Chapter Three

The Tower

This chapter deals with the themes and symbols of the Collection poems of *The Tower* published in (1928). One of the richest volumes of Yeats’ later poetry. Yeats purchased the Norman tower named ‘Thoor Ballylee’ situated at Gort near Coole Park, in 1917, which marks the beginning of new preoccupations, touched upon in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, but fully explored in the poems of *The Tower* of 1928. Yeats saw the tower as a universal symbol of ‘a mind looking inward upon itself’ and was aware of the vogue the symbol enjoyed at that time. Yeats wanted a symbol.

Quite apart from its symbolic significance, however, the ownership of the tower made Yeats ‘officially’ part of the land owning Anglo Irish Protestant minority, an allegiance he had felt in the twenty years since his first meeting with Lady Gregory, and which he clung to during the Civil War when this section of the community was the particular target of the Republican forces, in their resistance against the 1921 settlement. (Cowell, 74).

Symbolism and realism, metaphysical speculations and contemporary social comment, jostle against each other in the poems of *The Tower*. Although his mind was ‘looking inward upon itself’, Yeats wanted to test the findings of his introspection against reality. The poems collected here cover a period, from 1926 to 1928 and again are arranged architecturally, each poem contributing to Yeats’ continuing argument with himself and to the development of the book, from the uncertainties of *Sailing to
Byzantium to the almost arrogant confidence and assurance of Meditations in Time of Civil War.

Like all his Collections, this one reveals both continuity and innovation in themes and style. The themes in this Collection reflect both his own life in this period, and certain perennial concerns which never left him; his style shows his continuing search for a distinctive poetic voice. The most important aspect during this period was that he became ‘a public man’, being an active and controversial senator of the Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928. In the senate he formed another important and revealing friendship, that with the authoritarian and much-hated Kevin O’ Higgins, whose assassination in July 1927 distressed and embittered Yeats. During this period, he got inclined towards authoritarian forms and methods of Government in the belief that only harsh measures could fend off impending anarchy, and he was even attracted to Mussolini’s Fascism.

During this period in 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for literature, an honour he relished immensely. And yet, concurrently with this public activity, he was pursuing even more vigorously the intricacies of his ‘system’.

The Poems taken from The Tower Volume discussed in this chapter are Sailing to Byzantium, The Tower, Meditations in Time of Civil War, Nineteen hundred and Nineteen, Leda and The Swan, Among School Children.

It is precisely this combination of public activity with his heightened metaphysical speculations that gives Among School Children its exciting contrasts and modulations from the particular to the general, the contemporary to the timeless. In his emotional life, in spite of the happiness of his own marriage, the marriage of Iseult to a man he thought ‘a dunce’ Public life, ill-health, and proximity to death, emotional
bitterness, marital happiness, metaphysical speculation: all these elements contributed to the controlled richness of *The Tower*. But underlying all these elements are the complexities and perplexities which Yeats encountered in his exploration of the relation between the world of Imagination and the real world.

*Sailing to Byzantium* is a poem which reflects the interest in Byzantine art felt by Yeats since his visit to Ravenna, a city whose churches contain the finest of all Byzantine mosaics, with Lady Gregory and her son in 1907.

In the Twenties he deepened and intensified his knowledge by reading several of the books available on Byzantine art and civilization, which were increasingly fashionable. This interest and reading were part of his search for what he now called ‘Unity of Being,’ a state in which art and life interpenetrated each other, and which he thought he saw in Byzantine culture (Cowell, 77).

In *Sailing to Byzantium* the poet expresses his desire to leave the sensual world and the young at their gallantries, and sail to Byzantium, the holy city of unageing intellect. He seeks to escape the physical process of birth and death, and once out of the clutches of time, he will not take any mortal shape, but become a golden bird and sing of the past present and the future. The Byzantium-image is subtly associated with the image of the golden bough on which the mechanical bird will be set and this interlinking immensely increases the complexity of meaning and overtones. The gleaming bough that unlocks of Aeneas the gates of Hades also illuminates the dark process of life and death; he learns, with agony and despair, that each departed spirit has to prepare himself for another pilgrimage among the children of men; there is ordained for each a ghostly penance, which endures for a thousand
years, until the heavenly essence has been cleansed of every stain and memory of Unhallowed fellowship. The image-complex and the aura of words also reveal new meanings. ‘Hammered’ implies effort and striving, gold ‘implies purgation, melting and sifting of baser metals; ‘gold mosaic’ and ‘gold enameling’ signify precision and hardness, ‘Holy Fire’ symbolizes a mode of purification through suffering. The gyre-image symbolizes the revolution of historical cycles. The reference to ‘dying generations’ and ‘the artifice of eternity’ links the poem with Keats Ode to a Nightingale and Ode on a Grecian Urn. This bringing together of apparently disconnected images suggests the tortuous process of thought and feeling. In the first two stanzas, a nostalgic yearning for a vanished youth and a mocking self-pity are mingled with a carving for unageing intellect and disgust for the physical process of existence. In the last two stanzas, the desire to escape into the artifice of eternity is accompanied by an agonized acceptance of the fact that life is an in exorable cycle. The poem thus ends on a mingled note of hope and despair, and a craving for the effort and purification, although not explicitly stated, is suggested evocatively through the interaction of the auras of words and images.

