Chapter Six

Conclusion

This chapter is the conclusion of the observations made on the themes and symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. In the preceding chapters that have endeavored to demonstrate how Yeats used themes and symbols in an entirely poetic framework. Coming as they do from strictly religious sources, these symbols and themes, while operating within the context of his poems, often undergo a drastic change yielding an entirely non-religious meaning. Similarly, themes are utilized as a poetic tool or machinery, and are hence treated in a non-Christian way in his poems as well as in the plays.

Critics sometimes complain that Yeats’s symbology is mainly based on his private myth of *A Vision* and hence is not very communicative. A close study of his symbols removes this complaint, for the Themes and symbols come from well-known religious sources. For example, rose, cross, dance, Byzantium—to mention only a few of the impressive ones—are all traditional symbols which are public and communicative. Even the solar and lunar symbols—the sun standing for action and violence, the moon for reflection and imagination—are, private to Yeats alone. Similarly “even the thirteen cycles in the poet’s extremely private and esoteric mythical system may be considered reminiscent of Christ and the Twelve Apostles”. (Identity, 159). To list of the main Yeastian symbols one may add the tree and towers which admittedly are not very private. The gyre makes the list almost complete; and it is easy to see how the whirling gyre is an extension of the fixed cross of the antinomies of his poetry.

The crux of the problem regarding Yeats’s symbology lies in the fact that it is more a literary than a philosophical or religious problem. It seems to me that many of
the discussions have only added confusion to this already complicated question. Instead of examining the symbols in the context of the poems in order to decipher the richness of their meanings, critics very frequently lift those symbols out of poetic contexts, to scrutinize them in the light of what the poet had written elsewhere, especially of his *Vision* system. It is true that the poet’s philosophical or mystical ideas have gone into the making of several of his poems was rendered easy for Yeats by his own intellectual ethos. With his characteristic religiosity he developed a monkish hate for science, he found the asceticism and rationalized ethics of Christianity quite uncongenial. Being destitute of faith and yet terrified of skepticism, he longingly turned in several directions, to the past, to the orient, and to other religions. Consequently, he brings together traditional and universal symbols or prototypes, which as Hiram Haydn observes, to most of us do not “belong together”.

As Haydn goes on to say “Yeats’s juxtaposition and balancing of Christ and Oedipus, Saint Catherine of Genoa and Michael Angelo, the Buddha and the Sphinx, the Angels and the Gods confuse all but those minds that delight in new combinations for ‘their own sake’- for the sake of his art” (Haydn, 297-323). That Yeats could do this was not surprising, for what he aimed at was to rest his art upon “certain heroic and religious truths” even if they are modified by individual genius. (Autobiography, 332-333). It is this traditional truth that Yeats was reaching for through his eclecticism. According to him even the Mass goes back to savage folklore.

Universality was attained not only in his treatment of Irish landscape; it was attained through the treatment of Irish people, too. Until then, treatment of Irish people in his poetry was topical. In writing about Major Gregory, he rose to a level that he had never reached before; people, events and scenery not only act upon one another, but also transcend the merely personal. In these poems, Major Gregory
ceases to be an individual; his stature has grown so much that he has become a symbol of all accomplished Young men, whose tragedy is shared by all generations. It has significance not only in Yeats’ time but in our time as well.

Making use of what he took to be complex and tragic situation, Yeats achieved multiplicity of expression. The death of an Irishman elicited from him a wide range of emotions, which enabled him to approach his subject from different angels. Consequently, An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, Shepherd and Goatherd, Reprisals and In Memory of Major Robert Gregory give us the impression of a fugue. Lifted from time, the Irish hero bears testimony to the following judgment by Fraser: “No poet of our time has loved and admired his friends more, or incised their profiles in more firm and enduring verse”. (Fraser, 278).

Yeats was conscious, very early of the urgency of the fight for the independence of art, the very life of poetry, and never wavered in his conviction. That the artist's work preceded and transcended the moralist's. As an aesthete the early Yeats almost obliterated the distinction between art and life, but he did not go as far as his other co-aesthetes in wanting life purged of all its coarse and vulgar elements. However, he shared their idea of replacing religion with art.

At this point a distinction should be made between symbolism and aestheticism. The first is a doctrine of art, springing from artistic practice; it is not merely a method of using symbols, but it is a technique adopted to raise language to a highly charged level. The second derives from theory and tends to become an attitude towards life, to turn away from life in all its in artistic elements. Yeats's aestheticism differs from that of the others in that it was not a result of a reaction from bourgeois social and moral standards which they despised. In 1898 Yeats wrote: “The arts are, believed to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders
of priests. . . "(Essays and Introductions, 193). What Yeats wanted was to exalt poetry and place it on a pedestal as high as religion's. Consequently, he was searching for a 'tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing'. (Gitanjali, 390). It is important to note that the nature of the fight for the independence of art led the poets to emphasize the dark side of art with its preoccupation with the secret and forbidden as the way to self-discovery.

