is motivated by hunger, jealousy, love and pride, and Septimus is at times the hen-pecked husband, love-tormented poet, drunkard and prophet. Yeats is successful, I feel, in not letting his "thought" obtrude upon the "passion" in making this tragi-comedy.

CHAPTER III

THE ONLY JEALOUSY OF EMER

In the introduction to this thesis I cited Yeats's preface to The Only Jealousy of Emer in which he states that he has always longed for a country where all people shared in a "half-mythological, half-philosophical folk belief" and that he has always written as though it existed. The "mythology-philosopny" which he found in "Robartes' papers" is later systematized into A Vision. In The Only Jealousy of Emer Yeats combines his mystical beliefs with Irish folklore about the hero Cuchulain in a form which borrows much from the Japanese Noh drama. I am concerned here mainly with the philosophical aspects to the play. These fall into three general categories: the conflict of opposites manifested in physical and psychological masks, the personality Phases of the Great Wheel attributable to most of the characters, and the stages of the after-life which affect Cuchulain.

These last two, which include Yeats's own comments on the Phases of women's beauty pertaining to the play, have led Wilson and Vendler to regard the beautiful supernatural creature Fand as being the main interest in this play. They feel we are meant to regret the fact that Cuchulain does not join Fand in the after-life, and Vendler even sees her as victorious because she is of Phase 15. Other critics, like Ure, Nathan and J. R. Moore, and I would agree with them, see Emer as the heroine and feel our sympathies lie with her. This does not imply a

reduced relationship between A Vision and the play, but rather a different emphasis. Emer is the only character who changes in the course of the play, who "chooses whatever task's most difficult among tasks not impossible"[1] and who thereby assumes her "mask." This pattern is as much a part of A Vision as the stages of the after-life and the Phases of beauty.

The action of The Only Jealousy of Emer follows that of On Baile's Strand and is part of the "Cuchulain cycle" which includes the last play The Green Helmet, At Hawk's Well and The Death of Cuchulain. The story opens with Cuchulain having fallen into a death-like trance after rushing into the sea upon learning that he has killed his own son. The story concern's his wife Emer's attempts to bring him back to life. His soul is being held by the "people of the Sidhe," or "Country under Wave," and Fand, the "Woman of the Sidhe," would like to take him away with her forever. Cuchulain's character is actually divided into the Ghost of Cuchulain and the Figure of Cuchulain. The Ghost experiences one of the first stages of the after-life, and the Figure is possessed by Bricriu, the maker of discord among gods and men. The other dramatic personae are Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's mistress, and the Three Musicians who act as a chorus commenting on the action.

All of the characters wear masks, or their faces are made to resemble masks. This has the effect of universalizing the situation,[2]

[1] W.B. Yeats, "The Phases of the Moon," A Vision, p. 62.

[2] See F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography (London: Victor Gallancz Ltd., 1960), for other ways in which Yeats, in drawing upon varied sources, uses universal themes and symbols.

and of making us more aware of the play of psychological masks going on among and within the characters. There is a general conflict between the natural and supernatural worlds, with Emer and Eithne against the Sidhe, but Fand and Bricriu are also ememies. There are also intense inner conflicts in Cuchulian and Emer. Cuchulain is torn between Fand and Emer, and Emer between her duty as a wife and her hope of Cuchulain's love. Each of the main characters can be clearly related to a particular phase on the Great Wheel, as Wilson notes, except Emer, who can nonetheless be generally located.

Cuchulain wears two masks, that of the hero and of the distorted changling. He is of Phase 12, "the phase of the hero," whose Mask is "derived from the terrible Phase 26, called the phase of the Hunchback."[3] The struggle within the individual is especially strong at this point because the four Faculties are equidistant. "The oppositions (Will and Mask, Creative Mind and Body of Fate)are balanced by the discords, and these, being equidistant between identity and opposition, are at their utmost intensity."[4] One critic, H. H. Vendler, says that "Cuchulain is throughout a passive character, manipulated by otherworld powers (Fand's beauty and Bricriu's spite)."[5] It is true that Cuchulain is "full of hesitation" which is characteristic of his phase. He is tempted by Fand who is supremely beautiful and offers oblivion, yet is held back by his

[3] A Vision, p. 127 and p. 128.

[4] Ibid., p. 127.

[5] Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays, p. 219.

ties to Emer and his responsibilities. He is also, as A Vision states, "overwhelmed with the thought of his own weakness and knows of no strength but that of Image and Mask."[6] But if Fand and Bricriu are really controlling powers as Vendler contends, one must realize that they are in some sense Cuchulain's own projections. Fand is described as seeming "more an idol than a human being"; she is Cuchulain's Image of perfect beauty. The man of his phase "follows an image, created or chosen by the Creative Mind from what Fate offers; would persecute and dominate it; and this Image wavers between the concrete and sensuous image. It has become personal; there is now, though not so decisively as later, but one form of chosen beauty, and the sexual Image is drawn as with a diamond and tinted those pale colours sculptors sometimes put upon a statue."[7] Cuchulain did pursue and dominate Fand when she appeared as the Hawk-woman in At the Hawk's Well, and as the warrior Queen Aoife whom he defeated in battle and subsequently seduced. At the end of this play Fand is described as a statue, and though she has her own mythological identity, her role as Cuchulain's image of aesthetic perfection is paramount here.

Bricriu, Cuchulain's Mask, is described as having a distorted face and an arm withered to the socket. His only interest is in creating and affirming his own power. Emer has been urging Eithne Inguba to appraoch Cuchulain's body, to speak to it and kiss it in order to recall his soul. When the Figure of Cuchulain stirs it is Bricriu of the Sidhe in his

[6] A Vision, p. 127 and p. 129.

[7] Ibid., p. 129.

place. When he shows his face Eithne Inguba leaves because, Bricriu says, "I show my face, and everything he loves/ Must fly away." When Emer protests that he is lying because she has not fled, he tells her she is not loved. Emer rightly concludes that she is therefore outside of his power. In return for putting herself under his power, Bricriu tells her, he will restore Cuchulain to life. He says, "You loved your mastery, when but newly married,/ And I love mine for all my withered arm." This corresponds to the characteristics of the man of Phase 26, "The Multiple Man, also called 'The Hunchback'." The physical deformity "may be of any kind, great or little, for it is but symbolised in the hump . . . ."[8] He is vengeful and power-hungry. "He commits crimes, not because he wants to . . . but because he wants to feel certain that he can; and he is full of malice because, finding no impulse but in his own ambition, he is made jealous by the impulse of others." Bricriu is jealous of Fand's power and tells Emer he is Fand's enemy, "come to thwart her will." He is one "who betrays, not for thirty pieces of silver, but that he may call himself creator."[9] Bricriu is also a supernatural creature, one of the Sidhe, and for a man of Phase 26 there is "when the phase is truly lived, contact with supersensual life . . . ."[10]

Wilson places Bricriu at Phase One because it is supernatural, and spirits of this phase are, according to the first edition of A Vision "indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood," "deformed"

[8] A Vision, p. 177.