Sailing to Byzantium, is a personal poem in which with a chorus of symbols the poet attempts to remake himself. This world of dying generations and sensual music is set against the unified city of the immortal soul. The poet or his Persona has left this world of flux and longs to be gathered into ‘the artifice of eternity’. “It is a symbolic voyage from the material world to the spiritual one. In other words, the poem is a meditation on timeless existence or eternity as against ‘Among School Children’, which in the words of V. S. Pinto is a meditation on existence in time, and the world of becoming”.(V.S.Pinto,107).
In his brilliant analysis of *Sailing to Byzantium*, Elder Olson says, that “in this poem an old man faces the problem of old age, of death and of regeneration, and gives his decision” (Permanence, 257-269). Olson sees the poem, “as a resolution of contraries-the condition of sensuality active and spiritually passive youth, and of physically impotent and spiritually active old age resulting in the vision of a wholly desirable mode of existence which “amalgamates the positive elements and eliminates the negative elements of both nature and art …” (Permanence, 257-269). The poem, no doubt, is born of the poet’s own sense of loss and decay. While lamenting the loss of his youth, he feels that age and death are unendurable. “An aged man is but a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a stick” (Collected Poems, 217). A mere scarecrow and it is ridiculous for him to ding ‘that sensual music.’ He must learn a new song, the spiritual song of the soul, and so he comes to the holy city of Byzantium which alone can be the new singing school. He now beseeches the sages of that ideal world to be the ‘singing masters of my soul’. In the midst of his prayer to the sages and thoughts about the soul and ‘God’s holy fire he feels the throbbing of his human heart which is “sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal.” (Collected Poems, 217)Here is a tension dramatized in the speaker: while he is desperately trying to find another center, to beat out a new and meaningful mode of existence for his aging life, he is pulled in the opposite direction by the obsessions of that sensual world. At this point he seems to admit that it is futile to learn the new song, and so abandoning the plea for instruction from the sages, he prays for death, to be gathered into ‘the artifice of eternity’. But this is only a momentary solution.

In the final stanza, electing the body for his next incarnation (which has an ironic touch as we shall see later); he chooses to inhabit an artificial Byzantine bird that will sing. All that he wants is to be out of nature, to escape all physical
reincarnation, to remain imperishable, and at the same to retain his human soul to sing about the world of flux, the condition of being human. If there is any reconciliation of the opposites reached at the end, it is that he will sing of time while remaining immune to its influence.

Olson would have us take this poem as a happy resolution of all the problems of the old man, whereas Simon Lesser argues that if there is a solution at all, it is a negative one and that the poem is ‘a cry of agony’. (Lesser, Simon, 291-310) It seems that the truth lies somewhere between these two extreme positions. Admittedly, the poem starts with a cry of agony over physical decay, and the realization that one must find a new center which will sustain him in his old age. While searching for such a center, the poet chooses a golden bird for his soul to inhabit. Yeats seems to have used his characteristic irony which should caution us against an over-optimistic interpretation of the conclusion. Immersion in art is a compensation for decay in old age, but, as lesser points out, no claim is entered in the poem for the proposition that old age is a happier time than youth. Even when the poet seeks refuge in ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’ (Collected Poems, 217). He cannot forget his fascination for the world of flux, for poet is ‘sick with desire’. So the poem ends with the bird’s song, not of eternity or immortality but of ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’ (Collected Poems, 218). Perhaps it is this fact which has forced B. L. Reid to place this poem in the line of the poet’s tragic emotion (The Lyric of Tragedy, p-179).

Furthermore, if the persona is identified with the poet as is often done, it is difficult to believe that Yeats would seriously want to be a golden bird to be set on a bough to sing in order to ‘keep a drowsy Emperor awake’. As lesser admirably puts it, “A fairy-tale quality of momentary attractiveness the last stanza possesses, but as
soon as one thinks of the golden bird as the eternal incarnation of a once-living poet, all the luster vanishes.” (Reid, 179).

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep the drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come (Collected Poems, 217).

A question arises pertinent to the discussion and related to the theme of the poem: Is this a poem about afterlife? The answer would depend on the way one interprets the poem. This certainly is a rich and complex lyric which has already yielded several interpretations. This poem can be taken as dealing with transition from sensual art to intellectual art or with the poet’s coming to terms with old age and death. Taken aesthetically, the poem would yield Yeats’ brilliantly original insight into the nature of Byzantine imagination. Byzantium, then would symbolize the achievement of Unity of Being through art. The golden bird and its song would represent the poet or the artist and his work of art. Even the obvious religious imagery takes on a different symbolic meaning. God in the third stanza ‘O sages standing in God’s holy fire’ (Collected Poems, 217) stands, as Ellmann comments, “less in the position of the Christian God than in that of supreme artist, artificer of eternity and the holy fire.” (Ellmann, Man and the Masks, 258). He is thus also the poet and the human imagination which is something in Yeats’s system described as a maker of all things. As for the emperor was himself a God as well as a man. Finally the Golden
bird, symbol of the reconciliation of opposite, symbolizes the poem itself, the created artifact, the protagonist, who fades into it and the poet, who becomes what he creates. The poem is a veritable chorus of symbols, all contributing to what Yeats long ago declared as his endeavour, to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art’s sake. The sages to whom the prayer is addressed live somewhere in the poet’s imagination; they are also artists who teach the soul to sing and thus the traditional religious imagery is transfused with aesthetic meaning. The poet’s cry is for a transformation of his art as well as of himself (Ellmann, 258). kenneth burke thinks that the vision of immortalization, not as a person, but by conversion into a fabricated thing, is an intensified version of keats’ ode on a grecian urn. He says that in the Byzantium poem it is “not a religious immortality that is celebrated here, but an aesthetic one. It is ‘beauty,’ ‘lunar.’” (Permanance, p-234).

