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Yeats and Water Imagery

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master in Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 1997

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0-612-40165-0

ABSTRACT

Yeats and Water Imagery

Saskia Latendresse

Surprisingly little of Yeatsian scholarship deals with the cluster of images that forms one of the basic building blocks of the poet's philosophical system, water and its related imagery. This thesis intends to remedy this neglect.

The centrality of water imagery stems from the fact that Yeats had identified both himself and the Irish people (his subject, as he was trying to build a national body of symbols) with water. Water -- sea, lake, ice, well -- and its related imagery -- moon, water birds, fish and dolphins, blood and alcohol as related liquids -- pervades the poetical and dramatical work of Yeats. Water imagery is one half of the system that provided Yeats with his subjects, a religion of opposites; the other half is absence of water or fire. Water and fire, wet and dry, the Moon and the Sun symbolize Yeatsian opposites that either unite (Unity of Being) or clash (opposite characters or ages). In the late works, when Yeats concentrates on the Great Wheel, water and fire are fixed as a key concept of the gyre, its poles. All the images that had been paired with or related to water or the absence of water in the earlier works (stone, garden, tree, bird, woman) converge as correspondences for the two poles, each feeding off the other (the clashing opposites are alternate aspects of the one reality that is the gyre). The imagery is crunched around the wet and dry poles of the Great Wheel, making water imagery and its eloquent absence essential to understanding Yeats's symbolism.

Many thanks to
Micheal Brian for his advice
and to Hugh Hood and Ghislain Bégin
for much inspiration

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Yeats and Water Imagery

The early life of Yeats seemed to revolve around water. From the fishermen in Sligo, to the vision of the well the poet shared with some members of the Golden Dawn as Father D.E.D.I., to the time when Yeats "was halfway through 'The Wind Among the Reeds,' a wise woman in her trance told me that my inspiration was from the moon, and that I should always live close to water, for my work was getting too full of those little jewelled thoughts that come from the sun and have no nation."¹ He had reached, according to Kathleen Raine, the fourth level of initiation in the society of the Golden Dawn, with rites based on the image of water. He also claimed in an early essay that "I am certain that the water, the water of the sea, and of lakes, and of mist and rain, has all but made us Irish after its image. Images form themselves in our minds perpetually as if they were reflected in some pool."²

This profuseness of water is not without its effect in Yeats's works: "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Cuchulain Fights with the Sea," The Wanderings of Oisín and The Shadowy Waters. His landscapes frequently involve water in some form or another. In addition to the element of water itself (sea, river, rain, dew, wells) he uses related imagery: the moon responsible for the tides, certain liquids (alcohol or blood) as well as images that

¹ As quoted in M. H. Thuente, W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore (Totowa, NJ:Gill and Macmillan, 1980) 234.

² Yeats, Mythologies (London: Macmillan, 1970) 80.

imply water (a well-watered garden or leafy tree, an island, water birds, water plants). Yeats plunders the Romantic and esoteric traditions in using the element: from the Romantic water of imagination, creativity and origins to the esoteric waters of baptism and life.

The evolution of Yeats's use of water imagery can be divided along three steps. At first he uses the image of water with simple traditional meanings, pairing water with either one other element (mostly fire) or with another image used as an element (the tree) to form the *locus amoenus*, the site usefully described by Pierre Gallais as a garden with a tree and a fountain, a site familiar in chivalric quests for love. Water imagery, alone or grouped with other elements, ends up subservient to Yeats's emerging philosophical system: a religion of opposites, the quest for the self which is found at the source of a stream, Unity of Being in joining contraries (the Moon and the Sun personalities, the same opposition used by the woman in a trance describing Yeats), the role of art (its images borne out of water-imagination) as vision. Yeats's choice of water imagery to portray his philosophy made his verse, according to his theory of the water-bound racial memory of the Irish people, a perfect medium in building a national literature and set of symbols. This was one of his early goals, parallel to his efforts to create an Irish esoteric society. After this 'middle' period of sketching a philosophical system, Yeats started receiving material through his wife's automatic writing: the material,

the Great Wheel, influences Yeats's work more and more. Water, like the other imagery, becomes in the late period a vehicle for the theory set in A Vision. Each of these steps, early uses, emergence of a philosophy of contraries, and eventual preemption of all imagery by the Great Wheel, corresponds roughly to the years 1890-1910, 1910 to 1919 when he wrote his first philosophical manifesto, the essay Per Amica Silentia Lunae, and 1919 to 1939 when the influence of the material of A Vision grew stronger.

This is a rapid sketch of Yeats's career; a full analysis respecting the chronological order of Yeats's writing will expose the gradual evolution of the imagery. Focusing on a few key poems and plays from each period, I want to reveal the evolution of Yeats's imagery as it developed for him and for his readers: This will necessitate a bit of weaving: we will pick up and leave threads in the analysis as each image appears or reappears in the works. The nature of Yeats's evolution, however, requires such a lattice: only after seeing how his images evolve through time, through substitutions and combinations which augment their connotative baggage, can we understand the great clustering (a poetical Big Crunch) that occurs in the late period when Yeats became infatuated with the image of the Great Wheel.

The Early Works

The early poems owe much to the Romantic image of water

as a symbol for the inner life of the imagination and to the idea, as Harold Bloom calls it in The Ringers in the Tower,¹ of the "internalization of the quest" of the Romantics. In the same manner as his Romantic predecessors, especially Shelley, Yeats creates questers who embark on a physical quest to the source of a river in order to find themselves: The Wanderings of Oisín, published in 1889, is the best example. The river in "Fergus and the Druid" represents the passage of life ("I see my life go drifting like a river"), similar to the bodies of water in Wordsworth's Intimations and The Prelude, which mark the journey of the soul to maturation. The yearning for "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (written 1888) is a yearning for one's sources in general, one's origins, which in the personal case of "lunar" Yeats meant nearness to water.

Like the Romantic poets Yeats makes water the main image for the life of the imagination and for heroes' quest for their sources. Water, as Kenneth MacLean writes, the element with the most fantastical physical transformations (rain, fog, lake, river, sea, snow, steam, storms, ice...), is the perfect element for the Romantics to represent the imagination and its life. As MacLean so eloquently details in his analysis of Wordsworth's The Prelude, water has "the power to move and sound; to freshen and make float; to wash and to cleanse; the power to reflect; to distort, to sparkle

¹H. Bloom, The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romantic Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 7.

magically; the power to be free; and finally, the power to create that rhythm, which, however it comes into life, can moderate, soothe, and give pleasure."¹ Similarly to Wordsworth who used water imagery in Intimations Upon Immortality and The Prelude as sources of reflection marking the changes in the speaker as he matured, the early Yeats used passage along a body of water as a source of meditation: "I passed along the water's edge below the humid trees ... and saw the moorfowl pace ... and heard the eldest speak.... I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk" ("The Indian Upon God," 1886). Yeats's river embodying the course of a life ("I see my life go drifting like a river," in "Fergus and the Druid," 1892) also compares to Shelley's poetry, which incidentally teems with shells and seas; Shelley's questers, and Alastor is a perfect example, follow the river into the sea or toward the source, changing as the waters change, finding their own inner sources or fate as their journey proceeds. Water in Yeats reflects the soul: the waves in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (1891) symbolize the hero's grief at having killed his son; each successive island in The Wanderings of Oisin portrays a new longing until Oisin is ready to deal with reality and return to Ireland. The sound of water, the lapping of waves on a shore ("The Lake Isle of Innisfree") or wind in a leafy (hence watered) tree ("The Two Trees"), is the key to the heart's desire, to the

¹Kenneth MacLean, "The Water Symbol in The Prelude (1805-6)," University of Toronto Quarterly 17 (1948): 387.

imagination. As Daniel Albright reveals, the lapping of water flowing in a window display in London inspired in Yeats the longing for the island of Innisfree and the inspiration for the poem.

Yeats's marked interest for opposites, pairs of elements (usually water and fire or wet and dry), also owes something to the Romantic poets: the opposition of calm or turbulent waters in Wordsworth and Coleridge, the amalgam of contraries in Blake ("Without Contraries is no progression"¹), the Objectivity and Subjectivity Yeats perceives in Shelley (which Yeats represents respectively by dryness vs. water or a lone water bird). The early poems already hint at Yeats's emphasis on cohabitation (not merely clash) of opposites; indeed, Richard Ellmann points out in Yeats: The Man and the Masks that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is both the island and the lake together. During that period, Ellman assures us, Yeats was looking for a "religious system [that] had for its central doctrine the union with one's opposite of which Yeats had talked so much, and that he mistily conceived of the union as altering the qualities of self and anti-self as hydrogen and oxygen react in combination to form water."² Ellmann assumes Yeats knew about the chemical reaction, but Yeats himself sees water as part of binary oppositions, not binary in its nature: water and fire, the Moon and the Sun,

¹William Blake, Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 149.

²Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 210.

must embrace but still retain their distinct characteristics (a lunar man must bind his visions to actions, which are the domain of the Sun). The setting of Yeats's pairs of opposites determines their meaning: in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," the Sun-hero sets in the sea in a way that relates to death, not Unity of Being, for Yeats distinguishes between Unity of Being (theory of embracing the Mask to balance the personality) and opposites in character (Objective and Subjective personalities and ages which come in succession and clash, but don't unite). Water and fire in "The Blessed" ("While time and the world are ebbing away / In twilights of dew and of fire"¹) paves the way for pairings, in the middle period, of these two elements which will accompany visions of the apocalypse, the end of the present age, the coming of a new age.

In addition to pairing water and fire, Yeats groups water with a tree, a garden, though I prefer the term *locus amoenus*, which Pierre Gallais dissects as tree and fountain. The lake island of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is a place apart, in the early Yeats, a garden of meditation isolated from the busy world by the lake. Thomas L. Byrd advances that an island like Innisfree (or the islands of Oisín) -- a patch of earth (material world) which cannot be defined without the water (imagination) that surrounds it -- is "perhaps a place of preparation and meditation in which one loses the false

¹W. B. Yeats, "The Blessed," The Poems, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman/J. M. Dent and Sons, 1990) 86.

reality of the world of materialism and finds the true reality of Being."¹ So we have, in addition to water and tree, a pair in water and land/earth: the lake island, with "lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore."² These pairs in cohabitation are closer to the idea of Unity of Being than Cuchulain setting in the waves.

The pairs in both the images of the shore in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" or Cuchulain in the waves are echoed in other early poems: the "flaming founts" in "The Countess Cathleen in Paradise" (1891) show a balanced personality while the two aspects, wet and dry, of the tree in "The Two Trees" (1892) only clash. In the early poems, it is the union of elements that is most often the center of attention. The early aspect of Yeats's religion of uniting opposites finds its expression in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree:" just as the Self must embrace the Mask, the thought (yearning for the lake isle) embraces the solid thing (the detailed island of Innisfree); dreams (or art, the poetical evocation of the island) and action ("I will arise and go now") meet.

Just as Yeats distinguishes two kinds of pairings (union vs. clash), he has two views of water: positive and negative, depending on what kind of water. The lake and its island-garden are described as benign; the same cannot be said about the sea and its islands in The Wanderings of Oisín. In Europe, writes Jean Delumeau in La Peur en

¹Peter Alderson-Smith, W. B. Yeats and the Tribes of Danu (Gerard's Cross: Colyn Smythe, 1987) 180.

²Yeats, Poems 60.

Occident, the ocean inspires fear and mistrust. The sea and the sea isle, therefore, cannot share the pleasant mood of Innisfree. The salt in the sea does differentiate it from the lake, but Yeats will only really develop the symbolism of salt later. The mention of the sea in the early Yeats signals moments of clouded judgment: Cuchulain in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" enchanted to go into the waves (the negative aspect of the sea is what in part makes the Sun-hero and water clash rather than embrace), the islands in The Wanderings of Oisín where no action bears result. Only much later will the image of the sea be rehabilitated, when it represents the Anima Mundi and the shore of rebirth.

The use of water imagery in The Wanderings of Oisín to symbolize dreams or visions without action implies a need for awakening. In the previously quoted lines of "The Blessed," Yeats figured that dawn, the union of dew and fire, would correspond to his idea of a religion uniting opposites: dreams resulting in action, the sleeper awakening ("The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" (1891) and later in "The Hour Before Dawn" (1913) and "The Mountain Tomb" (1912)) . . . hopefully even the artist inspiring men to action. (Why else build a national literature if not for an Irish nation?) "Dream, until God burn Nature with a kiss," reads the penultimate line in "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" (1891), evoking in turn the awakening of a new age, a violent apocalypse.

Before moving to the specific pairing of water with a

tree in the *locus amoenus*, I want to note that in the early Yeats water is a noisy image: the sound of waves lapping by the shore in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," the fish singing in "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," the "murmuring sea" in "Fergus and the Druid," the true tree that "gave the waves their melody" in "The Two Trees." The sound of water is the act of reading poetry aloud, of the lunar man of visions trying to reach out to solar men who can act. The fact that the tree (material) is needed to give water (imagination-art) its melody shows how Yeats resists making water too central in the role of art: he prefers pairs (tree and water, shore-land and water), as for his theory of Unity of Being (the Sun and the Moon, water and fire).