[9] Ibid., pp. 177-8.

[10] Ibid., p. 178.

and "automatic."[11] Wilson also cites a section from A Vision (B) which he thinks describes the "changeling" aspect of Bricriu's nature: "mind and body take whatever shape, accept whatever image is imprinted upon them, are indeed the instruments of supernatural manifestation, the final link between the living and more powerful beings." I think the description of the Hunchback of Phase 26 better suits Bricriu, however, because I do not see any evidence in the play that his image is "imprinted" on him, or his purpose "imposed" on him. Yeats says that in the man of Phase One there is "complete passivity, complete plasticity." Bricriu takes Cuchulain's place, but he appears as himself, deformed, and he is not passive. He is rather, as we have discussed, full of malice, jealous and power-hungry. In the play he is Cuchulain's Mask, literally. I think psychologically he is also related to Cuchulain more than to Fand, who would be his Mask (or object of desire) if he were of Phase One.

In what sense is the Figure of Cuchulain a part of Cuchulain's character? As I said earlier, Cuchulain is torn between his ties to Emer and his attraction to the supernatural world in which he could be united with his Idol. When he hesitates, Fand proposes to abolish all his memories so that "Nothing but beauty can remain." Cuchulain's response is "And shall I never know again/ Intricacies of blind remorse?" There is a tone of regret to these words. (This tone is more obvious in earlier versions of the play, when he asks, "How could you know/ That man is held to those whom he has loved/ By pain they gave, or pain that

[11] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p.112.

he has given --/ Intricacies of pain."[12] In a note to this play Yeats says his poem "The Phases of the Moon" contains aspects of his symbolism present in the play. In the poem it is written "there is no deformity/ But saves us from a dream." Part of Cuchulain does not want to give itself to the absolute, does not want to be a slave to a dream, and this "deformity" tries to keep him from such a fate. The "hero" side of Cuchulain is weak, while the "Mask" is strong. In A Vision Yeats says that the Will of the man of Phase 12 is "more and more conscious of its frailty -- and that which it would be, the lonely, imperturbable proud Mask." This is not to say that Cuchulain wants to be Bricriu. But if he is returned to life he will fulfill his destiny as a hero, a life which will be lonely and difficult but which is more fitting to a hero than succumbing to Fand and renouncing all his responsibilities. (In Fighting the Waves, a later prose version of this play, it is clear that Cuchulain is very much needed to fight off foes. Emer tells Eithne, "Before you came I called his name again and again. I told him Queen Maeve and all her Connacht men are marching north and east and that there is none but he to make a stand against them, but he would not hear me.")[13]

The inclination to reject Fand and the pursuit of the absolute lies within Cuchulain, but the final decision is not made by him. It is made by Emer. Her Phase is not as easily identifiable as Cuchulain's, but she would seem to be in an objective one, for she is the "honest wife" from "The Phases of the Moon" who is also "deformed" and "saves

[12] 1919 and 1923 versions, Variorum Ed. of the Plays, p. 599.

[13] Variorum Ed. Of the Plays, p. 544.

him from a dream." She makes Cuchulain "impure with memory" and she restores him to life. In this sense she is aligned with Bricriu, as they both wish to thwart Fand's desires. But Bricriu is also a "daemon" who brings strife into Emer's life. This "maker of discord" is one that Yeats identifies elsewhere as "Gates and Gatekeepers" who "have but one purpose, to bring their chosen man to the greatest obstacle he may confront without despair,"[14] or as "the Daemon [who] by using his mediatorial shades, brings man again and again to the place of choice, heightening temptation that the choice may be as final as possible, imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever among works not impossible is the most difficult."[15] Yeats describes the same confrontation in "The Phases of the Moon" with respect to the soul in its objective phases: "It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,/ Choosing whatever task's most difficult/ Among tasks not impossible, it takes/ Upon the body and upon the soul/ The coarseness of the drudge."[16] Bricriu makes Emer choose between her hope of Cuchulain's love and her duty as a wife, and her choice establishes her as a heroine.

When at first Emer refused to abandon her hope, Bricriu compared her dilemma to Cuchulain's, saying "You dare not be accursed, yet he has dared."[17] Presumably, he was referring to Cuchulain's decision in

[14] The Autobiography, p. 183.

[15] "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," Mythologies, p. 361, cited by Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of W. B. Yeats (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 234.

[16] A Vision, p. 62.

[17] Collected Plays, p. 189.

At the Hawk's Well to abandon the "well of immortality" for the battle-field, a decision which "cursed" him at the same time it made him a hero. Ure points out that Emer's decison is similar to Cuchulain's, and is even more heroic. "Emer's heroic deed, like Cuchulain's in At the Hawk's Well, is an assertion of her identity, of her name as loving wife" but whereas Cuchulain really "dares the curse," Emer chooses to be cursed. She knows the consequences of her act; "she does not find, after she has asserted her nature, that her destiny is in consequence to suffer its frustration; she chooses this destiny . . . . She is more the heroine of the moral choice than any of Yeats's earlier protagonists."[18] It is true that after hearing Fand's exchange with Cuchulain Emer knows she has cause to be "jealous" for the first time. (Hence the title, which Vendler stresses to support her argument that Emer does not act unselfishly.) If Cuchulain were to go away with this Woman of the Sidhe his memory of her would be obliterated forever, for as Bricriu says, one never tires of loving the Sidhe. But her decision does not seem motivated by self-interest. On the contrary, to bring Cuchulain back knowing he will never love her is more of a "curse" than never seeing him again.

Emer's act is "selfless" in that she chooses what she thinks is best for Cuchulain and the people, but she does so because she is "herself," that is, a heroine. In an introduction to Fighting the Waves Yeats speaks of self-sacrifice and heroism, and the passage applies well to Emer:

[18] Ure, p. 74 and p. 75.