Here again we can see, as Rosenthal points, out, how Blake influenced the young mind of Yeats. (Rosenthal, 21). Blake's rapport with sexual frankness, mysticism, and deliberate reversals of familiar moral assumptions guided Yeats through pastures which were fresh and new to him. It also helped him to see beyond the current fashions in poetry, and to transcend what was familiar to his co-aesthetes. In other words, Yeats was able to absorb and integrate in his mind the virtues of both symbolism and aestheticism.

Yeats, unlike the aesthetes, imbibed the true spirit of symbolism and became a seeker after reality. Consequently his art came to be a mystical way of apprehending that reality. It is this mystical vision of life and reality which provides the depth in his religion of poetry and which one miss in the religion of the aesthetes of the last century.

To a certain extent Yeats goes along with the aesthetes, especially when he deprecates the impure poetry of Wordsworth which is mixed up with popular morality, and also when Yeats enunciates his artistic principle that “Argument, theory, erudition, observation are merely what Blake called 'little devils who fight for themselves,' illusions of our visible passing life, who must be made to serve the moods...” (Essays and Introductions 195).
But when he says in the same breath that everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than the means... he certainly is outstripping his fellow poets of the 'nineties. This change finds its most clear and incisive statement in a passage in his Autobiography:

Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned. The revolt of Individualism [of the Aesthetic School the doctrine of which, according to Yeats, was expounded by the younger Hallam in his essay on Tennyson] came because the tradition had become degraded, or rather because a spurious copy had been accepted instead. Classical morality.... Dominated this tradition at the Renaissance, and passed from Milton to Wordsworth and to Arnold, always growing more formal and empty until it became a vulgarity in our time—just as classical forms passed on from Raphael to the Academicians. But anarchic revolt is coming to an end, and the arts are about to restate the traditional morality. (Essays and Introductions, 332-333).

Yeats attacked the question of ‘morality’ or values in a unique way: he made himself independent of it by objectifying it. This is at once different from, for instance, the method of Hopkins and the approach of Hardy—two of Yeats's contemporaries who represent extreme positions of belief and skepticism. Yeats presents a synthesis or a via media of these two positions and liberates himself from the bonds of both agnosticism and dogmatism by reducing them ‘to subordinate status in an aesthetically created universe of symbols’. (Rosenthal, 27).
Thus the Yeatsian fusion of aestheticism and symbolism led to a profound religion of poetry very different from that of the aesthetes of the fin de siècle. After all, poetry is, as Santayana says, “religion without points of application in conduct, and without an expression, in worship and dogma”. (Santayana, 289). Having accepted the new religion of poetry to which his life was dedicated to the end, Yeats realized that any other faith would seriously hinder his life-long mission. He was conscious of his obligations when he made the choice:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark. (The Collected Poems, 278).

Deliberately he chose the second, the perfection of the work, what he calls his ‘predestined part’ and refused ‘the heavenly mansion’ promised by religion. Poetry was the be-all and end-all of his life; and even after a long, rich and fruitful life of service in the cause of his new religion, he felt discontented. Towards the end of his career he takes stock of his work, and asks himself if he was satisfied and answers:

Infirm and aged I might stay
In some good company,
I who have always hated work,
Smiling at the sea,
Or demonstrate in my own life.
What Robert Browning meant
By an old hunter talking with Gods;
But I am not content. (Collected Poems, 370-371).
Although aged and infirm he prefers to die writing, ‘discontented till the whole design be shaped’. He is, in a way, like his great hero Cuchulain who, as the Blind Man's fatal knife creeps to his neck, declares Triumphantly, ‘say it is about to sing’ Yeats believed that striving after perfection in the realm of art is as noble and rewarding as any other religious pursuit. His own words bear out this point: Coventry Patmore has said, ‘the end of art is peace’ and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation that it demands. Somebody has said, 'god asks nothing of the highest soul except attention' and so necessary is attention to mastery in art, that there are moments when we think that nothing else is necessary, and nothing else so difficult. This is evident to make clear, in elevating poetry or art to the pedestal of religion Yeats did not fall a victim to the practice of 'art for art's sake.' While it is true that he was influenced by the apostles of this theory, Yeats cautiously steered clear of it and did not attempt to build up an autonomous art separated from life and experience. In spite of his preoccupations with non-literary occultism, his poems, especially the later ones, are the essence of his deeply felt experiences.

His poetry is instinct with what he had experienced in every fibre of his being; it is alive with things temporal and people living and dead—the complexities and the ‘fury and mire of human veins’ were his chief concern. For him experience was everything. So he rejected the Christian mortification of the flesh ‘to pleasure soul’ as well as the Hindu belief that springs from the idea that phenomenal experience is absolutely without value. Yeats's conviction is founded on the thought that phenomenal experience is all that we have of any value. At least this was the direction in which his art was moving. He was once in a dilemma and did not know if he should . . . bid the Muse go pack, Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend.
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel (Collected Poems, 218-219).