Yeats, who in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" saw water as immaterial compared to the earth of the shore, is reluctant to establish the image, though perfectly suited for his target audience, as his main symbolic tool. Resorting to the garden of the *locus amoenus* solves his problem: the image contains both the fluid, ungraspable yet imagination-rich element of water (the leafy locus or tree implies a fountain close by) as well as solid elements (the tree, the woman who guards the site). In "The Two Trees" (1892), the lively tree finds its source in the heart, not 'out there.' This is best explained in terms of the internalized quest: the one who can look into his heart will find the leafy tree, will give the water its melody. The mini-locus in Baile and Aillinn (1903) marks a benign mood, love: lovers are " fish that swim, /

Scale rubbing scale where light is dim / By a broad water-lily leaf."¹ The locus is also an ideal image for creating an Irish body of symbols: the country is speckled with holy wells shaded by trees. Eventually Yeats will consider the locus as indistinct from water in at least one respect: "I think of the Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden."²

Yeats, ever working in pairs, creates pairs of *loci*, which at first are pairs of dry and wet. The opposition of the wet and dry *loci* in "The Two Trees" showed the clash of contraries, those contraries which, as Yeats's definition of Objective and Subjective men and eras evolved, will never meet. (They don't meet despite having the same descriptive terms, Moon and sun, water and fire, as for Unity of Being.) I must note in passing that Yeats eventually uses the terms primary and antithetical, but I find his earliest terms, respectively Objectivity and Subjectivity, more suggestive. The withered locus, to return to the matter at hand, refers to less shining emotions and events, like failing the internalized quest by trying to find pleasure or oneself 'out there.' The loss of an element in the locus is like the loss of the garden of Eden Milton described in Paradise Lost, with its trees and rivers: the leafy tree, the Tree of life, gives the water its melody in Yeats, and gives Adam and Eve their longevity in the Biblic tale; the tree reflected in the lake, its vision bitter like the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge,

¹Yeats, "Baile and Aillinn," Poems 101.

²Yeats, "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," Mythologies 345, 346, 352.

is what men reach for when they wish for more than what their nature allows. One side represents self-sufficiency, the Subjective personality; the other side shows how for the Objective personality, to quote Reg Skene, even Paradise can be "made desolate by the intensity of spiritual desire."¹

(Skene relates desire to the salt of the sea: more on this later.) As much can also be gleaned from "The Withering of the Boughs" (1900): the trees wither because the speaker is yearning for an unattainable "sleepy country," i.e. a fairy world which makes this one pale in comparison. Again, dreams alone, though formed in the watery imagination, are unsatisfactory: one needs the balance found in pairs. In "The Stolen Child" (1886) too the human world was implicitly presented as enjoyable. The leafy tree is found in one's heart; the yearning for a supernatural fairyland leads to sorrow (the trees withering): Yeats in using the pair of wet and dry *loci* hints that he favours, as will become explicit in "The Grey Rock" (1913) and later works, the human side of experience. The self-sufficiency Yeats calls Subjective is linked to water and its related images: the leafy tree, the lone water bird, the moon (later, the Full Moon, as opposed to the lack of visible moon for the Objective side).

"Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland," written in 1894, uses both the opposition of wet and dry *loci* and a substitute for the tree. This new substitution, while still

¹Reg Skene, The Cuchulain Plays of . B. Yeats: A Study (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974) 127.

maintaining the place of water, brings the image of the locus away from the clash of opposites and makes it a symbol for the spirit of Irish nationalism. "Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies" (the dry *locus*), writes Yeats, but Ireland as described in the last stanza is still full of water, with the implication that since watery Ireland had not been dried up under English rule an Irish independent state was possible:

The yellow pool has overflowed high-up on Clooth-na-Bare,

For the wet winds are blowing out of the clinging air;
Like heavy flooded waters our bodies and our blood¹

Cathleen, the saviour of Ireland, is associated with the pure flame of a candle: the woman and the vertical element of the *locus amoenus* meet in the image of a lighthouse, a flame associated to water. The image is a candle before the Holy Rood, the lighthouse near the ocean that is the Irish people. The tree is replaced by a human woman, by a man-made thing (candle or lighthouse). It is interesting to note that lighthouses guide ships around reefs and towards ports, but are not ports themselves. The image of the lighthouse is another hint that Yeats wanted his poetry, art being related to water, the imagination and the leafy *locus*, to have social relevance: the flame of Cathleen, her ideas, will guide Ireland to independence (the sea guided by the flame; Unity of Being applied to the Irish nation).

¹Yeats, "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland," *Poems* 108.

Making this flame human prevents what will happen in the later play The Only Jealousy of Emer: the woman incarnating the pole of perfect beauty, of water and the full moon, cannot be reached despite all the influence she exerts on the gyre and the cycle of men: Cathleen is human, hence reachable, and Ireland can find Unity of Being (while Cuchulain could not remain with Fand).

The *locus amoenus*, now defined as vertical object (and sometimes woman) and water, expresses Unity of Being in the title of Yeats's next collection of poetry, The Wind Among the Reeds, published in 1899. By naming the reeds but not the water they grow in, the title reveals the complex relationship Yeats starts erecting among the elements: the semi-aquatic plant represents Man (who has found a Unity of Being of sorts in water and earth); the wind unites the elements of the scene (the implied water and earth, the reed, the air), by rustling a melody through the reeds. (More about the melody, as I said, when Yeats really develops it in the later works.) This interdependence is the same harmony the poet wishes for in "The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers" (1892): "falling wave and wind and windy fire." Here water and tree united in the *locus* portray Unity of Being, while the wet and dry trees of "The Two Trees" and "The Withering of the Boughs" stood for opposition of elements.

Like the pairs of tree and water, the pair of water and fire depict either unity or clash of contraries. In On Baile's Strand (1904) the opposition is introduced when

Cuchulain, who "burns the earth as if he were a fire,"¹ mentions the water coursing in the older veins of King Conchubar: the two men are opposed. Blood is the junction of liquid and fire, of reason and ardor, but the balance is uneasy. Yeats opposes the cold aspect of Greek component of water -- wet and cold-- and links it to reason, cool logic; opposed to it is the hot aspect of fire. There is, claims Peter Ure, "a failure of the imagination"² when Cuchulain allows blind rage to overcome him, a rage so strong only the ocean could possibly dampen it. The same clash between water and fire occurs in "The Valley of the Black Pig" (1896), a poem that takes the clash of opposite personalities of On Baile's Strand and makes it a clash for the end of time, the Black Pig in Ireland being linked to the destruction of the world: "when the day sinks drowned in dew" the world will bow to the Pig, "Master of the still stars and of the flaming door."³

The water imagery of the early poems always returns to an exploration of opposites: water and fire, wet and dry *loci*, the flame of the lighthouse and the sea. Using those pairs, Yeats develops the idea of the quest for the self (through embracing one's opposite: sun and moon, wet and dry meeting for a balanced personality), of the clash of elements at the death of the present age (fire and water), and the

¹W. B. Yeats, Collected Plays (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992) 256.

²Ure, "Plays," An Honoured Guest (Eds. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne, London: Edward Arnold, 1965): 150.

³Yeats, Poems 83.

role of art (the lighthouse, or the poem inspired by images borne out of water-the imagination, serving as guides for the sea-people).

The difference between the early and the middle poems comes from the application of his early opposites and many more combinations of water imagery to the message Yeats is erecting, a cycle of death and rebirth: the violent meeting of opposite elements will signal revelation of what is to come, the death and rebirth of people and of ages, especially as Yeats emphasizes the apocalypse. The philosophical system that will later drive the poetry will be supported by the same elements, water and tree and fire . . . except that the pairings gain something systematic, consistent about them:

"the images themselves were fourfold, and one judged their meaning in part from the predominance of one out of the four elements."¹

Water Imagery in Yeats's Emerging Philosophy

In his search for a message, Yeats recuperates some early themes and elaborates them into a coherent system of symbols for death and rebirth of people and historical ages, the facing or embracing of one's opposite, and the moment of revelation. These themes drive Yeats's poetry as he strips it bare of its sentimental flowerings, a simplification both T. R. Henn and Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux detail. The landscape or elemental imagery in such a stripped poetry becomes highly

¹Yeats, Mythologies 347.

symbolical, archetypal. Yeats's use of water in groupings with other elements, started in the early period, is refined. The poet, having come to "believe in a Great memory passing on from generation to generation,"¹ sees the quintessence of all things divided among those four elements. Bergmann Loizeaux describes the middle poetry in similar terms: Yeats's "occult studies and the collaboration with Edwin Ellis on an edition and explanation of Blake's works encouraged his growing belief in the symbol and taught him that the basic elements of the landscape -- earth, water, air, and fire -- carried inherent symbolic power."² Throughout the 1890s, writes Bergmann Loizeaux, Yeats's landscapes become more and more unspecific and stripped down: each element, each image becomes archetypal, tapping into the Irish 'racial memory.' Yeats uses this stripped style until the end of his career, but we can distinguish two moments in the use of imagery: the first, starting from the simplification in style with the imagery based on the rule mentioned above, and the second when the image of the Great Wheel from A Vision and its poles take over the symbolism. The 'middle' period, expanding some of the early themes and images until they are subsumed into the Great Wheel, spans roughly over Responsibilities (1914), The Wild Swans at Coole (1919), Micheal Robartes and the Dancer (1921) and the one-act plays of the 1910s, and shows what is summarized in the

¹Yeats, Mythologies 345.

²Elizabeth Bergmann-Loizeaux, "Yeats's Early Landscapes," Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies 2 (1984): 154.

1917 essay Per Amica Silentia Lunae.

The place of water, according to Yeats's rule of thumb and continuing the tendency in the early poems of pairing elements, is in contrast with other elements. Yeats, as we will see, will add or substitute images to his groupings of the basic quartet (an early example was discussed for the *locus amoenus*: the tree replaced by a candle-lighthouse). By substituting single elements or parts of the *locus* for related imagery, Yeats will gradually introduce non-related stand-ins that receive the same characteristics as the elements they replace (which I might add will permit the Big Crunch when all the imagery becomes related to the Wheel through chains of substitution), just as in this period he claims that the sea and the garden symbolize the same thing, the Anima Mundi. In the middle period, these images Yeats adds and refers to again and again are the bird and the tree in their relation to water: white water birds and leafy trees separate from other birds and withered trees. These two images, especially the tree, were present in the early works, but Yeats now forces them into imagery for his system of reincarnation and revelation.

As I noted previously, because the build-up of imagery naturally leads toward the Big Crunch of the late works, I will as much as possible follow the chronology of publication.

The play The Shadowy Waters, first published as dramatic poem in 1906 and as play in 1911, bridges the early

and the middle Yeats, the young romantic poet and the symbolic one: the early themes are represented by two lovers who reach immortality through art (the play itself); the later ones by the sea of the Anima Mundi, sea of the dead coming toward the living in the shape of birds.

The 'racial memory' and folklore of Yeats's Irish audience make them understand the image of the sea: the *Imram*, the Otherworld Voyage (Saint Brendan, Oisín and the three islands); the fairies who might be the souls of the dead, who live out in the ocean, under the waves. But Yeats is still working on his imagery: does the sea inherit the bad reputation of the early works? After all, the whole play is about sailors and lovers lost at sea and in sea mist with no reasonable hope of finding land. Or is the sea the crossover point to death and reunion with the dead? There are strange birds that "hover over the masthead awhile / To wait for their friends."¹ (In a way these birds circling the sails guide men to the next world, acting as the lighthouse we discussed previously.) Is it the sea of hopelessness, as Aibric is made to say in an early version of the play: "but our sail has passed / Even the wandering islands of the gods:"² or the sea of immortal love (the last lines of the poem show Forgael 'drowning' under Dectora's hair, and becoming immortal as art, represented by the dreams and the harp)? The point of the play, says Richard Ellmann, is obvious: in a clumsy way

¹ Yeats, Collected Plays 153.

² as quoted in Alderson-Smith, Yeats and the Tribes of Danu 258.

Yeats tries to portray Unity of Being through love, a subject Yeats rarely treats in the middle period (he focuses on the alternation and clash of opposite eras or the clash of opposite personalities more often than on embracing the Mask: Unity of Being is displaced in favour of the opposition of Objective and Subjective). The sea as hopeless wandering, the sea as wandering life without reference points, the sea of Anima Mundi or the sea of the Sidhe, the sea as locus for immortality or perfect love: the imagery goes in too many directions. The Shadowy Waters, self-indulging, shows that Yeats needed a revival in his poetry by discarding his "embroideries" and his "luxuriant nostalgic moods."¹

This stripping bare of landscapes and imagery occurs around 1910-12 (T. R. Henn's dates), at the time of writing Responsibilities. From these images emerges, reports Henn, a recurrent structure that includes a moment of vision in which tensions "are unified or reconciled by a new perception in terms of image."² The moment of vision, the epiphany as opposites meet, is set up in tensions between fire and water, like the fire and ice in "The Cold Heaven." The message of the visions is the violent cycle of rebirth of both men and historical ages (through the rebirth or awakening of messiah-figures).

The violence of the revelation requires more powerful oppositions of elements: no longer is fire and water enough,

¹ T. R. Henn, "'The Green Helmet' and 'Responsibilities,'" An Honoured Guest (Eds. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne, London: Edward Arnold, 1965): 37.

²Henn, "'Green Helmet' and 'Responsibilities,'" 43.

the paradox must be erected as with the ice burning of "The Cold Heaven" and the smoking cataract of "The Mountain Tomb." Yeats also roots his elements in the solid world through linking water in pairs with solid objects like the bird, like stones (similar to the solid land and liquid water meeting in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"). In the poems of Responsibilities (1914), birds and stones root the imagery of the vision in the solid world: from "The Peacock" to the curlew in "Paudeen", from "The Grey Rock" to the rocky ledge in "The Hour Before Dawn", the material-based voice lends authority to the otherwise sensuous imagery of elements (the Greek and sense-bound definition of the four elements, pairs of wet and dry, warm and cold, meets the solid state).