> Here in Ireland, we have come to think of self-sacrifice, when worthy of public honour, as the act of some man at the moment when he is least himself, most completely the crowd. The heroic act, as it descends through tradition, is an act done because a man is himself, because, being himself, he can ask nothing of other men but room amid remembered tragedies; a sacrifice of himself to himself, almost, so little may he bargain, of the moment to the moment . . . .[19]

Emer's sense of duty coincides with Cuchulain's own conscience but Emer is not, as Wilson contends, "no more than the voice of his own conscience returning him from the heaven of Fand's beauty to the material world," and Cuchulain does not "turn away from his ideal of his own volition."[20] Cuchulain is "full of hesitation" at first and is about to succumb to Fand, is indeed mounting her chariot, when Emer calls him back. Her renunciation is the climax of the play. Although Vendler disagrees with Wilson on this point, recognizing Emer as a separate dramatic character, she too diminishes Emer's role when she says Emer is "acting as an agent for Bricriu."[21] This can be refuted, however, because it is established in the beginning that Bricriu has no control over Emer unless she wills it. More crucially for the interpretation of the play, these critics feel our ultimate sympathy should be with Fand, and that we are meant to regret that Cuchlain is torn away from her.

This point of view is based partly on early versions of the play, and partly on what Yeats says in a note to the play with regard to his System. In the early versions (1918 - 1924) Cuchulain's memories include

[19] Variorum Ed. of the Plays, pp. 569-70, cited by Ure, p. 74.

[20] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 113.

[21] Vendler, p. 222.

those of his dead son, and Emer's renunciation is followed by dialogues between Fand and the Ghost of Cuchulain, and the Figure of Cuchulain. When Fand discusses why she has lost, her point of view is stressed. Cuchulain's memory of his son somewhat diminishes Emer's position, and her renunciation is longer and blander than in the final version. But the revisions in the latter put all the emphasis on her choice, and as Nathan says, there is "little doubt that the play belongs to Emer, is her tragedy."[22]

In a note to one of the early versions of the play (included in Four Plays for Dancers, 1921) Yeats puts emphasis on those phases where women's beauty is supreme. He says:

> I have filled "The Only Jealousy of Emer" with those little known convictions about the nature and history of a woman's beauty, which Robartes found in the Speculum of Gyraldus and in Arabia Deserta among the Judwalis . . . . The invisible fifteenth incarnation is that of the greatest possible bodily beauty, and the fourteenth and sixteenth those of the greatest beauty visible to human eyes. Much that Robartes has written might be a commentary on Castiglione's saying that the physical beauty of woman is the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul, for physical beauty, only possible to subjective natures, is described as the result of emotional toil in past lives.[23]

This statement encourages Wilson and Vendler to see the play as revolving around Fand, whom they identify, justifiably, with the 15th Phase. The opening lyric is about woman's beauty, and the closing lyric seems to concern Fand's frustration, but the core of the play in its final revised form belongs to Emer. In a preface to the same early edition

[22] Nathan, p. 236.

[23] Variorum Ed. of the Plays, p. 107.

Yeats makes a statement which would lead one to focus all attention on Cuchulain: "The Only Jealous of Emer was written to find what dramatic effect one could get out of a mask, changed while the player remains upon the stage to suggest a change of personality."[24] Yeats does deal with Cuchulain's conflict, and he does use the systems of incarnations as a back-bone for the play, but one should only judge from the play itself what weight to give these statements. As an embodiment of the 15th Phase Fand is an image of absolute beauty, but one cannot conclude from that that she is the heroine of the play. She is a supernatural creature in a "discarnate" state. For a hero like Cuchulain, abandoning life and responsibilities is not necessarily the best choice.

When Cuchulain first sees Fand he relates her to the 15th Phase of the moon: "Who is it stands before me there/ Shedding such light from limb and hair/ As when the moon, complete at last/ With every labouring crescent past,/ And lonely with extreme delight,/ flings out upon the fifteenth night?"[25] This is the phase of the full moon, of complete subjectivity and beauty. Fand says she is not quite complete, lacking fullness "by an hour or so" because she "longs." Although she is not complete, she is more representative of Phase 15, which we may recall is "an ideal or supernatural incarnation" than of Phase 14 (where Bjersby and Qamber place her) which is human. Fand herself says that lacking an hour is not like "lacking a day to be complete," which was true of his other lovers, presumably Eithne Inguba. (The moon, in any case, need

[24] "Preface to Four Plays for Dancers," Variorum Ed. of the Plays, p. 1305.

[25] Collected Plays, p. 191.

not reach fullness the first hour of its 15th day.) Cuchulain admits that her "brilliant light surpasses all crescent forms."

But when Fand tries to seduce Cuchulain, in no matter which version, she does not seem very appealing to the audience. Even Vendler admits that she "inspires mixed feelings . . . . Fand's language is scornful, intolerant, edged with sarcasm amd peremptory -- when it is not seductive or unearthly or triumphant,"[26] and Wilson says Fand "seems to stagnate in callousness."[27] Cuchulain remembers that as Hawk-Woman she ruthlessly flew away, and though she says she is "all woman now" she does not seem so. Her mask and clothes and even her hair are metallic so that "she seems more an idol than a human being." And even though she is supremely beautiful, that is not really enough to tempt Cuchulain. Only when she promises to erase his memories of Emer does Cuchulain start to follow her. Although Fand says she needs Cuchulain to be complete, as a supernatural being the need is too ethereal to be moving.

Just the fact that Fand is of the 15th Phase convinces Vendler that she is the heroine. Vendler's interpretation of A Vision is founded on her belief that the whole book (with the exception of the historical sections which she admits do not fit her schema) is about the creative experience, the high point of which occurs at Phase 15. She says, "all of A Vision is written to explain the central phase."[28] There is nothing in A Vision which justifies Vendler's narrow aesthetic

[26] Vendler, p. 234.

[27] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 110.

[28] Vendler, p. 8.

interpretation, which slants all Yeats's statements about personality, history and religion, and there is evidence that the 15th Phase is not the "be-all and end-all" which Vendler portrays. Phase 15 is one of the most significant phases as it represents the point at which man comes closest to Unity of Being. "Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it is attainable, at Phase 15 and returns to Phase 1 again."[29] But making the complete circle is what is important because the ultimate object is to escape the cycles entirely. Yeats tells us, "Neither between death and birth nor between birth and death can the soul find more than momentary happiness; its object is to pass rapidly round its circle and find freedom from that circle."[30] This is exactly what Fand is seeking. She tells Cuchulain that when they kiss she will be complete, and she will be free from all the "objective" cycles which follow:[31]

> Time shall seem to stay his course;
> When your mouth and my mouth meet
> All my round shall be complete
> Imagining all its circles run;
> And there shall be oblivion
> Even to quench Cuchulain's drouth,
> Even to still his heart.[32]

That we are dealing with a life or death situation regarding Cuchulain seems obvious, but Vendler again sets up an "aesthetic" situation

[29] A Vision, p. 81.