Or whether he should "mock Plotinus' thought / And cry in Plato's teeth" and thus assert the power and value of imagination and experience. Yeats's Crazy Jane poems show a resolution of this dilemma in his own experience by rejecting the Platonic abstraction which separates reality from nature. The Yeatsian idea of experience embraces both fair and foul love and excrement, beauty and terror, and sexuality and spirituality or, in his own words, ‘to discover... a divine love in sexual passions’ (Essays and Introductions, 195). About this idea of art as a negation of abstraction, Yeats writes in ‘Discoveries’:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls m a thematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain getting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. Its morality is personal, knows little of any general law ...(Essays and Introductions,292-293).

Like the bird in his The Lover's Song, Yeats often’ sighs for the air’ (which stands for spirituality) but always comes back to the core of physical experience:

Now sinks the same rest
Oh mind, on nest,
On straining thighs.

Unlike Hopkins and Eliot, Yeats could face no absolutes and consequently his art became a gong-tormented sea of experience rent by tension and conflict. To him
there was only one kind of truth —the truth of each situation. Philosophical abstractions of truth are not the concern of the artist. So the poet asks his Muse to leave ‘The cavern of the mind’ which is the abode of Platonic abstractions, and to do ‘better exercise in the sunlight and wind’. In the same poem (Those Images) Yeats refers to two other modern kinds of abstractions, namely, Moscow's communist doctrine and Rome's Christian dogma, and to sub serve the interests of either would be drudgery which his art must renounce. He says almost the same thing in Church and State.

Here is fresh matter, poet,
     Matter for old age meet;
     Might of the Church and the State,
     Their mobs put under their feet.
     O but heart's wine shall run pure,
     Mind's bread grow sweet.
     Wine shall run thick to the end,
     Bread taste sour. (Collected Poems, 327).

Yeats does not want his Muse to soar too high to lose contact with the earth:

Find in middle air
     An eagle on the wing, (Collected Poems, 367)

And he asks his art to seek all kinds of images, violent and serene, fair and foul, ‘The lion and the virgin, /The harlot and the child’ (Collected Poems, 367). The poet recognizes the fact that his Muse must find nourishment in the reality experienced through the senses: ‘Recognize the five that makes the Muses sing’ (Collected Poems, 367). This idea is more bluntly stated in The Spur:
You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (Collected Poems, 359).

Yeats presents a reversal of the usual process: instead of the phenomenal leading to the nominal, it is the abstractions that lead the poet to earthly realities. In his Diary he writes: “Certain abstract thinkers, whose measurements and classifications continually bring me back to concrete reality”. (Explorations, 303). This, also, has been the direction of his poetry—from the ethereal to the earthy. He sees himself set in a drama where he struggles “to exalt and overcome concrete realities perceived not with mind only but as with the roots of my hair”. (Explorations, 302). This preoccupation with concrete realities, a pagan yearning for life and earth, the heightened consciousness of experience fully lived and the Consuming anguish of becoming brings Yeats very close to an existential position. Like the existentialists he starts with man and the world and asserts the significance of human emotion as a revelation of metaphysical nature. According to the poet man is always in the process of becoming, and there is no way of knowing reality—in the words of Yeats, “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” (Cowell, 135). In this matter he resembles Rilke; as poets both believe in reality which is apprehended through experience and which is not based on any systematic philosophy.

Like all other existentialists Yeats affirms dissatisfaction with the human condition. His sense of the fundamental irrationality of life is best expressed in his comedies. As a thinker and a creator of myth Yeats might have believed in a system, but as a poet it was the reality of experience and of situations that mattered to him. His vision is dialectical; it is a vacillation between fatality and freedom of will. His
entirely personal and highly individualistic approach to all matters of belief makes him a non-conformist and this leads him to loneliness and anguish.

In exploring the far corners of this irrational world as well as his own inner world Yeats had to use a kind of language which would be the right vehicle to communicate the incommunicable. He found that the language of logic was incapable of expressing his vision of reality as was the medium used by naturalists. As Wallace Stevens puts it, realism is a corruption of reality. Religious symbolic imagery was Yeats's choice of means to express his vision of reality. The power of this device, as Graham Hough states, was not that “it embodies the appeal of a graceful way of life, or supports a particular set of moral principles, but that it carries the mind back to the mystery that is at the heart of the universe, the mystery which the religious thought of the nineteenth century was bent on explaining away”. (The Last Romantics, 228). Unlike the neoclassical and Victorian poets, Yeats with his constitutional distaste for the poetry of rhetorical statement tried to translate his intensely personal vision of reality into highly individualized religious imagery. An understanding of this symbolic imagery is the only road to the inner world of the poet.

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours

The sentimentalist himself; while art

Is but a vision of reality. (Collected Poems, 350).
Work Cited