The imagery of water, aside from a few poems in Responsibilities, is quieter in that it goes in fewer directions (unlike the confusing sea in The Shadowy Waters); this allows the other elements to find their proper place in relation to that element. Especially in Responsibilities, we have fire, wind, stones, mountains and birds interacting with cataracts, shores, rain. Together they form Yeats's personal philosophy of life and history: reincarnation and the revelation of reincarnation to come, as the short poem "The Mountain Tomb" (1912) demonstrates.

In this poem about a messianic figure waiting to be awakened, the one image that arrests the reader's eye is "the cataract smokes." Water and fire in union, like wine (l'eau qui brûle, in Gaston Bachelard's words) and blood in On

Baile's Strand, forming a veil (remember Yeats's four elements plus one more hiding another four) behind which could be new elements. These would be the elements of the afterlife, or their reincarnation in a new age dawning with a new messiah (related by name to the Rose and the Rose Tree of the earlier image of a cataract in fire, Yeats is training the reader to recognise his terms of the new beginning (opposites meeting); however, the man stays asleep, the veil will remain intact (the cataract "cries") until the time is right. This connects to the sleeper in a companion poem, "The Hour Before Dawn," who might not want to wake from his alcohol-induced sleep.

Like "The Mountain Tomb," "The Cold Heaven" (1912) also contains the unnatural union of two elements signaling the revelation of a cycle of human rebirth: "ice burned and was but the more ice;" a similar tension occurs in "Paudeen" (1913) where a "luminous wind" accompanies the revelation of life after death (each soul possessing the cry of a bird, like the birds of the dead in The Shadowy Waters). The one element both "Paudeen" and "The Cold Heaven" add to "The Mountain Tomb" is the bird. In "Paudeen", the curlew, a water-bird, is paired with a positive vision of death ("there cannot be ... a single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry") while in "The Cold Heaven", the land-bound bird of the "rook-delighting heaven" shows reluctance to the idea of rebirth. The water bird relates to the Subjective personality, which accepts its human lot; the other bird

would indicate an Objective point of view, the forever-unsatisfied desire to escape from the cycle.

The opposition of water and fire, or the Moon and the Sun, in relation to the revelation of rebirth or awakening of a messiah, is also found in "The Hour Before Dawn" (1913). The sleeper is either drunk or has found a miracle brew, depending on whose point of view: he is linked to the liquid, and therefore to an age of the Moon. However, as in "The Mountain Tomb," the sleeper won't wake up. The beggar, who comes from the world of the Sun, cannot understand the sleeper, whose whole life is slipping by in alcohol-induced sleep and dreams (we return to the warning that water alone is a life of illusions). Opposites clash, the beggar takes action and gets angry:

. . . 'You would rob
My life of every pleasant thought
And every comfortable thing,
And so take that and that.' Thereon
He gave him a great pummeling,
But might have pummeled at a stone
For all the sleeper knew or cared;
And after heaped up stone on stone,
And then, grown weary, prayed and cursed
And heaped up stone on stone again,
And prayed and cursed and cursed and fled
From Maeve and all that juggling plain,
Nor gave God thanks till overhead

The clouds were brightening with the dawn.¹

The last line opposes the Sun (fire) to the night (the Moon, and therefore water): the beggar will calm down when he sees with the light of his own sun (and no longer in the dim moonlight of the night), he will see again what he is familiar with. He was not ready for the vision, and not ready to embrace his opposite either.

Wine in "The Hour Before Dawn," though conferring immortality of sorts, is presented under an unfavourable aspect, that of a life wasted in dreams. The negative side of alcohol is repeated in "The Grey Rock" (1913) where the speaker prefers a blood-dipped and rock-bound footsole to the god's brew. The blood flowing on the foot sole is the true fountain, the true inspiration (referring to the imagery of "The Two Trees"), while the wine making the gods wise or drunk is not: also, notice how the human side of the equation, acceptance of mortality and looking in the human heart for answers, is favoured, continuing Yeats's emphasis on human-bound imagery from "The Two Trees," "The Withering of the Boughs," and "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland." The difference between the two liquids, human and supernatural (Subjective and Objective) will be clearer when we discuss "The Peacock" and "The Witch."

The rock in "The Grey Rock" ("that rock-born, rock-wandering foot ... a footsole dipped in blood that had made prints upon the ground") has the same function as the human

¹Yeats, Poems 170.

blood, rooting the imagery into the solid state (not just vision or dream) as well as indicating the reasonable limits of desire. The speaker puts his faith in the human image rather than in the gods; that rock-bound, blood-dipped footsole symbolizes an art based in real life, as well as desire respecting human limits (The score could be Subjective satisfaction 34 : Objective pining 0).

The early difference between Subjective and Objective, wet and dry, the presence and absence of water, recurs in "The Witch" (1912) and "The Peacock" (1913-14). In "The Witch", the pursuit of riches outside of oneself is a deceptive goal; it is like lying with a witch, and witches in folklore are known to milk the cow dry. In "The Peacock," the barren landscape is conducive to happiness because the artist is not looking for anything outside himself: Subjectivity, or finding the source within to refer to Henn's internalized quest, means one can thrive on "the wind beaten, stone-grey, and desolate Three Rock."¹ Finding water within oneself can also be found in the play At the Hawks's Well, where the well fills up for Cuchulain even though he doesn't drink from it. Subjective man feeds metaphorically on the dried-up hill, using the barren land as inspiration because "the more depopulated and barren the landscape, the more conducive it is to vision."² Vision of course being the domain of the waters of the imagination. (The poem by the way states

¹Yeats, Poems 172.

²From Albright's note on the poem: Yeats, Poems 539.

Yeats's new style, with landscapes stripped bare so that the imagery, uncluttered by distracting elements, gains potency.) The Subjective man rewarded and the Objective man unsatisfied are well explained by Reg Skene:

"Yeats draws a sharp contrast between these lucky men . . . who seek an earthly Paradise represented by the flowing Well and the Green Tree [the *locus amoenus*] and those who, driven by spiritual desire, seek an unearthly Paradise. These are kin to the Wilderness and the Dry Tree. The idea is that those who are driven by spiritual desire voluntarily chose the empty well and withered tree. . . . "¹

As F.A.C. Wilson further explains, for Yeats the human heart is "by nature so disoriented that the discipline can never be fulfilled"² for those who seek water/Paradise through meditation.

The difference between Subjectivity and Objectivity also finds biographical roots. Yeats, who had been described as a man of the moon, was anxious to rehabilitate the role of art and dreams, especially after having lost Maud Gonne, who married a man his opposite, a man of the Sun, of action. Sometimes by making art embrace its Mask (leading men to action), at other times by favouring the lunar and water-related personality of Subjectivity, Yeats seems to console himself. As a poet (related to water-imagination) who tried

¹Reg Skene, Cuchulain Plays 127.

²F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography (London: Methuen, 1969) 62.

to impart a message to his fellow men (a national literature, a teaching about the cycle of life) like a lighthouse, Yeats was himself in a way embracing his Mask: imagination meets action, water meets flame, art meets social relevance.

That Subjectivity, water-related, needs its opposite is clear not just from Yeats forcing a role onto his poetry and in the man in "The Peacock" who lives in a barren setting, but again in the pair of poems "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" and "Two Years Later" (both written 1912-13). There is to the child a Blakean innocence where water flows ("Dance there upon the shore"), opposed to experience warning the child about the hardships of life ("how despairing / The moths are when they are burned?"). The child with its real water (the sea) is not the poet, but the speaker is; the implication is that the speaker was burned by experience like the moth, the fire a transfigurative force that simplified the complexities which cluttered the mind, and opened it to the figurative water of imagination.

The poems we have just seen, collected in Responsibilities, show how water imagery gets refined as Yeats erects a philosophical system. Using pairs as in the early poems, Yeats establishes a few constants: fire and water (and variations of it) symbolize the Mask to embrace (Unity of Being in art and in people) or opposites in history and personalities (Subjective and Objective ages or men). Water was the medium for vision while fire is the power that simplifies everything until it is barren enough to lead to

vision (hence the need for fire and water to signal moments of vision). The *locus amoenus* is present only subtly in the pair of stone or rock with water, the function of the pair being to root the vision in the material world, like the island of Innisfree. Substitutions begin, again rooting the creative, life-giving and visionary properties of the liquid element (imagination, art, revelation) in more solid images unrelated to water, such as, from the early poems to this point, the moon, the leafy tree, the bloody footprint. This informal system of paired imagery was formalized in the essay Per Amica Silentia Lunae (published in 1917), an essay introducing explicitly the idea of embracing one's opposite and the daimons dreaming back to life from their Condition of Fire across the sea of the Anima Mundi. The Condition of Fire, the alchemical flame that burned everything to a barren state, unclutters the mind, thus allowing visions to come forth (exactly the fire transforming the soul in the late poem "Sailing to Byzantium").

The image of the sea is rehabilitated also because of its tides. Two movements are found in Yeats's sea: daimons dreaming back across the sea of Anima Mundi and, as the Byzantium poems will later document, the dead sailing east to reach the Condition of Fire. The cycle of life and birth capitalizes on the image of the tide: to and fro. Let us remember that, though bound to an Irish 'racial memory,' the centrality of water was a debt to the Romantic period: "Romantic poets," wrote Harold Bloom, "liked to return to the

imagery of the ocean of life and immortality, for in the eddying to and fro of the healing waters they could picture a hoped-for process of restoration, of a survival of consciousness despite all its agonies."¹

At this point, it is useful to summarize the importance of water imagery in its relation to fire. In opposition, water represents the favoured Subjectivity, while dryness is Objectivity. When the two elements meet, they represent either the act of embracing the Mask (daimon) or they indicate by paradoxical juxtaposition the violent death and rebirth of historical ages. The blood (water and fire) required to bring in the new age is the liquid that corresponds to that moment when elements clash. The images are rooted in living, sensuous forms: from blood, in which opposites must embrace or be forced together, to the classical image of sea foam as semen (Chronos's lost semen, which begat Venus on the sea waves) that can be found in early and late poems. . . . All indicate that Yeats had sexual union in mind to represent Unity of Being as well as the birth of the new age (this will become much more evident in "Leda and the Swan"). Fire also symbolizes rebirth in Yeats's description of the four elements: there being four elements and a fifth one, "a veil hiding another four, a bird born out of fire,"² a Phoenix. (That description of the veil evokes the hymen broken in the sexual union, and the bird the

¹Bloom, Ringers 127-8.

²Yeats, Mythologies 347.

incarnation of the dead thing in a new life: this hymen-veil is the cataract that hides the cavern and sleeper in "The Mountain Tomb.")

Using the elemental imagery of fire and water to demonstrate the cycle of birth and rebirth (applied to people, daimons dreaming back, and eras), Yeats seems to give an alchemical recipe for finding the true self, a kind of Book of the Dead but which indicates man's path in life. The idea is not so strange for Yeats, who had used The Wind Among the Reeds, according to William H. O'Donnell, to describe the process of initiation into adeptship, or as diary of the soul travelling along life. The case is even stronger for the Cuchulain cycle of plays and the poems written after A Vision, which focus more carefully on the journey of the soul; the 'middle' poems, concentrating on embracing the daimon and on union of opposites, center the quest for self on embracing the opposite rather than on the initiatory levels O'Donnell referred to. Per Amica's image of opposites meeting to form the personality finds its strongest example in the play At The Hawk's Well, published the same year as the essay, 1917.

In At the Hawk's Well, dry well, old man and arid land are opposed to Cuchulain and water flowing: the water flowing serves as an indicator for the moment the hero finds his opposite, the hawk woman and warrior women, and runs to embrace the one he can catch, the queen of the warrior women with whom he will mate (according to the popular Irish

legend). Sexual union symbolizes Unity of Being, and the landscape, dry or well-watered, marks success or failure in the quest for Unity of Being. (The opposites as markers will be salvaged later on as symbols for the alternating poles of the Great Wheel.) The play uses opposites in two ways: sometimes they clash (dry well and water flowing), at other times they meet (sexual union). Both ways relate to the personality, respectively by showing there are two kinds of people and that the strongest of these two groups is the one that achieves balance, i.e. Unity of Being. A detailed look at the play will make this clear.

At the Hawk's Well, as F. A. C. Wilson points out, deals with the Self: Cuchulain searching for adventure is unwittingly on a quest for his sources, which are found at the *locus amoenus*, with the fairy woman as guardian of the flowing well, a prize, in legends, for the successful hero (again a hint of sexual union). Cuchulain is the Subjective hero for whom water flows; displaced is the emphasis of On Baile's Strand on his solar origins. Instead, he is identified with watery Ireland. He meets an old man as dry in old age as the dry well ("Have you been set down there / To threaten all who come, and scare them off? / You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks, / As though you had no part in life."¹). Two men waiting for the well to flow, like the two trees in "The Two Trees," opposed only by water or lack of it: a return to Yeats's basic opposition, wet and

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 215.

present only by the blue cloth on stage and in the lines mentioning water flowing for Cuchulain, represents Subjectivity, while salt sea water cannot even quench thirst (though it represents Cuchulain's journey to the well). Through the eyes of Objectivity, 'salted' with desire, the old man views the water of the well as the water of immortality, the same supernatural liquid as the ale of the sleeper in "The Hour Before Dawn" and the brew rejected in "The Grey Rock;" he is of course bound to fail at his unreasonable expectations. Before moving to the opposite of sea water, the water in the well, it should be noted that sea water does have its positive aspect as the place of journeying: Cuchulain set out on the sea, he says early in the play, to find his adventure. The sea symbolizes life, its starting point ("To a Child Dancing in the Wind") as well as its concluding point as the dead cross the sea of Anima Mundi ("Byzantium").