[30] Ibid., p. 236.

[31] Wilson also interprets the passage as such, but Vendler says Fand is not seeking to escape the cycles but only to attain perfection of self.

[32] Collected Plays, p. 192.

in order to make Fand more attractive. The Musicians describe Cuchulain as "dead or swooning," Fand says he is "among the dead," and Bricriu describes the "dreaming back" process of the soul which Cuchulain is experiencing, and which is common to those newly-dead. Bricriu also tells Emer that her husband "shall live again" if she renounces his love. Vendler maintains that all purgatorial terms "represent the mind in aesthetic suspension," and "have no reference to real death at all," and she concludes that "an interpretation of the play which sees Fand as symbolic of actual physical death can get nowhere."[33] Such an interpretation would clearly look with favor upon Emer's act. There is no reason to doubt that Yeats believed in reincarnation, and Books II and III of A Vision detail the process of the soul between death and birth. When Bricriu briefly describes the Ghost of Cuchulain's state, it closely resembles the "Meditation" stage of the soul. Says the Figure, "A dream is body;/ The dead move ever towards a dreamless youth/ And when they dream no more return no more;/ And those more holy shades that never lived/ But visited you in dreams."[34]

In the period between lives instead of the "Four Faculties" prevailing we have what Yeats calls the "Principles." They are Husk, Passionate Body, Spirit, and Celestial Body. At death consciousness passes from Husk (the human body) to Spirit, and Husk and Passionate Body are said to disappear. If, however, Husk (also the past) persist, the Spirit still continues to feel pleasure and pain. If the Passionate

[33] Vendler, p. 223.

[34] Collected Plays, p. 190.

Body (the present and the senses) does not disappear the Spirit finds Celestial Body (the timeless) "only after long and perhaps painful dreams of the past, and it is because of such dreams that the second state is sometimes called Dreaming Back. If death has been violent or tragic the Spirit may cling to the Passionate Body for generations."[35] In Cuchulain's case, especially since he is only in a death-like trance, the past and present are too strong to pass away; and it is evident from his continuing "pain" over his "dreams" that he is not yet ready to join "the timeless." It could be argued that this is regrettable, (as Wilson does when he defends beauty's "absolute demands") that it is too bad he is so "human," but the play does not project this feeling. As Nathan points out, "The point of view in the play is Emer's. It is her vision that determines value."[36]

Emer thinks she is saving Cuchulain from death and from the malevolent forces of the sea. She is convinced that Cuchulain is not yet dead, and that "sea enchantments" are holding him "amid their darkness." She stirs up the fire because these spirits "dread the hearth-fire," and she tells Eithne "We're but two women struggling with the sea." What Bricriu tells her, whether true or not, reinforces her feeling that evil forces are trying to steal Cuchulain away. He tells her that Fand "has hurried from the Country-under-Wave/ And dreamed herself into that shape that he/ May glitter in her basket; for the Sidhe/ Are dexterous fishers and they fish for men/ With dreams upon the hook."[37]

[35] A Vision, pp. 187-8.

[36] Nathan, pp. 288-9.

[37] Collected Plays, p. 190.

Emer's reaction to this shows that she thinks of Fand as a succubus: "And so that woman/ Has hid herself in this disguise and made/ Herself into a lie . . . I know her sort. They find our men asleep, weary with war,/ Lap them in cloudy hair or kiss their lips;/ Our men awake in ignorance of it all,/ But when we take them into our arms at night/ We cannot break their solitude." Fand may not seem as demonic as that to us, but she does offer an escape from life which Cuchulain is reluctant to take, and we are glad he is restored to his role of Hero once more.

The worst error Vendler makes is in finding that at the end Fand is "victorious" and Emer is "superfluous." She says, "Essentially the play belongs to Fand, in spite of the fact she is in the end defeated and it belongs to her by virtue of her poetic impact."[38] She maintains that in the final lyric she does gain completion: "'When beauty is complete . . ./ When moon's round is finished,/ The stars are out of sight.' There is a victory in these lines, and it is Fand's."[39] Vendler concludes, "In spite of vacillation and stalemate, both implicit in the play, the Muse receives the final allegiance, as we have come to expect; and Emer, like Septimus in The Player Queen, appears in the end touching but superfluous."[40] Vendler has omitted some of the words of the lyric which are important. The full quotation is, "When beauty is complete/ Your own thought will have died/ And danger not be diminished." Fand will undoubtably attain completion but it will be without Cuchulain.

[38] Vendler, p. 223.

[39] Ibid., p. 235.

[40] Ibid., p. 236.

At Phase 15 there is no desire. Yeats tells us in A Vision, "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 . . . . As all effort has ceased, all thought has become image, because no thought could exist if it were not carried toward its own extinction . . . . ."[41] Fand will no longer "long" and she will not have Cuchulain.

There is no agreement among critics as to what the "danger" is, or what the "stars" mean. Wilson thinks the stars represent "man's intellectual love" which Fand will not have, and sees the danger as her continued isolation.[42] J. R. Moore has a similar interpretation in that man will move on to the "objective" world, after the 15th Phase has passed, and "may forget the moon's divine inspiration."[43] Vendler thinks Cuchulain will continue to worship Fand from afar, and will "outshine" her competitors, Emer and Eithne. Vendler acknowledges earlier, however, that Emer and Eithne are in various "crescents" so it does not seem logical to view them as stars now. Since the "danger" appears to be associated with the disappearance of the stars, "isolation" would be the best explanation. Yeats describes such isolation as being characteristic of those at Phase 15: "there is now terror of solitude, its forced, painful and slow acceptance, and a life haunted by terrible dreams."[44]

[41] A Vision, p. 136.

[42] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 126.

[43] J. R. Moore, p. 222.

[44] A Vision, p. 136.

There is a similar description in "The Phases of the Moon." Robartes says:

> All thought becomes an image and the soul
> becomes a body: that body and that soul
> Too perfect 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's responses conjure up Fand, her beauty and her fate: "All dreams of the soul/ End in a beautiful man's or woman's body . . . . They ran from cradle to cradle till at last/ Their beauty dropped out of loneliness/ Of body and soul . . . . It must be that the terror in their eyes/ Is memory or foreknowledge of the hour/ When all is fed with light and heaven is bare."[45] Some sympathy is expressed by the Musicians who are "astonished" but they are "dumb/ Or give but a sigh and a word/ A passing word." There is a sense of inevitability here, mingled with regret, and certainly no feeling of "victory."