The last stanza is the crucial one in determining if the poem is about an afterlife. The pagan concept of reincarnation is introduced not as a doctrine but as a poetic tool. It would be a mistake to suppose that the poem as a whole or the final stanza is a declaration of a doctrine about escaping the cycle of rebirths as enunciated in hinduism, or getting out of the earlier cycles to escape into the Thirteen Sphere of the Yeatsian system. The concept of reincarnation is only a poetic machinery through which is a mixed feeling of desire to transcend the tyranny of time and of exasperation at the painful enchantment of the sensual world from which he tries to tear himself away. It is not emotion put into doctrine from outside as Yeats often neither does nor doctrine presented as emotion but it is a poem in which a doctrine is subsumed purely for the sake of creating poetic effect.
Making this idea clear are some of the symbols, especially those in the last stanza. The poet wants to renounce all physical incarnation, and so he elects the imperishable golden bird for his next and last reincarnation. As we have already seen, he is not serious about this idea of reincarnation. This is clear from the ironic description of the bird as set on a golden bough to sing like automation. Lesser is right in pointing out that the golden bird and golden tree illustrate the syncretistic nature of Yeats’ Byzantium symbols. The conventional forms of Byzantine images seem to deny the nature from which they derive. As Gordon and Fletcher claim,

“Those images were designed to express the divine, the supernatural, the transcendent realm which opposes the flux of time and nature.” (Lesser, Simon, 291-310). The symbol thus conveys the permanence of the artist in his work of art. Also, Byzantium is the city of Holy Wisdom, a Christian symbol, and at the same time a meeting place of the cultures of East and West. The theologically rooted city of Byzantium may serve as an image of the Heavenly City where the soul can dwell happily. The golden tree of Byzantium may have its origin in the Hebrew Tree of Life. This tree-image also connects Byzantium with the hermetic imagery of the Golden Dawn which provided the poet with the symbol of the Tree of Life. The golden bird, too, is hermetic imagery which represents the purified soul. It is also a personalized “symbol of the intellectual joy of eternity, as contrasted with the instinctive joy of human life” (Bradford, Curtis, 93-130). Thus, one can see that in this complex imagery of the incarnated bird set on a tree in Byzantium there is an interpenetration of Hindu, Hermetic and Christian symbolism.

Next poem of this volume is The Tower which is Yeats’ one of the best poems, and is more impressive than Sailing to Byzantium though it has less reputation at this time. Yeats aspires here towards being ‘a new species of man’, but in this poem’s
earlier moments he knows well enough that he belongs to an older species, the artists
who long to be their own contraries, yet never attain to the condition of the daimon.

*The Tower* is primarily a poem about an excess of imagination, or perhaps an
imagination, in excess of its historical stimuli, and its Anglo-Irish excursiveness is
hardly a poetic virtue, not being handled by Yeats with much saving irony. The poet
is growing old, but his vision refuses to darken, and his ear and eye continue to expect
an impossible sublimity.

The rebuilding of the Tower, Thoor Ballylee, near Lady
Gregory’s place at Coole, was a gesture, too: half believed in,
half-mocked at, but serving as a symbol, by turns cosmic and
absurd; viewed with that peculiar irony that was necessary to
preserve the sense of mystery. For the Tower was never
finished; and a great empty room remained at the top. Yeats
used to say that *A Vision* would be finished when the room was
finally restored; neither was ever completed. But, in mockery
or not, it could be shorten history for him. (T. R. Henn, 12-13).

He could pace upon the battlements where the crumbling stone, or a
Jackdaw’s nest at a loop-hole, gave other images-

And send imagination forth
Under the day’s declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,

For I would ask a question to them all (Collected Poems, 219).

By 1928 *The Tower* had served its purpose as a symbol. The influence of
Blake on Yeats is seen throughout his poetry. The central theme of *The Tower* is the
“poet’s reaction to his own physical infirmity wrought by Time. He has lost his bodily strength and yet he cannot accept his old age without remonstrance. The paradox is that with his decreasing vitality, he has gained immensely in powers of the mind, in the gift of imagination”. (Chatterjee, 104).

He continues to know that less than all cannot satisfy man, yet his decrepit age threatens to make his desire merely grotesque. The minute particulars the Muse demands would make of the poet an object of derision, yet how can ‘imagination ear and eye…be content with argument and deal/In abstract things?’(Collected poems, 219) To this apparently insoluble dilemma the meditative second part of the poem provides no resolution, but it provides something better, a thorough rejection of all self-pity and all imagination-destroying remorse.

Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an Ear and eye
That more expected the impossible-
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly (Collected Poems, 218)

Out of the past, both from history and from his own creating, Yeats calls forth ‘images and memories’, to ask them two questions: do all humans rage against growing old? And more complexly, is it accomplishment or frustration, the woman won or the woman lost, most engages the supposedly mature yet still fantastical imagination? The two questions may seem finally to be one, for Yeats’ art as early as The Wanderings of Oisin was founded upon a rage against growing old, and upon the Shellleyan conviction that the most poetic images are necessarily those of unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. Confronting his own Hanrahan, his reckless antithesis, Yeats asks ironically for all the knowledge that the mythical after-life can gain one of the
labyrinth beings of other selves. The labyrinth image is from Blake, but Hanrahan, is not a very Blakean figure, for he never explored the intricate, great labyrinth of another self, any more than Yeats did. Self annihilation, finally learned by Blake’s Los, was not possible for Hanrahan, or for his creator, for any man. What is immensely moving here is Yeats’ clear self condemnation, for he implicitly states a failure of desire on his part in his love for Maud Gonne.