The opposites of spring and salt water, one quenching thirst and the other leaving one full of desire (respectively Subjectivity and Objectivity), echoes the play's absence and presence of water in the *locus*. The water in the well is at first absent, though potentially present since it is represented by a blue cloth, the colour of water:

The withered leaves of the hazel
Half choke the dry bed of the well¹

The barren tree, the dry well and the old man are the

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 209.

withered version of the *locus amoenus* : viewed through the distorting lense of the man's Objectivity, represented by the monk-like wait of the old man, the tree is fruitless, the well won't flow. The old man lacks, in the words of "The Two Trees," passion, the figurative fountain that makes the tree leafy. That is what Cuchulain, the Solitary and Subjective hero, carries within him and makes the well flow:

I have heard water splash; it comes, it comes;
Look where it glitters. He has heard the
plash;

Look, he has turned his head.¹

The water flowing is a marker, suggesting Cuchulain has succeeded symbolically in his quest (the internalized quest, of course). Water represented for Yeats the attainment of a higher Self or Reality, marking the journey of the Soul, as I mentioned earlier: the element presided over the Fourth Grade of the Golden Dawn, which Yeats would have reached, says Kathleen Raine. The initiation to the Fourth Grade included this incantation:

The priest with the mask of Osiris spake and said:
I am the water stagnant and silent and still;
reflecting all, concealing all, I am the Past, I am
the Inundation. He who rises from the Great Water
is my Name.²

Like communion wine, the water of the well can be seen as

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 217.

²Kathleen Raine, Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1976) 41.

symbolical, an internalized grail (the Christian 'grail' of mass wine permits communion with the greater being that is God; the internalized 'grail,' with the greater reality of knowing the Self): the water must flow in order to represent the inner sources of Subjectivity (imagination, Unity of Being, self-sufficiency in spite or because of embracing the opposite). The Subjective person will reach for the earthly paradise (the warrior woman instead of the hawk woman). Cuchulain pursues love (the hawk woman, then at the end of the play joins the "fierce women of the hills"¹) rather than the water of immortality: Yeats again puts his faith in the more human, the more graspable alternative. F. A. C. Wilson claims that the hero, by not drinking, does not attain *participation mystique*. In a sense he is right, Cuchulain does not attain any transcendent state: but in saying that Cuchulain fails, Wilson misconstrues the meaning of the play. It is important that Cuchulain not drink of the well of immortality, but instead from the symbolical fountain of sexual love: this is how Yeats demonstrates the superiority of Unity of Being and of the Subjective personality. That the water in the well flows for Cuchulain even if he does not drink it does not spell failure, but rather marks success at internalizing the quest (finding Unity of Being), or at least at giving the quest a more human goal (sexual union). This humanization and success of the Subjective hero's quest evokes also the dual protagonists in "The Two Trees," and

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 218.

"The Witch" and "The Peacock:" the one who finds satisfaction is the one who resorts to the fountain flowing in his heart, inside him (it would be very solipsistic if it were not for the need to embrace the Mask). This is the wet locus, only briefly described in the scenery of the play because it is internalized; indeed, the water of the well ("It comes") is parallel to Cuchulain, whose last line in the play is "He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes!"¹ The literal quest for the source or the grail, once internalized, can be resolved only in a symbolic manner rather than with direct drinking of the source water; this means that the poet finds inspiration in human experience (bloody, rock-born foot, or love) rather than on "beautiful, lofty things" (the brew of the gods in "The Grey Rock," the well of immortality here in Hawk's Well). The superiority of the 'wet,' Subjective personality is proven.

(Let me stress that Yeats distinguishes the innate characteristics (Sun or Moon) from opposites in personality, Subjective men who can find balance and Objective men who can't: thus Cuchulain, whose innate characteristic is the Sun, is also Subjective, and linked to water, because he reaches Unity of Being through sexual union, also related to water.)

As I hinted in the above paragraph, the individual Subjective hero in At the Hawk's Well must encounter and embrace his opposite. This is what F.A.C. Wilson describes as

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 218.

"the marriage of the hero and the virgin . . . the reintegration of the personality."¹ Being seduced by the guardian makes Cuchulain the passionate hero he is, bringing him to sexual union with his opposite (Yeats's metaphor for Unity of Being): Cuchulain-the Sun pursues the hawk woman-Moon and the fierce warrior women. (Yeats will recycle the bird-woman's dance and ungraspability in the rest of the Cuchulain cycle written under the influence of A Vision.) As Yeats asks at the end of his play, when given the option of finding a source within one's heart, "Who but an idiot would praise dry stones in a well?"

Previously treated in Responsibilities, alcohol has its part to play in At the Hawk's Well, since it is a drunken vision that sends Cuchulain to the island of the Hawk's Well:

A rumour has led me,
A story told over the wine towards dawn.
I rose from the table, found a boat, spread sail,
And with lucky wind under the sail
Crossed waves that have seemed charmed, and found
this shore.²

Alcohol being, in Gaston Bachelard's words, *l'eau qui brûle*, we find ourselves in one of those paradoxical unions of opposites where Yeats places his visions of a greater reality. Alcohol here, as opposed to the drunken inaction and slumber seen in "The Hour Before Dawn," joins watery visions

¹Wilson, Iconography 47.

²Yeats, Collected Plays 212.

to the fire of action (returning to the opposite of lunar and solar personalities). (Like pure water, alcohol has its beneficent and negative significations.)

The opposites of wet and dry *loci* of At the Hawk's Well find their way into the underlying imagery of The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919), written as Yeats was gathering the early material for his vision of the Great Wheel. In Emer, the wet *locus* becomes the pole of the Full Moon, which is opposed to the pole of the New Moon of Hawk's Well. The focus on the *locus* becomes evident when we see how Yeats revises the earlier play On Baile's Strand, in retelling it, to include a tree ("Baile's Tree"¹) at sea side. If At the Hawk's Well represented the setting out of the hero, the pursuit of Unity of Being (Yeats's answer to the disappointing loss of Maud Gonne), Emer paired with its retelling of Baile in turn portrays death and resurrection (what rejoicing over Yeats's wife's automatic writing skills), drowning and birth depicted as a bird thrown on the shore after a sea storm (like the painful contractions at birth, when the baby leaves the watery maternal womb).

The rebirth of Cuchulain shows his spirit's and his body's emergence from the sea water: the sun-god/hero, Cuchulain, has set in the waves and must be rescued. Was he cheated out of a glorious sexual union with the moon goddess? Despite his Subjectivity, Cuchulain cannot live in total submergence: water alone cannot lead to balance, as I have

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 284.

explained previously, and there is no union possible with the inhuman perfection that is Fand the sea woman. Because of this, Cuchulain must emerge from his 'death': there is no escape from the cycle. The union of Sun-Cuchulain with the immortal, Full Moon, white bird, perfect beauty that is Fand would be a union of perfection; man lacks the discipline to reach such transcendental perfection. So the play is not one of missed opportunity, but of a watery Orpheus, submerging and emerging, drowning and reborn. Borrowing F.A.C. Wilson's words, the cycle of death and rebirth is expressed in terms of water imagery and light, like the physical departure from the womb at birth:

. . . we begin from the symbols of 'white bird' and 'white shell', combined with the more sombre imagery of sea and storm: the sea-imagery gradually darkens and grows more menacing till it is offset by the climax with its 'supernatural light'¹

As Cuchulain becomes the archetypal man, his "rejection of Fand is every man's renunciation of the absolute."² His birth is that of every man, his Subjectivity in accepting his human lot a role model for men. (Again that message, already discussed with "The Grey Rock" and At the Hawk's Well.) "Cuchulain has been saved," writes Harold Bloom, "from everything that is most to be desired, the *daimonic* beauty and perfect love of Fand's full moon, that perfect

¹Wilson, *Iconography* 121.

²Wilson, *Iconography* 122.

consummation of the sun-hero and the moon-beauty that would free the hero from the cycles of retribution and rebirth he must continue to suffer."¹ The absolute of perfection, of beauty is deceptive, and Yeats's speakers reject it ("The Grey Rock," the sense in "The Stolen Child" that the child would miss the world if he left). Either the hero accepts the cycle, or he dreams of escaping it completely. Since escape is impossible, the quest for escaping the cycle is also the quest of the Objective man. Interestingly, the play demonstrates the distinction I made earlier about Yeats using opposites in two ways, either clashing (opposite personalities and alternating eras) or meeting (Unity of Being), Cuchulain the son of a Sun god is related to the Subjective personality, which as we have already seen relates to water and the leafy *locus amoenus*. That Cuchulain can be both related to water on one level and to sun-fire on another proves Yeats's distinction in dealing with Unity of Being and clashing opposites even if they share the same imagery.

The sea in The Only Jealousy of Emer, suggests Wilson, is the Anima Mundi, the place where the soul dreams itself back to life. The play is set at "the moment of daybreak, which in Yeats's symbolism is the moment of rebirth. The soul is imagined crossing the Anima Mundi to the dry land of consciousness, and it is shown it thrown up at the sea's edge, like some wounded bird, by a sudden storm; that convulsion of the Great Memory which precipitates its rebirth

¹Bloom, Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 302-3.

into the world."¹ Daybreak is also one of those magical moment of elements juxtaposed: the dew and fire of the early poem "The Blessed."

The rebirth-landing of the white bird and Cuchulain, in the opening verses of Emer, on the sea shore demonstrates the link Yeats works between beauty and the sea and the toil of physical birth:

A woman's beauty is like a white
Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone
At daybreak after a stormy night
Between two furrows upon the ploughed land:
A sudden storm, and it was thrown
Between dark furrows upon the ploughed land.
How many centuries spent
The sedentary soul
In toils of measurement
Beyond eagle or mole,
Beyond hearing or seeing,
Or Archimede's guess,
To raise into being
That loveliness?²

Beauty is the result of toil which here is represented by the pangs of rebirth, making all new-born beautiful. (This association will be reused in later in "Among School Children.") The specific instance of beauty in Emer, the

¹Wilson, Iconography 99.

²Yeats, Collected Plays 282.

absolute of perfect beauty which must have been shaped by immense and awe-inspiring toil, is merged with different aspects of water or the moon through a chain of substitutions: the ideal woman is beauty, which is the full moon, which is water; or she is the sea-bird in the sea of rebirth, which is water too, or the statue (late in the play), which makes a version of a *locus amoenus* by seaside, with water. This kind of merger, the convergence toward one symbol of images related because Yeats substituted one for another, will only get stronger as Yeats collects all his images around the Great Wheel. The second stanza of the opening chorus creates a parallel between the sea bird and Cuchulain recovered from the sea:

A strange, unserviceable thing,
A fragile, exquisite, pale shell,
That the vast troubled waters bring
To the loud sands before day has broken.
The storm arose and suddenly fell
Amid the dark before day has broken.
What death? what discipline?
What bonds no man could unbind,
Being imagined within
The labyrinth of the mind,
What pursuing or fleeing,
What wounds, what bloody press,
Dragged into being

That loveliness?¹

Does that make the Subjective hero part of the chain of images merging around the beautiful white sea bird? In a way, yes, because Yeats admitted seeing the Subjective hero sometimes as a solitary water bird:

"Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river."²

Cuchulain is part of the Subjective cluster of imagery, which is the watery *locus*. He is the exemplum of the Subjective personality, a life led by pursuing earthly desires and Unity of Being (symbolized by sexual union with the warrior woman in Hawk's Well, and his wife and mistress in Emer).

The last lines of the second verse, "dragged into being" (which recalls Blake's Tyger: "What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry;"³ a terrible beauty, to reuse Yeats's words, that is cruel and bloodthirsty in what it inspires, like the beauty of Helen responsible for the ruin of Troy) suggest that the bird or shell (lighthouse, woman of beauty, hero in his watery coma, sleeper, Father Rosicross) is reluctant to be born again, like the creature of the later poem "The Second Coming." And like Helen of

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 282.

²As quoted in Wilson, Iconography 166.

³Blake, Writings 214.

Troy, once messiah- or guiding-figures are brought back to life they inspire the violent, apocalyptic birth of a new age--"a terrible beauty is born."

The terrible beauty in question in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the seductive woman, is Fand, and her coming to land as a bird (the opening chorus's "a woman's beauty is like a white frail bird"¹) is a sea fairy version of the birth of Venus. There forms around the absolute beauty of Fand a *locus amoenus* of her own: in the final chorus she is cast as a statue amid the sea landscape (the duo of *loci* no longer wet and tree vs. dry and tree, but wet and tree vs. wet and stone). The idea of beauty as a statue is explained by Yeats considering that no human life can abide at the phase of the full moon; and, because Fand is related to the sea, her beauty recalls the image of Cathleen in "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland," the lighthouse for the birth of Irish nation. Fand, more like Venus than Cathleen was, guides toward sexual passion rather than nationalism. (In the words of Chevalier and Gheerbrant, Venus Aphrodite symbolizes "les forces irrépressibles de la fécondité, non pas dans leurs fruits, mais dans le désir passionné qu'elles allument chez les vivants."²) The image of bird-woman-lighthouse will only get more complex, starting in the collection of poetry published right after Emer, The Wild Swans at Coole (1919).

Before moving to the next step in Yeats's poetry, we

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 281.

²Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des Symboles (Paris: Jupiter/Robert Laffont, 1982) 55.

must stop to notice the many substitutes Yeats started establishing for water in Emer (this is a useful summary of the imagery at the point where the Big Crunch was only beginning): there is the white sea-bird (sea of rebirth and rebirth itself), the sea-shell (beauty, rebirth). While the wet-dry pair of *loci* has symbolized the contraries of Subjectivity and Objectivity, this time water is the constant, and the opposition is between a human-friendly *locus* (garden) and one that won't allow human life (phase of the Full Moon): it is evident that Cuchulain has to be rescued from the negative *locus*, and fire provides the buoy to rescue the 'drowned' Cuchulain by erasing the complex 'glamours' around the hero. If water is the medium for the imagination, if water is the element of rebirth, it is the sun and fire that must clear away all the complexities, as demonstrated with "The Witch" and "The Peacock," make the land barren so that visions (inner source) can appear. Emer lights a fire and the "enchantments from the dreaming foam" vanish to reveal the changeling lying in place of Cuchulain (fire and sea foam); in turn the changeling produces a stronger visionary fire that "dissolved the dark" which had hid Cuchulain and Fand from Emer's eyes.

The slow merging that started in Emer only continues as the growing material from Mrs. Yeats's automatic writing is influencing the poetry. In The Wild Swans at Coole, it is the water bird that gathers the extra connotative baggage that links it to the Great Wheel. The bird, after its previous

incarnations (the sea-bird as the woman who is the lighthouse of the transformed locus , or sea-birds as eternal lovers and Unity of Being through love in "The White Birds"), becomes here the gyre of the Great Wheel as the swans take flight in the title poem (written in 1916, the poem uncannily fits with the main idea of the collection, of inescapable cycle of death and rebirth). The most arresting image of the poem "The Wild Swans at Coole" is the merging of elements: the lake mirrors the sky, uniting the sky above and the sky-water below. As the swans take flight they don't really change elements. It is a subtle union of opposites that will lead to a revelation of the Wheel: he can grow old and die, but the swans, "wheeling in great broken rings"¹ (like the gyres of the Great Wheel) will keep on turning. This is the same movement as the sea birds in the early play The Shadowy Waters, where birds were guides: in "Wild Swans," the birds are less lighthouse-guides than the gyre itself, though it could be argued that the gyre is both the force it exerts on people and the people submitted to it, gyring too. The speaker seems to accept the fact that the swans will leave his lake: is it a sign of compliance to the cycle of the Great Wheel? or was Yeats despairing because he no longer cared, as Norman Jeffares supposes, that Maud Gonne had once again rejected him?²

From almost purely literal description ("nine-and-

¹Yeats, Poems 180.

²As mentioned in Albright's notes in Yeats, Poems 551.

fifty"), the swans are gradually charged with more metaphorical baggage: their wheeling flight pattern (the cycle of Phases), and their immortality in the fourth stanza makes the wheel eternal. Yeats starts with water imagery and moves on to his new favourite image, the wheel, the cycle.

In subordinating water imagery to the gyre, Yeats joins his pairs of opposites rather than make them clash. The elements are not separate but markers along one continuous process: the two poles pulling on the gyre, and the four elements marking each a quarter of the Great Wheel in A Vision. In "The Wild Swans at Coole," in the opening image, there is the sky and the not-sky in the water, merged into one sky. As the swans take flight, Yeats implies a fluidity of time that forbids past, present, and future from being considered alone; a fluidity that connects one moment (lake) to the next (flight).

The bird-water association which symbolized the gyre, a cycle of life and rebirth, also represented, as we have seen, the Subjective man who advances alone and follows his fate in the gyre.

The rebirth aspect of birds can also be found in folklore, where birds are the transformed souls of the dead which travel between the worlds of the living and the Other World (like the two lovers transforming into swans in "Baile and Ailinn"). Additionally, in Yeats's system, birds are the shape of the soul reborn, cast from the sea of generation (the sea of Anima Mundi as it is named in "Byzantium"). The

flight of these birds, notes Edward Lense, is "analogous to the sea-journey of an *imram*,"¹ the Irish equivalent of the *Odyssey*, or, as I mentioned earlier, an aquatic version of Orpheus who dies and re-emerges to life. F. A. C. Wilson wrote: "the sea is Yeats's emblem for the tide of becoming as opposed to pure being;"² in view of this, birds are the embodiment of the change.

The cycle that decentralizes water-related pairs of elements in The Wild Swans at Coole is linked to water anyway through the moon, whose 28 phases characterize the Great Wheel. As Daniel Albright points out, "The Phases of the Moon" (1818) was written to summarize the material from George's automatic writing. Focusing on lunar imagery, Yeats salvages and merges the imagery of the four elements, water, fire, earth and air, and of opposites (water and fire) into a cycle of death and rebirth cut into quarters: each element is associated to a quarter, and the New and Full Moon are poles (which correspond to absence and surplus of water). The moon as it increases and decreases, named eight times in the short poem "The Cat and the Moon" (1917), replaces the tidal function of water. It is also a richer image than the tide: the moon is linked to fertility and to beauty; with the sun it forms a daily cycle; its twenty-eight phases each become as many different images (the Saint, the Hunchback, the Fool, the Hero . . .). Through a chain of substitutions, the moon

¹Lense, "Sailing to the Seas of Nowhere," Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies 5 (1987): 101.

²Wilson, Iconography 23.

rather than direct water imagery is the focal point to which everything else connects (the chain begins with the garden of the *locus amoenus*, in which the tree-candle-bird-gyre becomes the phases of the moon as it goes from dry to wet pole, and the moon connects to water: all images merging into a primordial puddle!).

The idea of water paired with another element is not lost, just dethroned from the central role it had during the period Yeats treated of Unity of Being, and Subjectivity and Objectivity. Elements still form tense paradoxical pairs, and even the gyre, as we saw in the above paragraph, has its own oppositions of wet and dry. Yeats still emphasises the meeting of opposites, building his imagery, as noted by Christiane Joseph-Trividic, "*à la jonction . . . de contraires*:"¹ the line in "The Fisherman" (1914), "Where stone is dark under froth," shows the opposition of water and stone, white froth and dark stone. (They are opposite yet form a mineral *locus* in the same manner as the flame of the lighthouse formed a *locus* with the sea of the Irish people in "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland.") The merging of opposite elements, Full and New Moon, water and fire, turns apocalyptic in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (1918) in the image of "the pull of the dark moon and the full," an image which suggests the violent forces to which the cycle is subjected as it goes from pole to pole, the confusion it

¹Christiane Joseph-Trividic, "De 'île' au 'pêcheur': Le fonctionnement dans quelques poèmes de Yeats; Actes de Congrès de Tours, 1977," Linguistique, Civilisation, Littérature (ed. André Bordeaux, Paris: Didier, 1980): 137.

brings described as "the frenzy of our western seas" (the chain of substitutions disclosed earlier for "The Phases of the Moon" returns to the starting point, the sea synonymous in Yeats with the garden of the Anima Mundi).

The stone is, like fire, one of the elements Yeats likes to contrast with water: the stone in the stream in "The Fisherman" and "Easter, 1916," the brew and the rock in "The Grey Rock," as well as the many islands found in "Sailing to Byzantium," "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "The Green Helmet," At the Hawk's Well, etc. The contrasts are solidity vs. vision, stability vs. fluidity, dry vs. wet. As part of a transformed *locus amoenus*, the stone replacing the tree can indicate a positive situation: in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" the vision-inducing Rock of Cashel and the stone kissed to end the furor of visions. Or it can point to an unglorified instance: in "The Phases of the Moon" the architectural stone of the tower signifies failure at finding the inner leafy tree of the garden of Anima Mundi, because "he seeks in book or manuscript what he shall never find."¹ (Here, the natural image by implication is better than the man-made one, but Yeats does value human-based imagery when he must decide between supernatural and earth-bound, as in "The Grey Rock.")

"Easter, 1916," written before Yeats's marriage but collected in Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), proves how the merging of Yeats's imagery was present even before

¹Yeats, Poems 213.

the advent of his wife's automatic writing: an earlier poem using the imagery of the beauty-stone-lighthouse and the rebirth of the cycle, fits perfectly among poems concentrating on the gyre and the pole of the Full Moon, mainly because by integrating his old imagery into the Great Wheel Yeats was ensuring continuity. In this poem, Yeats unites all the images he had been toying with -- the nature images, apocalyptic vision and revelation, the consequences of the cycle of the moon reaching its last phases, the stone in the stream, beauty, the leading or lighthouse role of beauty and art-- and manages to depict a historical event with a sense of occult urgency. The image of beauty as a leader/lighthouse, parallel to the image of a stone in a stream (a *locus amoenus*), details the merging of the lighthouse with the pole of the Full Moon which exerts a pull on the gyre.

The key words, "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born,"¹ recall the beauty of Helen, a woman whose beauty lead men to war. She is, in terms encountered in "The Woman Homer Sung" and "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland," the lighthouse in a transformed *locus amoenus*. Like the Sidhe Fand in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the woman's beauty is seductive but cruel, inhuman. This monstrous beauty that is the execution of the Irish rebels (or, if the idea of dying for a cause were not inspiring enough, the monstrous beauty of the revolution itself) could very well be the

¹Yeats, Poems 228.

inspiration of Irish nationalism, a muse that drives men to bloodshed.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.¹

The stone in the stream replaces in position the line "A terrible beauty is born." The position of the line confirms that the stone *is* the terrible beauty, hard-hearted and claiming its human toll, leading to war like the tower-lighthouse-Helen. The stone in the *locus*, evoking the leafy tree giving the waves their melody in "The Two Trees," is art with a social relevance, art inspiring to action, beauty inspiring to bloodshed.

The *locus* as lighthouse is found in the related poem "The Rose Tree," which concludes the subject of "Easter, 1916" by explaining why the cry for bloodshed is so loud, why blood is necessary: bloodshed is required not only because blood evokes the birth of flesh, but also because without action nationalism cannot lead to political independence: "Maybe a breath of politic words / Has withered our Rose Tree."² As if these men created their own *locus* of beauty with their death, now the rose tree, or the men conversing "bone to bone," "needs to be but watered . . . To make the green come out again."³ Pearse replies that in Ireland there is no water,

¹Yeats, Poems 229.

²Yeats, Poems 231.

³Yeats, Poems 231.

implying that England has sucked Ireland dry: the only liquid is inside the Irish people, in their blood. Blood is an apocalyptic version of the watery element: the fire in blood means that violence, the Easter Rising and the storm of rebirth are the new forms of water's passion, Irish nationalism and death-like sleep. The relation to the "Hour Before Dawn" is clear:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed. . . .
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle¹

Blood is the last resort of someone dying of thirst, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Blood is the race, the Irish people. Blood is red, like the Rose which in early Yeats poems was the symbol for Ireland and beauty. Blood symbolizes the toil that shapes beauty, both the beauty of the new age and beauty of the newborn baby. Blood symbolizes rebirth, and becomes part of the *locus* of the New Moon, opposite of the Full Moon: at the Full Moon we had the sea and the seductive beauty; at the New Moon we have bloodshed and cruel beauty. One death by water, one by fire: one is a submergence and re-emergence, while the other is a transformative simplification by fire.

As in "Easter, 1916," Yeats portrays in "The Rose Tree" the Second Coming, the apocalyptic reversal of the gyre, as incredibly close at hand. Blood is shed, the herald of the

¹Yeats, Poems 235.

upheavals that characterize the turn of the cycle. The age will turn from Objective, Christianity, to Subjective. The difference can be seen in the two bloodsheds: bloodshed in Christianity was the crucifixion and the wine at mass (a mere fire and water stand-in) while in the new era the cry for blood is greater (sixteen men die, and they ask in "The Rose Tree" for bloodshed, not ritual). Bloodshed awakes the sleeper (nationalism, heroes that lead to war) from his "stony sleep."

The new dawn is heralded by the cry of a water-bird, the moor-hen. This dark water-bird, the moor-hen, like the black bird in "Paudeen" and the crows of Morrigu of The Death of Cuchulain, is opposed to the white sea-birds in Emer which had personified the birth of a new age or the phase of the Full Moon: the darker bird is the aspect of the white bird (as depicted in Emer) under a new phase, the New Moon (no moonlight) opposed to the Full Moon (moonlight). This is basically the same difference as water vs. bloodshed discussed earlier. As prophets of the change, they themselves do not change as do the rebels and the clouds (both made of water): in this they are similar to the wild swans at Coole which did not age. The black water-bird image is used at the end of the cycle (the dark moon) while the swan had been used for the full moon.