The only other specific references to women's beauty and the Phases occurs in the opening lyric. It is sung against the back-drop used in At the Hawk's Well, a black cloth with a gold pattern suggesting a hawk. Since Fand was the Hawk-Woman the lyric has some reference to her, but it is more associated with Eithne Inguba who enters as the Musicians are singing. They sing of a beauty "imagined within/ The labyrinth of the mind." Robartes had told of how "Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,/ The soul begins to tremble into stillness,/ To

[45] A Vision, pp. 61-2.

die into the labyrinth itself,"[46] and undoubtably Eithne is of the 14th Phase when "greatest human beauty becomes possible."[47]

Phase 14 is a phase of self-absorption, and Eithne has to be persuaded by Emer, who seems much more unselfish, into working "against the sea." In A Vision Yeats says of this phase that "responsibility is renounced and this renunciation becomes an instrument of power, dropped burdens being taken up by others." When Eithne flees the scene, it is up to Emer to struggle with Bricriu and Fand. At this phase one also "understands nothing yet seems to understand everything; already serves nothing, while alone seeming of service." Eithne does not understand at first how Cuchulain is possessed, she does not accomplish his return and yet she is credited with it. She is as the Musicians describe, "A frail, unserviceable thing."

At the same time the Musicians pay tribute to women's beauty which is a "fragile, exquisite, pale shell" which took "centuries" or many phases to perfect. There is also some sympathy for its lonely plight. Though it is a "sea-bird" it is rejected by the sea (anima mundi)[48] and thrown upon the land (anima hominus). At first the Musicians seem in awe of such beauty and ask how long would it take "to raise into being that loveliness," but at the end of the second verse when they have considered the past suffering necessary to produce this beauty, they ask "what bloody press dragged into being this loveliness?" As

[46] A Vision, p. 60.

[47] Ibid., p. 132.

[48] Identified by Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 97.

much as the Musicians are "astonished" later at Fand's fate, it is somewhat foreshadowed in the opening lyric when beauty must stand alone. "Raised" and "Dragged" epitomizes an ambiguity which is felt in the play. Fand is Ideal Beauty, but she causes suffering, and is not worth sacrificing one's life for. Eithne seems very desirable to Cuchulain at the moment, but she is undoubtably right that he will tire of her, and she will be "thrown into some corner like old nutshells," no longer "serviceable."

Emer is not completely victorious since she does not have Cuchulain at the end, but she has confronted her Daemon and surmounted the almost impossible task. The core of the play belongs to her, and appropriately she has "room amid remembered tragedies." Wilson thinks that a self-sacrifice like Emer's would not appeal to Yeats but there is evidence to the contrary. Wilson says, "For such a morality Yeats had of course little use, precisely because it seemed to him to stifle the individuality."[49] Besides this play, one can turn to an essay of Yeats's in which he singles Emer out for special admiration:

> And yet I think it may be proud Emer, Cuchulain's fitting wife, who will linger longest in the memory. What a pure flame burns in her always, whether she is the newly-married wife fighting for precedence, fierce as some beautiful bird, or the confident housewife, who would awaken her husband from his magic sleep with mocking words; or the great queen who would get him out of the tightening net of his doom, by sending him into the Valley of the Deaf, with Niah, his mistress, because he will be more obedient to her; or the woman whom sorrow has set with Helen and Iseult and Brunnhilda, and Deidre, to share their immortality in the rosary of the poets.[50]

[49] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 112.

[50] "Thoughts on Lady Gregory's Translations," The Cutting of an Agate (New York: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 9-10, cited by Nathan, p. 290.

Emer is compared to a "beautiful bird" but here it is "fierce," not "frail" or "unserviceable."

I would like to make one last comment on the form of the play. Yeats says in his essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" that with the help of Japanese plays "I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic . . . an aristocratic form."[51] By "aristocratic" Yeats meant that it would appeal to those who could "understand the literary and mythological allusions." In the case of Cuchulain, although he was an aristocrat, a noble warrior, his legends would be familiar to most Irish people, though Yeats changes the original story [52] and incorporates his philosophy regarding personality and the after-life. It seems that in adapting the Noh form to the Cuchulain legend Yeats appeals to both worlds, common and aristocratic, which he states in his autobiography is his intention:

> Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make these stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work's sake what I have called "the applied arts of literature," the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance; and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design?[53]

The use of masks, verse, music and dance does "distance" the action from

[51] Essays and Introductions, p. 221.

[52] See Birgit Bjersby, The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats (Sweden: Upsaala, 1950).

[53] The Autobiography, p. 131.

the everyday world but Yeats says this is the effect he wants in order to "enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation." In the Noh form the spiritual and "real" worlds often interact, and in this play there is a smooth mingling of supernatural characters with the heroes and heroines of Irish folk-lore, in both this world and the next. Yeats's System also shapes the action, and helps to universalize the characters. Fand is an "Idol," the pursuit of which could ruin one's humanity, and Emer confronts her Daemon and makes the heroic choice.

CHAPTER IV

PURGATORY

Of the three plays under consideration in this thesis, Purgatory is probably the most closely related to A Vision because Yeats's theories on the after-life, on history, and on the personality all shape the action. Yeats himself said of it: "I have put nothing into the play because it seemed picturesque; I have put there my own conviction about this world and the next."[1] Despite this Melchiori finds the plot inexplicable: "So in Purgatory Yeats writes his own Oedipus at Colonus: the old man killing his son under an obscure compulsion that no amount of reference to Yeats's theories and principles can clarify."[2] I think the Old Man's motives are clearly presented in the play, but as Yeats's theories are behind the action it can only enrich our understanding to examine the correspondence.

Purgatory is a verse play in which there are two characters, a Boy and an Old Man, and there is only one scene with "a ruined house and a bare tree in the background." The Old Man and his son have returned to the birthplace of the former. This ruin is haunted by the ghost of

[1] Letter to Dorothy Wellesley, August 15, 1938, Allan Wade, ed.; The Letters of W. B. Yeats (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 913.

[2] Melchiori, p. 253.

the Old Man's mother, whom he says has come to "relive her transgressions." She was of a wealthy aristocratic family, but married beneath her to a groom, who subsequently squandered her fortune and burned her house down. When the Old Man was sixteen he killed his father during the fire, and became a wandering peddler. In the course of recounting all this, on the anniversary of his parents' wedding and of his conception, the ghosts of his mother and father appear and re-enact the scene from that night. The Old Man, seeking to end the consequences of that fateful union, kills his son, but then sees that his mother's torment continues anyway, when the scene starts to repeat itself.