The second section of *The Tower* is distinguished by its rich symbolism. It shows that the tower is chosen not simply as the emblem of ‘thought’s crowned powers’, but also as the focal point from which may be viewed the turbulent stretches of life, past and present. Like Hanrahan, he turned aside, and could not give all to love. Far in the back ground and yet relevant, is Shelley’s similarly conscious failure in his *Epipsycidion*, where the limitations of selfhood triumph over the poet’s intense love for Emilia Viviani. Hanrahan, in the story *Red Hanrahan’s Curse* felt “a great anger against old age, and all it brought with it,” but his struggle with self never proceeded far enough for him to accept the four sacred emblems-cauldron of pleasure, stone of power, spear of courage, sword of knowledge- that could have been his” (Mythologies, 241). Taken together, the four attributes would have unified him in the image of a Blakean Divine Man, or God. The implication in *The Tower* is that Yeats, like Hanrahan, has failed, but the failure is not less heroic than simpler fulfillment of desire. The past and present are interwoven the canvas gradually widens and assumes a kaleidoscopic pattern. Mrs. French whose servant, divining her wish, clipped an insolent farmer’s ears and brought them in a dish, symbolizes both beauty and an aristocratic pride. The two most significant figures are Hanrahan and Mary Hynes, and in their legends the poet reads the story of his own life. The strange life of Hanrahan a tall, strong, red haired young man has been narrated by Yeats. Mary
Hynes, in whom he finds the replica of Maud Gonne, was a most beautiful woman and an old woman thus describes her in an irresistibly ecstatic language.

“The sun and the moon never shone on anybody so handsome, and her skin was so white that it looked blue and she had two little blushes on her cheeks” The half-blind Irish poet Raftery made a song about her and described her as ‘the shining flower of Ballylee”. (Chatterjee, 105-106) The story of his peasant beauty and the half blind poet reminds Yeats at once of Homer and Helen and once more the images are mixed up, telescoping the past and the present. Helen symbolizes Maud Gonne.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;
Yet, now I have considered it, I find
That nothing strange; the tragedy began
With Homer that was a blind man,
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed. (Collected poems, 220).

The reference to Helen introduces a new element into the cluster-the image of Maud Gonne and the tragic story of the poet’s love for her. The extraordinary beauty of above mentioned passage is achieved not only by the richness of symbolism, but also, by the sudden shifts of tone, by the purity and simplicity of language and by the incandescent luminousness of the conclusion.

In the third section, of *The Tower*, as pointed out by Bloom,

Yeats turns to what is left, as his dream drunken Hanrahan could not. Like Hanrahan, the poet has not attained Unity of Being, and so finds himself at the impasse of knowing perfection neither in his life nor in his work. But nothing in the first section, with its conflict of active imagination and fading nature, or in the second with its parallel conflict of imagination
and the unfading self, compels the poet to surrender his Blakean and Shelleyan pride in the continued autonomy of the imagination. (Bloom, 351-352)

Whitaker boldly, claims more for Yeats here, and speaks of a pride “that is not the ego’s apprehensive desire to posses and dominate but the whole being’s exultant sense of creative giving” (Whitaker, 198). This is to grant Yeats more than he dared to assert for himself. There is, one needs to admit, much Anglo-Irish posturing and drum beating in Part third and much purely, Yeatsian striking of attitudes as well. Here, the poem is in decline and its celebration of “excessive dramatization” that Yvor Winters has urged so vigorously against Yeats’ work. As Winters remarks of Yeats' ideal, “the gentlemen should be violent and bitter... and they should be fond of fishing” (Winters, 5). Yeats’ ‘upstanding men’ are not attaching themselves to tyrants, but they are to show equal contempt for historical victims of tyranny, and we begin to feel that the excited imagination the poet insists he still possesses is perhaps not the most mature of imaginations. A touch of the Wordsworthian “sober coloring” which Yeats despised is needed to temper the “headlong light” of an old man’s pride.

After the uncertainties of Sailing to Byzantium, The Tower explores the possibilities of a different kind of poetic Imagination and as a result achieves some measure of confidence. As, pointed out by Raymond Cowell,

The poet begins by facing up to the suggestion that with old age he should turn aside from the more intense aspects of life and ‘be content with argument and deal/In abstract things;’ things idealistic philosophies of Plato and Plotinus. Here Plotinus a neo-Platonist of the third century, is linked with Plato as being out of touch with human life, but when The Tower appeared
Yeats added a note retracting his statement about both of them, saying that he was wrong to ‘see them as all transcendence’.

(Cowell, 79).

In *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats knew something of the dangers of the esoteric uses of the imagination, and so, in the second section of the poem, he brings to life through his poetic powers not golden Byzantine sages but figures from local Ballylee legend. These are his new singing-masters and he calls them to life, as he had the sages, to ‘ask a question of them all.’ These figures teach him, through the glimpse his imagination affords him of their vitality, the folly of turning aside from life, however old one might be, a point reinforced by the implicit counsel of his own poetic creation, Red Hanrhan, who shows him at the end of the second section the folly of being guided by such abstractions as pride, cowardice or conscience. Whereas in the previous poem *Sailing to Byzantium* the sages admittedly at his own request, led his imagination away from life, here the blind poet Raftery and the rest lead him back to life so that, he is reconciled to life, he can declare his faith in man, and ‘mock Plotinus’ thought/And cry in Plato’s teeth’ (Collected Poems, What he cries is that man is at the centre of the world, not abstractions. Thus, in the poem as a whole he accepts life, as seen from the vintage point of the tower battlements, and declares his faith that, provided the Imagination retains its vital contact with ordinary human experience, the conventional consequence of old age, retreat into abstractions from actual life, and need to apply to the poet.