The moon and its phases, and the full and new moon described as wet or dry poles of the cycle of increase and decrease, death and rebirth, have grown to incorporate

Yeats's early imagery. The personality, which had already been characterized as either solely wet or dry, Subjective or Objective, now is alternately one or the other depending on which pole is closest. This can be seen in a letter Yeats wrote, explaining the alternance of the two periods in his life: "That conflict is deep in my unconscious, perhaps in everybody's. I dream of clear water . . . then come erotic dreams. Then for weeks perhaps I write poetry with sex for theme. Then comes the reversal -- it came when I was young with some dream . . . with a flame in it. Then for weeks I get a symbolism like that in my Byzantium poem . . . with a flame for theme. All this may come from the chance that when I was a young man I was accustomed to a Kabalistic ceremony where there were two pillars, one symbolic of water and one of fire."¹ The two pillars as poles of changes are also the wet and dry *loci* incorporated into the gyre; birds, trees, the nature of the vertical object in the *locus* have two aspects, one seductive and related to water for the full moon, one repulsive and dry for the new moon. Because A Vision was not so different from ideas he already had (the alternation of contrary periods, the cycle of reincarnation), the influence of the material was seeping through even before the material was first published in 1926. It just helped displace Yeats's focus from pairs of opposite elements symbolizing Unity of Being (which, as I have previously

¹From Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley as quoted by Daniel Albright in Yeats, Poems 720.

mentioned, characterized much of the 'middle' poems) to pairs of opposites that clash (historical contraries clashing or alternating). Even in A Vision, Unity of Being becomes a complex system involving the meeting and calculating of four Moods following a gyre and a reverse gyre: the very simplicity of the image of the polarized wheel hints that Yeats is at this time more concerned with the tensions in history than the meeting of opposites. The alternation of the water and dry or fire poles was to be found, as Yeats explained in the letter I have quoted in the previous paragraph, even in human lives. Did this mean that Yeats, who was described as lunar by a woman in a trance (one of the quotations that opened this thesis), achieved Unity of Being in the periods when the flame dominated his thoughts? I don't think so: the poles are alternating periods of influence and do not correspond to finding and embracing one's opposite Mask (yet).

The Cuchulain cycle shows what Yeats meant: the set of plays do not portray the passage of the hero through each quarter; Yeats makes the plays alternating from one pole to the other, from the dry new moon (At the Hawk's Well) to the watery full moon (On Baile's Strand and The Only Jealousy of Emer), and back to fire and dryness as the cycle closes in The Death of Cuchulain. Though each play had its own subject (respectively the contraries of Objectivity and Subjectivity, clash of opposite personalities, cycle of death and reincarnation, and the end of the cycle), the cohesive item

is the opposition of wet and dry and how the imagery adapts to each pole. By the correspondence of imagery to one pole or the other, Yeats builds his chains of substitutions. The watery *locus* sees leafy tree, white water bird, woman of beauty as equivalent to the pull of the Full Moon, this grouping forming one lighthouse in the Great Wheel. The barren *locus* has the withered tree or a stone or a stone construction, a black bird, an ugly old man forming the opposite pole, the one of the absence of visible moon and thus absence of water. Cuchulain is Everyman, his life demonstrates how man in general is affected by the passing phases, or rather by the pull of each pole. Cuchulain is sometimes pursuing or pursued by an object of desire, respectively placing desire-full Objectivity at the new moon and self-sufficient Subjectivity at the full moon. From Phase 1 to Phase 15 Cuchulain was thriving; the phases leading to the pole of the simplifying fire are a *regression* from Cuchulain's culmination of heroism and glory.

Once Upon a Time a Poet Saw a Great Wheel

After the publication of A Vision, Yeats surely must have felt confident about his message, and the merging of all his images into aspects of the one bipolar gyre became prominent, the chains of substituted imagery became dizzying. Stand-ins for water and fire (wet or dry landscape, water or land bird, beauty or ugliness . . .) are linked to the woman-bird-vertical element of the polar *locus* . Each aspect

of the pole represents the pull each contrary exerts in the gyre, in a way pulling the gyre into its cyclic motion.

In this scheme of things, the process of ageing is irrevocably linked to drying up, contrary to the old age watering down the blood in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea." As in "The Rose Tree," dry bones mark the closeness to the last phase; the corresponding voice of the old man is developed in the collection The Tower (1928), when Yeats himself at 63 felt old. Because in his youth, as we have seen, he had been associated with water, he might have feared "drying up," becoming a dry well lacking poetical inspiration. (Could that fear of lacking inspiration indicate why he seems to increase his reliance on the system in A Vision?)

The imagery in The Tower is filled with the cynical and dried-up voice of old age (in the title poem, the speaker claims he must abandon the muse), yet also with a hope of escaping the cycle, as in "Sailing to Byzantium." The first four poems of the collection, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926), "The Tower" (1921), the set of poems in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1921-22) and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1922) are placed in an order that seems to imply, as we shall see in analyzing the poems, that Yeats's imagination (or at least its focus) was turning from liquid to dust, similar to the last phases of Yeats's cycle, where the speaker who had sailed the sea of the Anima Mundi culminates as an ugly, cynical dried-up old man in "Nineteen Hundred and

Nineteen."

The main image in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," the last poem of the quartet, is of decay through exsiccation. The wind is a dry, "dusty wind," which in the last stanza drops only so that "dust settles." "Man is in love and loves what vanishes," writes Yeats in this poem, describing with this line from St. Augustine the Objective man whose intense desire ruins paradise. The simplifying fire of the Phase of the New Moon is present:

Incendiary or bigot could be found
To burn that stump on the Acropolis¹

What does not turn to dust will be destroyed by the people intoxicated by the violence of the apocalyptic last phases, a blend of water and fire (in alcohol and blood) the only form of liquid acceptable for the phase of fire:

a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at the door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free²

The dry wind is the answer to the wild swans taking flight in spiral at the Full Moon in "The Wild Swans at Coole:" its association with the cry for blood in the last phases evokes birth at the new moon, like the sea-storm when the bird was washed ashore at the full moon in Emer. As explained in F. A. C. Wilson's W.B. Yeats and Tradition:

This wind . . . is Yeats's symbol for the

¹Yeats, Poems 254.

²Yeats, Poems 253.

destructive bouleversement that takes place at a reversal of the gyres; it is the apocalyptic "great wind of love and hate" which destroys the established world order of "The Secret Rose," and "the sudden blast of dusty wind" which (together with Yeats's equally apocalyptic horsemen) presages the final overthrow of civilization in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."¹

The image of the dry wind is related to water nonetheless by the absence of water: it is a dry, New Moon version of the sea storm at the Full Moon. Another image merging with water, this time through the *locus*, is found in the second poem of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1922), where the tree is replaced by other images (the "symbolic rose," the man-made tower reduced to its main component, "a winding stair") to symbolise the gyre in general.

The quarters that accompany the poles of the gyre are found in the four poems at the beginning of The Tower. Water imagery is one quarter of the wheel, culminating in the wet pole. Each of the four poems loosely corresponds to a quarter of the cycle, to an element. The passage of the four quarters of the cycle is similar to the imagery in "The Four Ages of Man" (1934), which Yeats explains as:

Earth	bowels	Instinct	Early nature-dominated civilization
Water	blood, sex organ	Passion	An armed, sexual age, chivalry

¹F. A. C. Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958) 228. As quoted in Edward Hirsch, "Yeats's Apocalyptic Horsemen," Irish Renaissance Annual 3 (1982): 86.

Air	lungs	Thought	From Renaissance to end of 19th century
Fire	.	Soul	The purging away of our civilization by our hatred ¹

The four elements are then applied to the four poems opening The Tower, which Yeats described as a progression from nature to imagination, to reason, and finally to transcendence:

First, Phases 1-8, the soul's disengagement from nature, its emerging strength; second, Phases 9-15, the soul's perfection of imagination; third, Phases 16-22, the soul's attempt to master the world through reason, and its compromises with the world; fourth, Phases 23-28, the soul's dismissal of the world and reason, its absorption into God.²

According to this, then, "Sailing to Byzantium," corresponds to earth because of the speaker's disengagement from nature (he wishes to be reborn as a mechanical bird to escape the natural cycle). The second quarter of the cycle, climaxing with the Full Moon, is represented by "The Tower," which shows the imagination-filled phases of water. In that quarter, images keep being generated, as can be seen in a later poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," where "Such fullness in that quarter overflows / And falls into the basin of the mind."³ Another poem where the phases of water correspond to a quarter in the historical gyre is "Three

¹Quoted in Albright's notes in Yeats, Poems 766.

²Albright's notes in Yeats, Poems 766.

³Yeats, Poems 285.

Movements:" the full and watery imagination is in Shakespeare's time, while in Yeats's time, nearer the end of the cycle, the fish "lie gasping on the strand" (the dryness of the pole of the New Moon). The third quarter (air) is represented by "Meditations in Times of Civil War," where the speaker is trying to put some order in the images he has gathered from the quarter of imagination. (In "Three Movements," the third quarter was the Romantic period, with the poets catching the fish, or imagery, in their nets.) The last quarter corresponds to "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," where the cynical speaker dismisses the world ("Come let us mock at the great . . . at the wise . . . at the good"¹). Let us look in greater details at these poems to see how they match up to the four elements.

"Sailing to Byzantium" shows the speaker's detachment from nature, which as we have just seen is the first quarter of the gyre: the speaker disengages himself from the mortal world described in the first part of the poem. His strength as he leaves behind the old world comes from the "sages standing in God's holy fire," which would guide his soul.

"Sailing to Byzantium" shows through the hopes of the speaker the process of leaving nature behind: first the soul must cross the sea (second quarter) and ultimately reach the Condition of Fire (the end of the cycle). The sages who would guide him in this journey evoke the image of the lighthouse; note that the flame of this lighthouse, which was the Irish

¹Yeats, Poems 255.

woman Cathleen in the early poems, is burning in the orient: east meets west.¹ This suggests that Yeats, who had previously forced the image of water into pairs with fire or stone or tree (imagination leading to action, or dreams made solid), could not accept that the Irish people (whom he likened to water) should form their identity in isolation.

The second quarter, ruled by the water of passion, is at first equated to the passionate inebriating power of song in "The Tower." The song of the blind man inebriates everyone in the poem (the peasant girl with a song of her own, the men with the song). These singers, the old man, the peasant girl and the speaker who "created Hanrahan and drove him drunk or sober,"² act like the poles of the gyre, puppet masters. The song reveals once again the role of art in inspiring action. Similar to the pull of the song at the phase of the Full Moon, the culmination of the second quarter, the opposite pole of the New Moon also has its inebriating effect: the soldiers in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" act under the influence of something stronger than them, washing them from responsibility.

Water in "The Tower" also refers to lives led in passion, to whom the speaker bequeaths his vision:

I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until

¹Yeats mentions in Per Amica Silentia Lunae that he opened his mind to "Indian and Japanese poets, old woman in Connacht, mediums in Soho." Yeats, Mythologies 343.

²Yeats, Poems 242.

The fountain leap . . .
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.¹

These lines describe passionate men who can make water rain down (like the bloodshed in "The Rose Tree" and Cuchulain in At the Hawk's Well) until they sing their swan song. These Subjective men, following the path and accepting death, contrast with the old man in "Sailing to Byzantium" who only wishes to escape.

"Meditations in Time of Civil War" is the third quarter, thought putting order to the images gained in the quarter of water. In doing so, the speaker re-establishes the contrast between Objective and Subjective men that was in the earlier poem "The Two Trees" and the pair of poems "The Witch" and "The Peacock:" for Subjective men, who have spiritual richness, "life overflows;" it "rains down life until the basin spills;" "That out of life's own self-delight had sprung the abounding glittering jet."²

By the end of "Meditations," in the part titled "I See

¹Yeats, Poems 244.

²Yeats, Poems 246.

Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness," the speaker considers the same opposition (Subjective and Objective) but this time applied to the historical cycle as well as to personality. Near the pull of the New Moon (this last part of "Meditations," has the violent end of the cycle as subject and time period), it is fire that drives and manipulates men; this exact opposite of the song that inebriated people in the water-related quarter leading to the Full Moon in "The Tower:" the fire of the dry pole in the part of "Meditations" titled "The Road at My Door" ("under the sun") inspires soldiers to action. Their violence belongs to and announces the reversal of the gyres (while in "The Tower" the influence of the watery pole was exerted through art, a song making people dance). Opposite the soldiers is the speaker, who admires these men of action but can only complain about the "hail and rain." The speaker and the soldiers symbolize the opposites of personality: the one associated to the moon (dreams, art), the group related to the sun (action, "the purging away of our civilization by our hatred"¹) of the 'present' phase. The speaker is out of phase: his personal phase is at the Subjective pole while the historical period has reached its fiery pole, and the dreamy quality of a life devoted to imagination is seen as inertia when the time requires action. (This is easier to comprehend by realizing that Yeats was applying the same terms to different ideas. There was the Subjectivity and Objectivity

¹Letter from Yeats quoted by Albright in his notes in Yeats, Poems 766.

of people at their birth, for which Unity of Being is possible; Cuchulain born as the son of a sun God, for instance. Then there are the phases to which these people are subjected in their lives, which , to continue our example, is Cuchulain at the different steps in each play. Then there is the Subjectivity or Objectivity of the era, which adds another influence, but in slower motion.) Returning to our subject, the lunar speaker out of phase (confronted with the sun of the soldiers) becomes a visionary. His water imagery, in the final part of "Meditations," becomes nightmarish, transformed by the rage (the word is repeated three times in one line) that fuels the violence of the fiery pole:

A mist that is like snow is sweeping over all,
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,
A glittering sword out of the east. . . .¹

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," which I have previously discussed, stands at the last quarter of the Wheel, when people "but gape at the sun,"² the element of the final quarter. The violence previewed at the end of "Meditations" is actuality: "a drunken soldiery" and "incendiary or bigot" all turn to destructive action. Interestingly, it is not fire per se that dominates the imagery, but the wind: the wind of the storm at the renewal of the cycle (like the storm for the birth of the white bird

¹Yeats, Poems 251.

²Yeats, Poems 255.

in The Only Jealousy of Emer), has gained the simplifying power of fire ("the levelling wind") and its dryness ("dusty wind . . . wind drops, dust settles"). The absence of water is eloquent, signifying the upcoming end of the cycle in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and the end of life when the speakers in Yeats's late works are the cynical, dried-up old man.