The reason behind the Old Man's "compulsion" to kill his son is quite plainly laid out. At the outset he explains the condition of a soul in Purgatory that comes back to familiar places, and explains how the living may affect the dead:

> Re-live
> Their transgressions, and that not once
> But many times; they know at last
> The consequences of those transgressions
> Whether upon others or upon themselves;
> Upon others, others may bring help,
> For when the consequence is at an end
> The dream must end; if upon themselves,
> There is no help but in themselves
> And in the mercy of God.[3]

The Old Man thinks the consequence is mainly upon others, because the house where "great people lived and died" was destroyed by the father's debts and drinking, because he recognizes himself as a murderer, as "my father's son," and because he sees his own son as a coarse bastard who

[3] Collected Plays, p. 431.

would "pass the pollution on." He considers the vulgarization of such a noble family line to be a "capital offense" and in order to "finish the consequence" he kills the Boy. He is aware that his mother could be suffering a personal torment, but the magnitude of it is not clear until the end when he sees that the dream continues.

The state of the mother's soul in the play corresponds to what Yeats details in A Vision concerning the after-life. The period between death and birth is divided into six states, the second called "the Meditation" being subdivided into the Dreaming Back, the Return, and the Phantasmagoria. The mother exhibits characteristics of all three subdivisions. During the discarnate period the Four Principles prevail, Spirit (Mind, the future), Passionate Body (the present), Husk (the human body, the past), and Celestial Body (Mind's object, the timeless). During the Meditation Husk and Passionate Body eventually disappear, but may persist for some time. "If the Husk so persist, the Spirit continues to feel pleasure and pain . . . . If there has been great animal egotism, heightened by some moment of tragedy, the Husk may persist for centuries, recalled into a sort of life, and united to its Spirit, at some anniversary, or by some unusually susceptible person or persons connected with its past life."[4] This is obviously the case with the mother who feels both remorse and pleasure, and must relive the moments of lust which brought about great tragedy, reliving them on the occasion of her wedding anniversary, in the presence of her son. This state is called the Dreaming Back; we recall, because if the Passionate

[4] A Vision, p. 224.

Body does not disappear, the Spirit finds Celestial Body "only after long and perhaps painful dreams of the past."

The Spirit relives events in the Dreaming Back, in the Return, then falls into the Dreaming Back again. In the Dreaming Back the Spirit experiences "the events that most moved it" in the order of their "intensity," but in the Return the events occur in chronological order, until "the causes" are "all related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself," and also "the consequences" are known.[5] (According to Wilson, who relies largely on the first edition of A Vision, this is accomplished in the Dreaming Back, but in the second edition Yeats specifically assigns the acquiring of knowledge to the Return.) These two periods may last for centuries "where the soul has great intensity and where those consequences affected great numbers."[6] The Old Man makes a point of how many people enjoyed their house, ~~and of~~ how the "pollution" could be passed on.

His mother seems to have a knowledge of the causes and consequences of her action, but she cannot purify herself of the degrading emotion which led to it. After the Dreaming Back and the Return comes the Phantasmagoria which "exists to exhaust, not nature, pain and pleasure, but emotion . . . ."[7] The "constraint" Yeats says in the Phantasmagoria is emotional while that in the Dreaming Back is physical. The Dreaming Back seems more linked to sexuality, but the mother is experi-

[5] A Vision, p. 226 and p. 228.

[6] Ibid., p. 228.

[7] Ibid., p. 230.

encing an emotional conflict too, and will only have peace when she can feel no more remorse. The Old Man realizes, at least partially, the nature of his mother's conflict:

> she must live
> Through everything in exact detail,
> Driven to it by remorse, and yet
> Can she renew the sexual act
> And find no pleasure in it, and if not,
> If pleasure and remorse must both be there,
> Which is the greater?[8]

At the end he sees that this consequence upon herself is much more difficult to expurgate than the consequence upon others. Ure points out that this latter consequence is most vividly seen in the character of the Boy, who is amoral and crude. Even when he is "finished," the mother's torment continues. In A Vision Yeats recalls examples of people in such a state: "those stories . . . where some ghost seeks not to perfect an event that concerns the living, but its own emotional or moral peace."[9]

It is difficult to attribute specific Phases to the "living" characters, but the play does insist on the fact that the Old Man was 16 when he committed his murder, and the boy is 16 now. The Old Man, who is about to commit his second murder, exhibits many of the characteristics of a man of Phase 16. Such a man sees "one side all white . . . the other side all black," and "In the men of the phase there will commonly be both natures. At one moment they are full of hate . . . and

[8] Collected Plays, p. 434.

[9] A Vision, p. 231.

their hate is always close to madness; and at the next they . . . discover symbolism to express the overflowing and bursting of the mind. There is always an element of frenzy, and almost always a delight in certain glowing or shining images of concentrated force . . . for this being must brag of its triumph over its own incoherence."[10] The Old Man does view the aristocracy of his mother's family as all "white" (though he blames her to some extent), and his father's lower station and character as all "black," and he certainly partakes of both natures. He is capable of appreciating high culture, but despite his learning he keeps his son ignorant, just as his own father had tried to do. He disparages the drunken, irresponsible behavior of his father which cost the family its home and fortune, but he does far worse in committing murder. Although his motive was honorable in that he wanted to help his mother's soul find peace, the act itself was nonetheless a heinous crime. The Old Man can see symbolically, as his references at the very beginning to the house, tree and cloud show; but his hatred is "mad." After brutally killing his son he starts to sing a lullaby, an act which reinforces his own earlier statement that his "wits are out." He then delights in the image of the shining tree as a sign of his "triumph" in appeasing his mother's suffering, but of course in that respect he has failed. It is his own "incoherence" in a sense which leads to the tragedy. Ure points out that the Old Man's understanding of the two possible "consequences" is really only partial and that "the state of half-knowledge is his hereditary condition entailed upon him by his polluted blood. It

[10] A Vision, p. 138.

is his tragic fate. It is that which engineers the catastrophe . . . ."[11]

The True Mask of the man of Phase 16 is "Illusion," and the False Mask is "Delusion." These correspond to the Old Man's belief that he can affect the life of the dead, and his final realization that his act had been for nothing. The Body of Fate, "Enforced Illusion," is from Phase 28, the phase of the Fool. Yeats says that if the Will subordinates its intellect to this, "there is nothing left but the fixed idea and some hysterical hatred." This could describe the Old Man because he is obsessed with the idea of ending all the consequences of the crime (embodied for him in the Boy who may be of Phase 28), which is an illusion, and because, as Vendler points out, he has a "mad hatred" of his parents whom he is unable to forgive.