The third section of *The Tower* is important in this respect. There are three main divisions in the poem: his proclamation of faith, will, and own plan of living in old age. He declares the human soul as the creator of not only the phenomenal world,
but also of life and death; other symbols in the poem call for comment because of the associative meanings they take on from other poems.

    The swan singing its last song in a glittering stream symbolizes lonely, defiant pride, but its meaning becomes more suggestive and complex when the chain of poems containing the swan symbol: *The Wild swans at coole, Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen, Leda and the swan, Coole Park and Ballylee* are remembered for swan symbol. ‘The proud stones of Greece’ symbolize immutable achievement meant in art and are related to Byzantium. (Chatterjee, 108-109)

    These two poems *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Tower* can be seen, as part of the continuing Yeatsian dialectic about the relation between the world of Imagination and the real world, a problem which became acute as, with old age impending, the satisfactions of the real world became less obviously realizable to Yeats the man. The basic question behind these two poems is “If the poetic imagination of an ageing man better employed in helping him to escape the ingratitude and indignities of the real world, by creating for him a timeless, aesthetic world, or in helping him to make sense of the real world?” (Cowell, 80). At the end of the poem *The Tower* Yeats has fended off the aesthetic temptations, but temptation will come in this kind again.

    Next poem of this Volume *Meditations in Time of Civil War* is a long poem, which is also considered by many critics, as a political poem, because it is based on Yeats’s own experiences at Thoor Ballylee during the fighting between the Republicans and the Free Stators which broke out in the summer of 1921. This poem is divided into seven parts. The first section of the poem, *Ancestral Houses*, is the poet’s nostalgic recreation of the Big Houses in the midst of current disturbance:
Surely among a rich man’s flowering lawns,
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,
Life overflows without ambitious pains;
And rains down life until the basin spills,
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains
As though to choose whatever shape it wills
And never stoop to a mechanical
Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call (Collected Poems, 225).

Echoing a series of poems on the aristocracy, the Renaissance and the Big House (Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation, To a wealthy Man…The People) Ancestral Houses reveals Yeats’ admiration for the heroic past and the influence of Coole and Castiglione’s Urbino upon him. It is Yeats’ turning to the past in the midst of turmoil. Reality, however, is too oppressive for him: ‘Mere dreams, mere dreams.’ In the following lines, the conflict in his mind lends complexity to his verse, with the turn of thought faithfully registered by such connectives as ‘yet’ and ‘though’, which also, exemplify his passionate syntax:

Yet Homer had not sung
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams
That out of life’s own self-delight had sprung
The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems
As if some marvelous empty sea-shell flung
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,
And not a fountain, were the symbol which
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich (Collected Poems, 225).
In the following stanza, ambivalence, which has been so outstanding a quality of *Easter 1916*, enriches the poem once again:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day… (Collected poems, 225).

While reminding one of the hard-riding gentry whose wasteful virtues Yeats extols, violent men ‘reiterate the artist’s alignment with the nobility in Urbino and Ferrara. Encompassing a wide gamut of moods (nostalgia, affirmation, and regret over the crumbling of ancestral houses), the poem is woven into a coherent whole by the subtle interplay of images, made possible by his increasingly comprehensive treatment of Irish subject-matter. Fountain imagery in the first stanza, for example, is taken up by the ‘glittering jet’ in the second stanza, which is in turn enriched by words contributing to the same effect: ‘rains’, ‘spills’, ‘rich streams’, ‘fountain’. Woven into the fountain image is the stone image, which suggests that greatness is a compound on the one hand of violence and bitterness and on the other of gentleness and sweetness. The oxymoron, which Yeats regularly resorted to after *Easter 1916* and the stone image reinforce the idea of sweetness out of bitterness. The complex meaning is condensed in an image that registers the unanalysable experience in life and the poet’s attitude which was foreshadowed, as we have seen, in *Easter 1916*.

Heather Glen has taken exception to *Ancestral Houses* for the following reason:

Even where Yeats tries to image the aristocratic life more explicitly—the “rich man’s flowering lawns” and “planted
hills”—the images embody little understanding of what such a life might involve … Though he dramatizes the movement of his own responding mind vividly, he seems strangely unable to convey a clear understanding of that to which he responds … What is missing is a sense of rigorous, defining intelligence. (Glen, 30).

In Ancestral Houses, Yeats does not, try to be explicit, nor does he want to make the picture clear and definite with the kind of detail Jonson introduces in “To Penshurst.” He can paint vivid pictures if he so wishes: witness The Wild Swans at Coole or Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931. However, in this poem, Ancestral houses and the kind of life they stand for are not meant to be particular houses in a particular setting; for Yeats is not aiming at picture-painting or enumerating details on the naturalistic plane. They have wider implications that radiate into symbols. And as such, they need not, and, sometimes, should not be too clear out or too sharply defined, as Glen obviously wants them to be. To enrich the symbolic significance of the life described and suggested in Ancestral Houses, the poet must needs refrain from counting the petals of the flower. That Yeats’ purpose differs from Johnson’s is at once clear if we attach due importance to “And not a fountain, were the symbol which/Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.” (Variorum, 418).