The four poems all contain birds: a mechanical one, swans, stares nesting, owls, peacocks, moor-hen. For once it is not their relation to water that characterizes them but their song: these birds, identified with the gyre and especially its poles, crow in the new era like a rooster at dawn. At the dry pole of the New Moon visioned at the end of "Meditations," there are "brazen hawks," the dry-land version of the white water-bird of the phase of the full moon (in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the swan-like heirs of the speaker in "The Tower"): it is their "innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon."¹

The image of the bird gains still more signification in "Leda and the Swan:" the swan, a god in the shape of a water-bird, mates with a human in the anti-version of the Christian virgin. The rape of Leda, the sigh of love-making, is the cry of the bird that announces the new age. The Christian dove is replaced by Zeus, king of the Greek gods, disguised as a swan, a Subjective, solitary water bird. The children of this union belong to the new age, like the

¹Yeats, Poems 252.

children in "Among School Children" (1926) belong to the new Irish republic.

The children in "Among School Children" are part of the new cycle, again subjected to the dry and wet poles of the gyre, born beautiful and finishing dried-up old people: two contraries that are but different aspects of the same thing, like the two moons at the poles of the gyre. The pair of wet and dry once again is forced into a connection with the gyre; the exercise of having that baby grow old culminates in Yeats's most succinct symbolic summary of the cycle, linking the *locus amoenus* to the gyre (and to quarters of the moon cycle: the root is earth, the leaf is the presence of water as in the leafy *locus*, the blossom would be the third quarter, and the bole is the tree stripped bare by the simplifying fire at the end):

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can you know the dancer from the dance?¹

There is an incredible merging around the song and dance of the gyre in this poem: the tree of life (of alchemy and of the *locus amoenus*) is the dancer, is the music (who is the poet, as depicted in "The Tower"), is the gyre. The grunts of sex ("Leda and the Swan") are the music of the gyres or of the dance, the song of the dying swan, the song of the mechanical bird, the cry of the hawk, the cries of the

¹Yeats, Poems 263.

many birds that speck the poems in The Tower (and again birds are linked to the gyre). The music of the gyres is the "barbarous clangour of a gong" (and later the "gong-tormented sea" of "Byzantium") that tolls for each new Phase, each new life or death. Alcohol is merged with the music of gyre too, after a fashion, because of the inebriating aspect of the dance (inebriating like the maddening song leading everyone in "The Tower").

The Winding Stair (1933) departs even more from Yeats's early emphasis on water imagery. This time he concentrates on one element of the *locus amoenus*, the tree, substituted by the ascending gyre, the staircase that is part of the tower. Yet water imagery is not abandoned, merely displaced, developed in some poems that give the tone to the rest of the poems in the book. Such is the importance of "Byzantium" (1930): its water, its sea amidst the concealed gyre (the "starlit or moonlit dome" is the pull of the dark and full moon in the cycle), its water of the implied *locus* ("golden bough"), stands for the sea of Anima Mundi. It is the sea of rebirth (as in Emer), the sea of dreaming back ("Those images that yet / Fresh images beget"¹). If the poem is about life after death, then the eastern Byzantium in the rebirth-aspect of the western isles of the dead, like the isles in The Wanderings of Oisin.

The tension between water and fire are present in their esoteric meanings in "Byzantium:" the "dolphin-torn", "gong-

¹The previous three quotations are from Yeats, Poems 298-99.

tormented" sea of Anima Mundi and the Condition of Fire, the pure flames "that no faggot feeds" of the smithies. The two opposites, fire and water, have become somewhat closer: their union is no longer paradoxical since they are two steps of the afterlife. Spirits, "astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood," complex in their "blood-begotten" shapes, flood the supernatural city and are broken in the simplifying fire of the smithies so that they can dance and leave behind them the "fury and the mire of human veins." The movement starts as a sea journey toward smithies, where mire and blood (mud, or earth-water, and fire-water) are transfigured into the simplified Condition of Fire; then, the sea is used again to beget images as spirits dream back like the Instructors guiding Georgie Yeats's hand to reveal images, like the bird in "Sailing to Byzantium" which sang like a visionary "of what is past, or passing, or to come." Northrop Frye described "Byzantium" as a poem "about images, which are, as always in Yeats, generated in water and borne across water by dolphins into the simplifying and purgatorial world of fire."¹ Frye means, in terms I have already used, that the cycle moves from one pole, the Full Moon and all its vision-giving water, to the other, the New Moon with its fire that strips bare the imagery, like Yeats had stripped bare his flowery style for Responsibilities. "Byzantium," like "Vacillation" and many poems in The Winding Stair, is concerned with human

¹Northrop Frye, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of 'A Vision'," An Honoured Guest (Eds. Donoghue and Mulryne, London: Edward Arnold, 1965): 32.

life under the influence of the gyre's two poles, "being caught," as Yeats wrote in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes, "between the pull of the dark moon and the full." (In the previous book, The Tower, Yeats had concentrated much more on history and the birth of messiah figures at the reversal of the gyre).

The dolphins are an interesting image of contraries meeting: they fill the functions of the white bird and sailing, but are mammals, an image much closer to humans. The dolphins are indeed made of complex "mire and blood", like the "fury and the mire of human veins." The dolphins, as William Empson points out, jump out of the water and into it again, belonging to both air and water¹ like the dolphins in Anthony and Cleopatra ("his delights were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above the element they liv'd in"²). Again, Yeats tries to find images "*à la jonction de contraires*" (to reuse Joseph-Trividic's terms) more and more human as he explains the human passage across the sea of Anima Mundi to the Condition of Fire. (This tendency to favour links with humans is the same as the speaker preferring the rock-bound bloody footprint to the ale of the gods in "The Grey Rock.")

The city of Byzantium forms its own architectural *locus* with the sea. The choice of an eastern city indicates, as I have mentioned before, that east and west must meet, and Istanbul, or Byzantium, is halfway between the two.

¹William Empson, "Yeats and Byzantium," Grand Street 1.4 (1982): 93.

²William Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra v.ii as quoted in The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2nd ed): 426.

Byzantium, therefore, should by its position, contain the best of both world: the characteristics of both Christian Europe, and of the Orient. By correspondence, Europe is the solar religion; the Orient the seat of lunar religion.

The wedding of opposite elements seen with the baby growing old in "Among School Children" and with the alliance of east and west and of sea and Condition of Fire in "Byzantium" continues with the wet and dry tree of the *locus amoenus* in "Vacillation" (1931-32). The tension between the two, still clashing in the middle poems, is resolved: the two aspects are now united in one tree, the leafy side nourishing the flames on the burning side. At last Yeats picks up the imagery of Unity of Being, which had been neglected while Yeats focused on the clash of opposites historical eras, and applies it to both history in "Byzantium" and to the human heart (where the Tree of Life grows, as discussed earlier in "The Two Trees") in "Vacillation."

Still under the merging sway of his fascination with the gyre, Yeats continues that kind of wedding in New Poems, the collection published in 1938, after the definitive version of A Vision came out in 1937. In "Lapis Lazuli" (1936) stone and water imagery meld into an undifferentiated state similar to the sky and lake merging in "The Wild Swans at Coole:" stone whose discoloration "seems a water-course or an avalanche, or lofty slope where it still snows."¹

The merging takes an interesting turn in "The Three

¹Yeats, Poems 342.

Bushes" (1936) where the merging is between artist and art, where Yeats integrates himself to his system as he explains the role of the artist. A chambermaid plants two trees, forming a *locus amoenus* where two lovers are buried, and when she dies protecting their secret, she also becomes a rose-tree: the artist who first planted the trees over the graves can no longer be distinguished from her work, just like the dancer in "Among School Children." This merging labels Yeats the poet as singer of inebriating songs of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," connecting him to the inescapable music and dance of the gyres he writes about.

Yeats spent, in the decade between the first and final publication of A Vision, a great deal of effort merging all his imagery with the gyre. *La fée à l'arbre et à la fontaine*, the elements in Gallais's definition of the *locus amoenus* have come to be intrinsically interdependant, their symbolism compressed together. The woman of beauty, symbolizing the pole of the Full Moon in the gyre, can replace the leafy tree itself. She in turn can be replaced by a white water bird, the swan. Opposite her is the ugly old man and the black birds of the pole of the New Moon, replacing the withered tree of the *locus*. The gyre in general, not just its poles, also is subjected to a chain of substitutions where all images, classified by their relation to water or fire, to the light of the Full Moon or the darkness of the New Moon, come to signify one or the other of the gyre's poles, or the gyre in general. As discussed earlier, the chain could come full

circle from the sea of Anima Mundi substituted by the garden of the *locus*, the tree substituted by a woman who in turn was a lighthouse or candle leading men, the woman was replaced by stone or towers and birds, gyring birds were replaced by the tower and its winding stairs, the gyring birds flying from lake to lake or between worlds was replaced by the travel to Byzantium, the city itself a *locus* of flame and sea of Anima Mundi. Yeats has gone full circle, especially with the image of the phases of the moon, linking the whole gyre to a water-related image (when the moon is full the presence of water is greatest). Opposites by the end of that decade could no longer clash: once attached to the gyre, wet and dry, water and fire, Subjectivity and Objectivity became two aspects of the same gyre, two poles where one feeds the other, two poles pulling and thus giving the gyre its momentum.

There is a kind of lull, a calmness after the din of all that merging. Has Yeats exhausted his subject? Has he dried up his muse, the system of A Vision? Harold Bloom is certain that in Yeats's Last Poems (1939) "the poet is in despair for the lack of theme, but he has gone beyond the possibility of finding a fresh one."¹ He has a point: even if the poems are jewels of exquisite craftsmanship (try reading "News for the Delphic Oracle" without feeling its sensuousness), under close scrutiny the poems say more of the jeweller's skill than propose new ways of mounting stones. Yeats reuses the images he tamed like circus animals

¹Bloom, Yeats 457.

parading. However there are still some powerful gems in Yeats, old images used relatively free from the din of merging (i.e. in a form that does not require complete correspondence with the gyre or its poles), like blood, and the simpler opposition of Subjective and Objective ages.

The use of blood imagery in The Resurrection (1931) establishes a contrast between bloodshed at the dawn of a Subjective and a (Christian) Objective era. The Greeks who follow Dionysus drink merrily of the blood of the goat in The Resurrection, while the disciples touch only symbolically the flesh and blood of Jesus: "The followers of Dionysus have been out among the fields tearing a goat to pieces and drinking its blood," vs. "Jesus divided bread and wine amongst them."¹ Jesus gives a miracle while the Greeks have real blood: using the image of liquids, one real blood and the other wine touched by a god, Yeats is contrasting the Objective men who seek for the greater than human and the Subjective men who accept what is on earth.

The sheer frenesy of the sexual imagery, which Yeats had associated with water, gives a sense of urgency in the three-part poem "News for the Delphic Oracle" (1939): love is everywhere, from the sighing of the first poem to the very physical love-making of the last part, lovers moving "fishlike" like the dolphins in the second poem. The dead return to the material world where a body must be conceived, and, echoing the creativity in Yeats's "rag and bone shop of

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 581.

the heart" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion"), here love is all sexual grunts and love-making, an image bound in fertility-giving water:

Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum,
Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.¹

It is physical love that makes the cycle go round, a physical love that echoes the sea of generation (lovers copulate in the sea foam, which takes us back to the image of the birth of Aphrodite; they are compared to fish), which is to say "News" provides a physical version of the sea of the Anima Mundi.

Although the poetry quieted from the intense merging around the gyre, the last plays reveal the converging impulse up to the last. This can be seen in particular in The Herne's Egg (1938) and The Death of Cuchulain (1939). Both plays, proving Yeats's fascination for his gyres, contain the full cycle of the moon within them, water displaced as one part of the gyre as in the previous examples of merging imagery with the gyre. The Herne's Egg goes from full moon to dark:

Agnes. The last time she went away
The moon was full -- she returned
Before its side had flattened.
Kate. This time she will not return.
Agnes. Because she is called to her marriage?

¹Yeats, Poems 386.

Kate. Those leaps may carry her where
No woman has gone, and he
Extinguish sun, moon, star.
No bridal torch can burn
When his black midnight is there.¹

The Death of Cuchulain, which concludes the Cuchulain cycle that had gone from new moon in Hawk's Well to full moon in Emer, now ends in the new moon, dryness: a "very old man" introduces the play; Cuchulain's house is burning, if we trust Eithne's words; the Morrighu, the goddess with the head of a crow (dark, non-water bird) appears.

In both plays, the image of a dancer is favoured at the expense of the four traditional elements, but still loosely linked to them by the force of the earlier merger of images. The dance of Attracta in Herne leads her god, represented by a water bird, to impregnate her (sex is, let us recall, the domain of water in Yeats), symbolizing as well the gyre as the begetting of a messiah for the coming age (like "Leda and the Swan"). In Death the Salomé-like dance of Emer with Cuchulain's head, makes Cuchulain the John the Baptist of the coming age; his blood shed brings in the new age as did Christ's.