It seems possible that the Boy is of Phase 28, since his Body of Fate derives from Phase 16. His True Mask is "Oblivion," his False "Malignity." The boy is both malign and cunning because he shows no moral sense of right and wrong, and tries to steal money when his father is distracted. "The Fool" is his own Body of Fate; the Boy reaches "Oblivion" or death simply because he is himself, because he has the polluted blood of his grandfather transmitted through his father, who is of Phase 16.

The mother, being in a discarnate state, is between phases, but she experiences a conflict of opposites. Her remorse is not appeased at the end because each time she relives the events in which she was "no better than her man," her "pleasure" is also renewed. Such antinomies within the Old Man and his mother are in accord with the system

[11]Ure, p. 110.

of personality Yeats outlines in A Vision. He reminds us that this is characteristic of both carnate and discarnate life: "whether we consider the cone that of incarnate or that of discarnate life, the gyre of Husk or Will cuts the gyre of Spirit or Creative Mind with the same conflict of seasons . . . ."[12]

Besides displaying psychological tensions, the characters also reflect the historical movement of the gyres. Yeats says the six stages of the after-life "correspond roughly" to Phases 22 to 28 on the Wheel of the Faculties. In the play it does seem as though the people of "this world" are approaching the end of an objective cycle. As we saw in The Player Queen, at this time there is a "loss of control over thought" accompanied by a general moral decay. The latter is most evident in the Boy who says "What's right and wrong?" and who sees no reason why he should not kill his father, "Now I am young and you are old." His only values are materialistic. When his father laments the destruction of the great house the Boy can only comment enviously on what luxury his father must have had. The Old Man is much more cultured, but he also recognizes, "I am my father's son,/ Because of what I did or may do." The "loss of control over thought" is evidenced partly in the murders, and partly in the decay of cultural values. We are clearly meant to sympathize with the Old Man's declaration that it is "a capital offense" to destroy a house which had "fine books, modern and ancient," and in which "great men grew up, married, [and] died."

[12] A Vision, pp. 209-10.

In A Vision Yeats says we are presently at Phase 23 on the cone of civilization and between Phases 25 and 26 on the cone of the era. In an interview conducted after the 1938 production of the play, he speaks of the current conditions in Ireland:

> My plot is my meaning. I think the dead suffer remorse and re-create their old lives, just as I have described . . . . In my play a spirit suffers because of its share, when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house; that destruction is taking place all over Ireland today . . . . I have founded my play on this exceptional case, partly because of my interest in certain problems of eugenics, partly because it enables me to depict more vividly than would otherwise be possible the tragedy of the house.[13]

Purgatory was published with On the Boiler, in which Yeats spoke of the current "degeneration of literature, newspapers, [and] amusements."

Some critics have carried the historical analogies even further, linking the Old Man and the Boy to Old and New Ireland, the house burning with the time of Parnell's death, and the birth of the Boy to 1922, when the Irish Free State was founded. Yeats was obviously concerned with current events, but I do not think that his comments, or anything in the play itself, warrants viewing it as a mere political allegory. Yeats's poems entitled "Meditations in Time of Civil War" were written in 1922, during the Irish Civil War. In one of the poems there is a reference to a specific figure: "Vengeance upon the murderers, vengeance for Jacques Molay." The line is not just "about" him or his supporters, however. In a note to the poem, Yeats says, "A cry for vengeance because of the murder of the Grand Master of the Templars seems to me fit symbol for those who labour for hatred, and so for sterility in

[13] Cited by J. R. Moore, p. 317.

various kinds."[14] In the same sense, I believe Purgatory is not "about" Irish politics, though they may have provided some of its "raison d'etre." To look outside the play for particular correspondences is too limiting. Rather, the images of the ruined house, of high culture and vulgar materialism, suggest a general pattern which need not be confined to the Ireland of 1938. This pattern is symbolized in A Vision, the second edition of which was published one year before Purgatory. The primary dispensation was characterized as "levelling" and democratic, and the antithetical as "hierarchical and "aristocratic," and these are reflected clearly within the play.

The symbol of the tree seems to function on both familial and personal levels. When the family was prosperous it was green and fruitful, now the family has declined and it is dead and barren. At the end it is shining in a white light "like a purified soul." This recalls the images in "Sailing to Byzantium" of the tree in summer, the stick, and the golden bough. The Old Man identifies the tree with his mother, but in fact she is not purified. The "consequence upon others" is at an end, however; the "pollution" cannot be passed on, and so the family is cleansed. But as in the poem, the image seems to be more related to the spiritual condition of the man. This is suggested in the beginning by the Boy who says the tree is like "a silly old man." I do not think the Old Man is "purified" in the end, but the light does attest to the strength of his passion to free his mother's soul, and to the extent to which his "Illusion" or his Mask takes hold of him.

[14] Variorum Ed. of the Poems, p. 827.

I have said at the beginning of this thesis that Yeats was always interested in using archetypal symbols and the light as a symbol of passion is a prime example. The Cabbalists identify what they call "astral light" with passion. In his diary of 1930, Yeats describes this:

> It was the opinion of those Cabbalist friends that the actions of life remained so pictured but that the intensity of the light depended upon the intensity of the passion that had gone to their creation. This is to assume, perhaps correctly, that the greater the passion the more clear the perception, for the light is perception. The "pictures" appear to be self-luminous because the past sunlight or candle-light, suddenly made apparent, is as it were broken off from whatever light surrounds it at the moment.[15]

In the play the moon is shining until the end where the stage is dark except for the light around the tree. The Old Man compares the "cold, sweet, glistening light" to the purity of a soul, but since his mother's is not appeased, it is more likely a projection of his own "intense passion."

A light also accompanies each moment of the Dreaming Back which has intense meaning for the mother. Yeats describes this phenomenon in A Vision:

> In the Dreaming Back the Spirit is compelled to live over and over again the events that most moved it; there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light which is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them. They occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity . . . .[16]

[15] Explorations, pp. 330-1, cited by Jeffares and Knowland, p. 281.

[16] A Vision, p. 226.

The Old Man says there is really nothing at the window "But the impression upon my mother's mind," but it is lit up when she appears listening for her husband, when they enter the bedroom, and when the husband drinks his whiskey. The window grows dark when the Old Man stabs the Boy because this is a "new event" which the mother's spirit cannot experience.