Nor does Yeats lack the sense of rigorous, defining intelligence. Symbols are Yeats’ means of organizing experience and integrating it with his philosophy. If Ancestral Houses is Yeats’ attempt at finding meaning in the past symbolized by rich men’s lawns and escutcheoned doors. My House is an attempt at attaching meaning to his own house, pitching it in the ‘tumultuous spot’ of present-day Ireland. Though threatened by war; his house is linked to the past:
An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can bleak in flower,
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable (Collected Poems, 226).

Apparently turning on his own activity, he is able to define what he sees it to mean. ‘Old ragged elms’ and ‘old thorns’ looked at in the proper context, especially when preceded by the symbolic rose, mirror a larger world outside. The disturbance in

The stilted water-hen
Crossing stream again
Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows…(Collected Poems, 226).

ceases to be mere scene-painting. It is a pointer to the turbulence of the world. Integrated with the same symbolic framework, the winding stair, the house and the candle in

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page . . . (Collected Poems, 226).

Take on emblematic meaning. They express all that the artist’s creative intensity and demonic rage can build in long wars and sudden night that is emblems of adversity. Viewed in the light, many apparently unimportant words—‘benighted’ for example have both literal and metaphorical value. His house and his lonely mind, to put it in simpler terms, are light in the midst of darkness, chaos and disorder. They are emblems that link the past with future generations.

Emphasizing the same ideas as in the first and second sections, third section

*My Table* which resorts to a different set of symbols which amplifies the ‘glittering
jet,’ ‘ancient bridge ‘and ‘ancient tower’. Meditating upon seemingly trivial objects in
time of civil war, Yeats again sees in them symbolic meaning, with the sword
standing for art, the product of a stable society which enjoyed Unity of Being.

An equally great success is achieved in The Road at My door, in which Yeats
brings the external world to bear upon his own world. Apparently trivial details are
turned to account and the consciousness of the poet is faithfully dramatized. Without
much effort, the intrusion of the outside world into his private world is introduced:

    An affable Irregular,

    A heavily-built Falstaffian man,

    Comes cracking jokes of civil war

    As though to die by gunshot were

    The finest play under the sun (Collected Poems, 229).

The phrase ‘murderous innocence’ suggests that the murderousness of the sea
waves is not designed and calculated, it is irrational force symbolizing the irrational
stream of violence that would flood the world. In another poem, I See phantoms of
Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness hover on the tower-
top and symbolize the coming emptiness:

    I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,

    Amist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,

    Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;

    Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind’s eye (Collected Poems, 229).

The Tower and many of its furnishings took on deep significance. For
example, the winding stair which leads up the tower was an emblem of the spiritual
ascent, with some side reference to the visionary gyres, which could be conceived of as the antinomy of spirit and matter or of heaven and earth.

A Sword given him by Japanese named Sato was a symbol of life, its silk-embroidered sheath a symbol of beauty while outside in the garden flowered ‘the symbolic rose’. Yeats touch turned all to symbol. The rose was one of the symbols he used in the ‘nineties’, but then it was always far off and remote, while he grew on his property. Yeats heads the sections of his *Meditations in Time of Civil War* that old Castle of the Heroes of which he had once dreamed as a kind of ethereal temple of the spirit is a microcosm where he and his family live, and where life is condensed and controlled by the machinery of symbolism. (Ellmann, 242-243).

*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* is also a poem written during the war. Like Meditations it expresses a negative view of Ireland and the world in general, the sense of loss of culture, gentility and hereditary station, and the fear of war. Despite his earnest wish, he realizes that is impossible to maintain the aristocratic tradition;

Many ingenious lovely things are gone
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
Protected from the circle of the moon
That pitches common things about.

This poem was prompted by incidents which occurred during the fighting between the Irish Republican Army and The British forces Army combined with Irish Police force in 1919. Though a bitter reflection upon the Irish scene and the Irish like *Meditations in Time of Civil war*, it differs from it in that it brings out more clearly the
problem which violence and war raised for Yeats in his crisis over Irish identity. The impact of the Black and Tan war enabled him to translate the present state of Ireland into a horrifying picture. Violence, the following lines imply, is the order of the Day:

Now days are dragon–ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot–free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pierced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

“As in Meditations in Time of Civil War, he transforms such violence into a powerful vision that symbolizes the blood dimmed tide in which, says Graham Hough, “the decay of the liberal and humanitarian tradition is most searchingly analyzed.” (Hough, 249). The horror of 1917-21 is depicted as a shattering experience. ‘Dragon-ridden’, ‘nightmare /rides upon sleep’ are powerful by virtue of their apparent vagueness.

In the first section Yeats evokes the unexpected brutality of war, moving from the destruction of ancient Athens’s sacred olive and its artifacts to his contemporary Ireland, and then reverting to Athens. As, Raymond Cowell says,

This is the poem of profound and scathing self-criticism and reorientation. Surveying the evidence for the universality of the destructive impulse in all ages and civilizations, he looks back to the optimistic beliefs he had shared with Lady Gregory and
others and makes a cruelly unfair indictment of them

(Cowell, 82):

We too had many pretty toys when young;

A law indifferent to blame or praise,

To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong

Melt down; as it were wax in the sun’s rays;

Public opinion ripening for so long (Collected Poems, 233).