The full meaning of the *locus amoenus*, which had represented up to this point the success or failure in the quest for the self, and then had stood for the gyre itself when the tree was associated with the tower and the stair, is

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 655.

revealed in The Death of Cuchulain as representing man himself: when Cuchulain ties himself to the erect stone near a pool ("You asked their leave, when certain that you had six mortal wounds, to drink out of the pool"¹), he becomes the erect element of the locus. The merging of man and tree, with all the baggage accumulated through the string of substitutions, shows that the gyre is life. The rock near the pool, vertical element related to water, becomes the central image for the Cuchulain cycle: Camel Jordan² says it is the stone which binds the Cuchulain plays into a cycle, though it is more precise to say it is the union of the three elements of the locus (tree, beautiful woman and fountain, or stone, ugly woman and dryness). In the cycle, At the Hawk's Well is at the first step: there is for the locus of the New Moon a dry well set among stones, and a fairy woman with "unmoistened eyes." On Baile's Strand, or more specifically its retelling in The Only Jealousy of Emer, contains the wet locus of the Full Moon: the waves of the sea and Baile's Tree; the woman arrives in Emer, herself identified with the mineral element (she is described as a statue) and the sea (where she lives, and the white bird). The Death of Cuchulain is the return to the New Moon: stone, dark land bird. Reg Skene suggests that the Cuchulain plays each corresponded to a quarter of the Wheel, but the plays represent more exactly the alternating poles of the gyre. As Cuchulain approaches

¹Yeats, Collected Plays 699.

²Camel Jordan, "The Stone Symbol," College Literature 13 (1986): 40.

the phase of the new moon in Death, water dries up and the dry stone stands out. The stone is also a return to a simpler image: after man-made towers and stairs and swans taking flight, the stone is the image of the vertical element simplified (as everything is simplified at the approach of the phase of the New Moon). With the stone and dark bird-woman by the pool, Cuchulain dies in the same barren setting as where he began his adventures: the circle has closed.

The soul of Cuchulain is transformed into a bird when he dies: "I say it [the bird, his soul's first shape] is about to sing," are the hero's last words. "And is not that a strange shape for the soul of a great fighting-man?" The bird is the shape of the soul transfigured after death, like the lovers in "The White Birds" and the solitary swans or Herne symbolizing the Subjective personality.

The poem concluding the Cuchulain cycle, "Cuchulain Comforted" (1939), twists the image of the bird. Alive, it was associated with the solitude of Subjectivity; in death, however, the bird of Cuchulain's soul joins a group of birds. The souls become images projected from the sea of Anima Mundi, joining a collective Condition of Fire: no individuality remains, like the soul absorbed into the greater reality of Brahma in Hinduism. In the country of the dead, "all we do / All must together do." Finally "The Black Tower" (1939) completes the poem "Cuchulain Comforted" by evoking the cycle of Full and New Moon and the rebirth of souls:

But winds come up from the shore,
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.¹

Last comments

Yeats's confidence in his poetry stems from the strength of his message, from the certitude that his poetry has substance. He uses a philosophical system of contraries joined or clashing, of death and rebirth, which provides themes for his poems; the imagery Yeats uses to describe his themes is rooted in water or in an image's relation to water (wet or dry). The centrality of water imagery stems from the fact that he saw himself as lunar ("a wise woman in her trance told me that my inspiration was from the moon, and that I should always live close to water"²), that water with its many forms is a pliable image, that water is the imagination which provides the visions Yeats writes about, and that the Irish audience he aims for is related to water ("I am certain that the water, the water of the sea, and of lakes, and of mist and rain, has all but made us Irish after its image"³). Yeats develops a system of pairing contrary elements, fire and water, the moon and the sun, water and tree or stone (the *locus*) as a result of his theory of Unity of Being: the element of water needs to borrow characteristics from other elements, such as activity from

¹Yeats, Poems 379.

²As quoted in Thuente, Yeats and Irish Folklore 234.

³Yeats, Mythologies 80.

the sun, such as solidity from the tree, stone or island. As Yeats is concerned with building an Irish body of images, and as Ireland was trying to gain an independent identity, he hints that east must meet west, Ireland must be independent but open to the world. As the philosophical system grows into the single image of the bipolar gyre applied to opposite historical ages, so the imagery connects and merges with the one image of the bipolar gyre.

The early poems, to summarize the weave of Yeats's evolution in imagery, concentrates mostly on contrary elements, fire and water, wet and dry, and joining opposites in order to find oneself (embracing the Mask, the daimon, marriage). Around 1910, the pairs of elements are developed to cover the concept of the Subjective (wet) and Objective (dry) personalities, for the violent convergence of elements at the dawn of a new age (the poems in Responsibilities) and the visions related to that clash, and for the alternation of opposite ages in history. The image of the *locus amoenus* in the middle works is also developed in terms of opposites: leafy or withered tree. In the later works Yeats makes the two opposites feed off each other, returning to the idea of Unity of Being which was slightly ignored amidst the clash of contraries in the middle poems. Elements remain in opposition until, just as for the locus, Yeats merges them into the one cycle, each contrary a pole in the gyre connected to the moon, opposites meeting in noisy love-making and giving birth to antichrists or to new ages.

The *locus amoenus*, at first the goal of the internalized quest for the self (At the Hawk's Well), is gradually treated as a marker for the changes in the soul during the passage of the phases (the Cuchulain cycle). Substitutions in the *locus* at first were indicators of something amiss: the lack of water, a stony tower instead of a leafy tree. The tower portrays the confusion of the poet in "The Phases of the Moon." Slowly, it becomes important for Yeats to replace the elements of the *locus* with man-made images, as if Yeats were claiming for mankind the natural and supernatural imagery offered by his Instructors: towers and stairs echo the earlier image of candle-lighthouse Cathleen, all human-related (man-made, or human).

In the later momentum of merging images with the gyre and its poles, the clarity of the elements in the *locus* is drawn thin because so many symbols compete to be equated with the wet, leafy tree and the withered bough. It is a welcome respite when Yeats concentrates only on one pole instead of the whole gyre: at the poles the *loci* remain more or less simple, as can be witnessed in The Death of Cuchulain. The confusion of imagery around the gyre is augmented because Yeats concentrates so many different concepts on a system of interlocking gyres (all defined by the pull of their opposite poles) where the same opposites, the wet and the dry poles of each gyre applied to too many distinct concepts: the Subjective or Objective personality (an innate characteristic, unrelated to poles), which could

independently achieve Unity of Being (symbolized by the union of water and fire), is subjected to a life cycle of alternating poles of Subjectivity (water-related) and Objectivity (fire-related) and to a slower historical cycle of opposite ages (the poles also linked to fire and water).

In the period when Yeats was revising A Vision (from the publication of the first edition in 1925 to the final version in 1937), the gyre became the focus of all the imagery, and this is the time when the images merge with dizzying frenzy. It started with the Anima Mundi as either the sea or the garden (which was the locus): both sea and *locus* were united in "Byzantium" as two parts of the same travel. The tree of the garden was the tower which became the lighthouse or the stone or the statue: these substitutes were explicitly linked to the beautiful woman (Kathleen, Fand). The tower, in turn, was dissected into its stair, which became the gyre, which became the cycle of 28 phases of the moon with two women at its poles; the women are transformed into solitary birds gyring, either white birds like swans (light for the Full Moon) or black birds (hawk, crow and herne; dark for the New Moon). From the music of the leafy tree evolves the cries of the bird women and the music of the dance the gyre performs; the music is explicitly related to water through the images of the (watered) leafy tree and the gong-tormented sea of Anima Mundi. Through all this, water and images related to it (water birds, the leafy tree) loses its primal importance but still symbolizes the Subjective

age, the Subjective hero and messiah, as well as one pole of the gyre. And it still opposes Fire: the dryness of Objectivity, the Condition of Fire after crossing the sea of Anima Mundi, or the fire at the opposite pole on the gyre. The meeting of opposites (fire simplifying the "blood and mire of human veins") announces the violence at the end of the cycle: bloodshed in "The Rose Tree," in The Death of Cuchulain.

Despite his impulse of giving meaning to his poetry through a philosophical system, Yeats manages to make some very personal poetry. His fear of drying up (in old age as in imagination), his anxiety over the import and role of art and the artist, his agony over the many rejections from Maud Gonne are all answered in Yeats's poems about visions. Yeats consoles himself over losing Maud to a man his opposite by justifying the role of the artist as visionary (and all images are born in water or the imagination, or in the sea of Anima Mundi), all visions potentially leading men to action, or by making a system where he would embrace his Contrary, the Moon embracing the Sun, opposites merging and feeding off each other.

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APPENDIX 1

THE BINARY SYSTEM OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

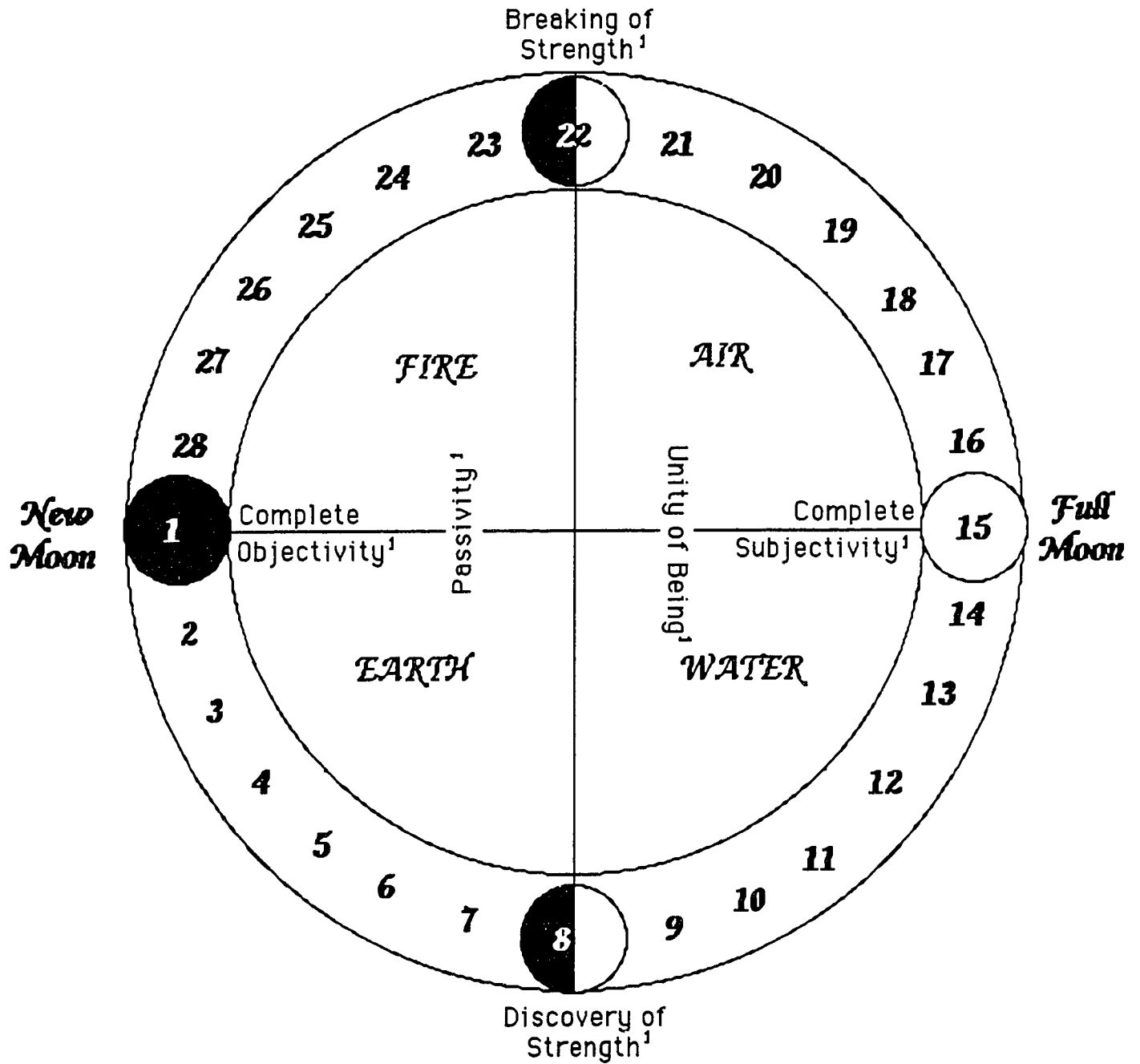
(adapting Northrop Frye's contrast of antithetical and primary)

<u>'Bad' (present age)</u>	<u>Favoured (the coming age)</u>
barrenness, dryness	wet: water/blood
sand and stone	water
demon	beast
objectivity	subjectivity
desert birds	falcon
self-effacement/mortification	heroism and passion
peace	war and bloodshed
Christian	Greek
Christ	Sphinx
dove*	swan*
virgin	sex, rape of Leda or Attracta
science*	art*
reasonable*	natural*
solar*	lunar*

The asterisk (*) indicates Northrop Frye's terms as listed in "Northrop Frye, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of Yeats's 'A Vision'," An Honoured Guest, ed. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne (London: Edward Arnold, 1965): 17-8.

APPENDIX 2

THE GREAT WHEEL AND THE FOUR QUARTERS



(1) W.B. Yeats, A Vision (London: Macmillan, 1989): 66, 81.

APPENDIX 2

THE GREAT WHEEL AND THE FOUR QUARTERS

EARTH
bowels ²
Instinct ²
Early nature-dominated civilization ²
soul's disengagement from nature, its emerging strength ²

WATER
blood, sex organs ²
Passion ²
An armed, sexual age, chivalry ²
soul's perfection of imagination ²

AIR
lungs ²
Thought ²
From Renaissance to end of 19th century ²
soul's attempt to master the world through reason, and its compromises with the world ²

FIRE
Soul ²
The purging away of our civilization by our hatred ²
soul's dismissal of the world and reason, its absorption into God ²

(2) Letters from Yeats quoted in Albright's notes in Yeats, Poems 766.