Yeats's interest in tradition is also evidenced in the Old Man's attempt to affect the condition of his mother's soul. In A Vision Yeats documents in several cultures a belief that this is possible: "Certainly I find it [an analogy between a phantom and a dream of the night] in old Irish literature, in modern Irish folk-lore, in Japanese plays, in Swedenborg, in the phenomena of spiritualism, accompanied as often as not by the belief that the living can assist the imagination of the dead."[17] In The Only Jealousy of Emer Emer does assist Cuchulain who is "among the dead" but only through the intercession of Bricriu, a supernatural creature. In Purgatory there is no communication between the two worlds, except that the Old Man can see his mother's dream and shares her remorse. The only one who can assist the dead and the living is God, to whom the Old Man makes an impassioned plea at the end, but whether He will or not remains unanswered. Yeats has taken a traditional idea but adapted it to his own purposes.

The fact that the Old Man is unsuccessful emphasizes the spiritual dilemma of the characters. The consequence upon others is ended but the Old Man and his mother both remain in their separate purgatories. The

[17] A Vision, p. 221.

man cannot purge himself of his hatred, escape his past, or foresee any changes in the future. The mother cannot purge herself of the degrading emotion which led to her downfall. We are concerned in the play with the effects on society rendered by a "levelling" uncultured bourgeoisie, but finally it is the consequence of a transgression upon the individual spirit which is the more profound.

Yeats's desire to individualize his characters within a universal context is reflected in the verse pattern. We may recall from the first pages of this thesis that Yeats's intention was to express the personal and concrete, but not in any rhythm which left it "unchanged amid all its accidence." For soliloquies in plays he tried to find some natural speech, rhythm and syntax, then would "set it out in some pattern, so seeming old that it may seem all men's speech." In Purgatory the verse manages to convey many types of speech (colloquial, formal, poetic) while maintaining the discipline of a four-stress line. There is some flexibility in the number of unstressed syllables and there is no rhyme. T. S. Eliot, among many other critics, has noted Yeats's success here, saying that he "solved his problem of speech in verse, and laid all his successors under obligation to him."[18] The voices of the Boy and the Old Man are quite distinct from one another, the Boy's being uncultured and crude, while his father's is at times eloquent, brutal, lyrical and meditative. The dialogues have the virtue of seeming realistic although they have the conciseness of verse. Clark notes: "Yeats is giving us

[18] T. S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, cited in David R. Clark, p. 88.

not common speech but the qualities of actual speech in phrases which are new-created, archaic, or distorted and, therefore, have some of the purposeful difficulty of poetry."[19] The Boy's opening words for example perfectly express in their rhythm and alliteration (unconscious on his part) the tedium of the long walk, the equation in his mind of poor and rich houses (half-door, hall door) and his disinterest (hearing vs. listening to) in his father's words. The Old Man's description of the way the barren tree used to look, "Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,/ Fat greasy life," conjures up its lost vitality, but the image is also unhealthy, grotesque, one which reflects his own "sliminess."

One of the characteristics of the Noh plays is the primacy of words.[20] Although Purgatory does not incorporate other typical Noh [redacted]res like music, dance, and masks, it is largely Noh in spirit. The [redacted]ays are also short, center on some moment of intensity, have a minimum of characters, depict the world of spirits together with the world of men, and are influenced by the Buddhist religion. Yeats's description in A Vision of the soul in the after-life corresponds to "the Buddhist theory that spirits re-enact their attachment to the world and its events."[21] According to Wilson, the play's ending is also modeled on the Japanese form, which could be one reason why he does not view the play as pessimistically as some other critics. "The play ends

[19] Clark, p. 95.

[20] Pronoti Baksi, "The Noh and the Yeatsian Synthesis," Review of English Literature, VI, iii (1965), 35.

[21] Ibid., p. 37.

on a note Japanese in its resignation, and with the traditional Noh formula of prayer."[22] In A Vision Yeats remarks on the universality in literature of apparitions haunting the places where they have lived, remarking particularly on the Noh drama, and the repetitions involved before the Spirit escapes from its Phase: "Though only visible to the seer when Spirit and Passionate Body are joined, they are constantly repeated until, at last forgotten by the Spirit, they fade into the Thirteenth Cone."[23] Vendler says the play "ends on a tone of frustration and incomprehension" but I think "resignation" better describes the Old Man's sentiment and Yeats's attitude. The Old Man certainly understands at the end what he sees and hears, and his simple "Mankind can do no more" is a recognition that the scene must repeat itself until God intervenes.

The ending of the play is consistent with Yeats's philosophy as expressed in A Vision and in no way reflects his "own bewilderment" or need for "hatred and rage," as Vendler interprets it.[25] Yeats is more likely to use the term "thirteenth cone or sphere" than God, but the idea is the same in that some unpredictable, unique force which is holding all in unity will release one from the repetitions of the cycles. "It is that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and

[22] Wilson, Yeats and Tradition, p. 160.

[23] A Vision, p. 227.

[24] Vendler, p. 201.

[25] Ibid., p. 200.

space . . . . Within it live all souls that have been set free."[26] There is a feeling of unpredicatbility at the end but this does not spell doom, either in the play, or in Yeats's philosophy.

[26] A Vision, p. 210.

CONCLUSION

In dealing with Yeats as a symbolist, in explaining his philosophy as it appears in A Vision, and in explicating three of his plays I have tried to show how Yeats's beliefs influenced his art. Allen Tate has written that "Yeats's doctrine of the conflict of opposites says nothing about the fundamental nature of reality; rather it is a dramatic framework through which is made visible the perpetual oscillation of man between extreme introspection and extreme loss of self in the world of action."[1] Yeats does say in A Vision that the instructors came to "give him metaphors for poetry." But to say that a system is a creative tool or that it is based on a psychological conflict (of whatever nature) does not preclude its reflecting "the nature of reality." As a symbolist Yeats saw his system as a "representation of what exists really and unchangeably." In A Vision we have seen that he took pains to document his symbols and ideas in many writers and cultures, so that his work would not be a product just of "self" but of an "age-long memoried self." We have also seen in the plays, particularly in The Player Queen, that the struggle is not for "loss of self in action," but is rather a striving for and assumption of the Mask, our "object of desire." In The Only

[1] Allen Tate, "Yeats's Romanticism," Collected Essays (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959) rpt. in Yeats, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Unterecker (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 161.

Jealousy of Emer the main character is not a heroine because she is "least" herself but because, after struggle, she can be "most" herself. In Purgatory every action of the characters springs from their mixed natures, and we have an awareness of how acute the conflict of "selves" can be. Yeats's doctrine of opposites also extended to the universe in general, and in The Player Queen and Purgatory the civilizations go through cyclical changes like the characters'.

I chose these three plays to write on because each obviously contains one or more aspects of Yeats's system: the phases, the stages in the after-life, and the historical cones. Yeats uses the system to shape his art, and both derive from his vision of "the fundamental nature of reality."

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