The central emotions of the poem are beautifully presented through the symbolic comparison of the soul to a swan, at once beautiful and pathetic;

The wings half spread for flight, the breast thrust out in pride

Whether to play, or to ride

Those winds that clamour of approaching night (Collected Poems, 235).

Thinking of how ‘cracked pated’ his early ideals now seem, he is tempted to despair, yet, like the swan, those ideals had a kind of fragile beauty. Nothing is more typical of Yeats’ mature style, nor more revealing of his emotional integrity and strength, than the juxtaposition of the beauty and mystery of the swan symbol with the contemptuous colloquialism, ‘crack pated.’ The tone of self mockery is prominent throughout the poem, but there is a dramatic change of direction as Yeats turns on the cynics, the mockers, who are incapable of cherishing any ideals, and says that they equally deserve and receive mockery. The poem ends with a vision of evil gathering force as he presents a wild procession of witches, which concludes with a symbol of universal depravity, the tributes, ‘bronzed peacock-feathers, red combs of her cocks, offered by a witch to her incubus; his age, Yeats implies offers similar tributes to the forces of chaos and evil.
In the next poem *Leda and Swan*, where Yeats presents his historical philosophy with immense dramatic force. Yeats tells us in a note on the poem that it began as a political poem, written at the request of an editor of a political publication, and his summary of his original political intention makes it seem likely that it would have been fascist in tone. As Raymond Cowell says, “He begins by saying that the ‘individualist, demagogic movement’ is exhausted and goes on. Metaphor takes over from personal opinion, so that the finished poem—over which Yeats took immense pains—retains no trace of the original political intention.” (Cowell, 84) It presents what Yeats saw as the moment of Birth of Greek civilization—the rape of Leda by Zues, in the form of a swan, an event at once horrifying and awe-inspiring as symbolic of the subsequent course of that civilization:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead (Collected Poems, 241).

*Leda and Swan* is another illustration of this method. The Leda-story gives in the form of a myth the primitive Hellenic conception of the Union of the spiritual with the physical. Zeus in the form of a swan varied born Clytemnestra and Helen. This violent portentous union of opposites is depicted by Yeats through a few stark, deadly, catastrophic images. The swan suggests wild sexuality which is reinforced by the description of Leda’s loosening thighs and this takes us to the catastrophic doom of Agamemnon. The terrible beauty of Helen which Homer celebrated in his epic, the flames of burning Troy and the tragic intensity of the Aeschylean triology—all are recaptured in three sharp, precise, staggering images:

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead (Collected Poems, 241).
The burning of Troy symbolizes the end of a cycle and becomes linked with the annunciation image; the Troy image recalls at once the beauty of Helen, and also of Maud Gonne whose revolutionary activities were designed to destroy the old order of Ireland. Helen, Clytemnestra and Maud Gonne are fused into each other and the licking flames of the burning walls illuminate their faces; the vast hiatus of time and space is bridged over and the two epochs are telescoped (Chatterjee, 120).

Helen of Troy symbolizes Maud Gonne. According to Ellmann, Leda would open her knees to the swan and begin a new age. The bird’s rape of the human, the coupling of God and woman, the moment at which one epoch ended and another began, the antinomies engendering breast to breast; in the act which included all these Yeats had the violent symbol for the transcendence of opposites which he needed. (Ellmann, 245-246).

After celebrating it in verse almost as miraculous as the event described, the poet suddenly demands whether copulation has resolved, if only for an instant, that last antinomy of knowledge against power:

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (Collected Poems, 241).

Could power and knowledge ever exist together in this world, or were they, as he had reason to suspect, contraries ever at war? Was wisdom the ripe the fruit obtainable only when the sense of taste was gone.
In the poem *Among School Children*, the structure of the poem more thoroughly reflects the total complexity. During his senate term as Senator Yeats was a member of a government committee commissioned to investigate the state of Irish education, and this poem, of June 1926, is based on a visit he paid to school with a reputation for modern and enlightened methods. St. Ottern’s Waterford, which used the Montessori method with its four to seven year olds and placed a similar emphasis on spontaneity and self expression throughout the school. Though the poem as a whole is, as he calls it in a letter a curse upon old age, the educational content is essential to its meaning. In the first stanza, youth as represented by the children, and age, represented by ‘a kind old nun’ a teacher.

The scene is a schoolroom which Yeats is inspecting. As he looks at the children and hears from a nun about the modern educational methods, he is struck by the contrast between the children and himself, now sixty years old. His mind is carried back to a day in his youth; when his beloved (Maud Gonne) told him of an incident in her school days, they had seemed suddenly, momentarily blended together by sympathy into a sphere or the yolk and white of one shell. “This image of opposites reconciled points the way towards the poem’s conclusion, but lasts only an instant; the recollection makes him wonder whether Maud once resembled these children, and suddenly her image as she must have been when a child floats into his mind”.(Ellmann, 255-256) It gives way to the image of her as an old woman. Both she and he though handsome once, are now old scarecrows.

As Ellmann points out, Filled with horror at the contrast, the poet says that no mother, if she could see her son at sixty years, would consider motherhood worthwhile. Even the greatest philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, are but ‘scarecrows when their fame has come’ and their greatest achievements are nothing.
In the two last stanzas he declares that only images escape the disintegration of age; the mother worships an image of her son just as the nun worships an image of God. Only images are real they are ‘self born’ being perfect and unageing, they mock man’s enterprise they are the symbols of heavenly glory. He explores in stanzas five and six the ravages of time a baby’s shape soon becomes, after a brief period of beauty, an old man’s shape, and stanza six asserts, intellectual beauty and power fare no better. Thus, mothers and lovers are tortured and mocked by images of mortal, transient beauty. The kind old nun by his side reminds him of those who dedicate themselves to religion, but he says, these people of a different kind of image, and of the love felt by those who dedicate themselves to religion but he says these people are no less cruelly tortured, though very differently whereas human images torture mothers and; lovers through their transience and changes, these religious images, which keep a marble or a bronze repose, also break hearts because of their coldness and lack of change. Human love and religious love are both mocked by these images or presences ‘though the kinds of mockery are antithetically different.’ At this point, therefore, the poem is poised on the cruel paradox that both change and lack of change mock and torment mankind. This is a paradox; Yeats attempts to resolve this paradox by presenting images which are more inclusive than the images of the first seven stanzas.

In the final stanza the poet imagines heavenly glory a place, or more likely a state where body and soul are united as he and his beloved had seemed united that day long before. Triumphing in his theme, he changes in the last stanza from declarative statement to apostrophe or secular adoration of the completed symbol of heavenly glory:
Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut–tree, great–rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (Collected Poems, 244-245).

Dance is used by Yeats as a symbol. This symbol of the dance, as seen as a kind of cyclical determinism, a predestined round which all men must tread, has left many traces on his poetry.

Some of the major themes of this Volume The Tower are discussed in this chapter. Magic is primarily spiritual form in this collection, replacing religion as a place to turn in a time of distress. Yeats was brought up in a protestant family, turned to theosophy. Later on, Theosophy, a set of beliefs that declares that all religions hold some measure of truth, tends toward the fantastical in practice. Yeats attended séances and exercised what he called “Automatic writing”. Writing funneled through a poet. These magical trappings are evident in many poems in The Tower, including the speaker’s ability to call on the “sages” in Sailing to Byzantium. Magic provides one possible solution to the crisis that the poet puzzles over throughout this collection.

Fishing is another theme used in this Volume. The activity of fishing appears throughout this collection as a metaphor for youth, life, and heath. Yeats uses it to counteract the images of aging. The most common, variations on the image of “tattered rags on a stick,” is the inverse of fishing. Instead of controlling the rod, a
symbol of virility, the aged man is himself trapped, no longer the fisher but the fished. Fishing holds not only a symbolic but a historical significance for Yeats, who used to fish during his childhood in the hills of County Sligo. The fish leaping in the water is a common trope for fertility, and Yeats’ special mention of salmon leaping upstream is biologically correct and also possible comment on the Irishman’s stubborn and heroic nature. In *The Tower*, Yeats leaves the fishermen his pride in his “will”. Although he is no longer one of the young, he seems to identify with and admire them.

Theme of Destruction also, occurs in this volume. In keeping with the collection’s more general theme of death, Yeats supplements the images of decay with those of active destruction. In addition to nature and time playing an active part in the destruction of the human body, other humans may also choose to destroy one another. In many poems, the speaker seems afraid of the former and horrified by the latter. Part of the horror of destruction is an intrinsic belief in the goodness of beauty and the human body. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* Yeats describes the destruction of an ancient statue and the mob’s complete disregard for its beauty or historical significance. Of course the more salient destruction that the IRA and Black and Tans carried out was killings. In mourning the destruction of a beautiful statue, the poet creates a symbol for the slain human and affirms its beauty and significance. Images of Destruction, whether they be killings as in *Meditations in a Time of Civil war* or less direct references, appear most frequently in the more political poems in this collection.

The Moon appears so often in this collection that its significance must be weighed. It is the counter symbol to the destruction that plagues must of the rest of the
collection; it is the female force. But although it is a peaceful symbol, the moon also has an edge of danger. Yeats often compares the moon to a beautiful woman, or draws parallels with Maud Gonne, the woman who refused to love him back. Yeats plays on the word ‘lunacy’ to support the ancient myth that madness and the moon were tied together. This, together with the moon’s feminine associations, implies that woman; too derive men mad. This is in keeping with the theme of unrequited lust.

Unrequited lust is also important theme used in this collection. Part of the experience of aging seems to be the loss of physical attractiveness. In A Man Young and Old, the speaker mourns, ‘my arms are like the twisted thorns/and yet there beauty lay.’ The speaker has been in and out of love but desire for young woman still remains. This is part of the contradiction of a young spirit trapped in an old man’s body. Classicism is another theme used in this volume. A poet so preoccupied with the issue of aging is naturally also preoccupied by the issue of immortality. Critics have explained the shift away from Irish and toward Classical mythology, once again, with Yeats’ friendship with Pound and his interest in the modernist literary movement. Putting this aside however, Irish mythology is much more vague about immortality than Greek or Latin: in which Gods, and some of their favored mortals, live forever. This may explain the hopeful color that references to Juno and Athena add to some of these poems, and the explicitly classical theme. Danger is another theme used in many poems of this collection.

Danger is ever present in this collection, whether it is through age, broken heartedness, or violence. Much of Yeats’ description of danger has to do with a heightened time scheme: all men age, but the speaker in poem Youth and Age seems worried about imminent death. All men die, but the speaker in Meditations in a Time
of Civil War is likely to face sudden death at the hands of intruders. Danger, characterized by a heightened urgency, creates uncertainty, and that is a dominant mood in The Tower. Continuity is represented in this collection by art, especially sculpture. Once this is destroyed by the mob, there is no telling what or whom the mob will destroy next. The mood is not confined to Yeats alone, but is visible in much of the literature written directly after world war first.
Work Cited


