I am worn out with dreams;  
A weather-worn, marble triton  
Among the streams ...  
— 'Men Improve with the Years'.

A passion-driven exultant man sings out  
Sentences that he has never thought ...  
— 'Whence had they come?'

Like Baudelaire, Yeats began with the belief that Reality was something spiritual and that it was neither apparent nor easily found; but this quest for spiritualism passed through three phases. There was the phase when Blake and Blavatsky led him towards mysticism, the phase when the Symbolist love of the supernatural as found in writers like Maeterlinck and Adam gave him a sense of depth and truth, and lastly there was the period when he came under the spell of Celtic legend and thought he had found the true spirit of Ireland. All these took him away from life either towards esoteric cults or towards dreams. Two forces, however, began to act as brakes upon his movement away from life: his love and his politics. Even these he tried to idealize. His politics, for instance, was more poetic and cultural than political. But soon failures and defeats in both these embittered him, and made him take a more realistic view of life.

The various early interests had, however, their own value for his poetry. They stimulated his romantic imagination, and he began to find symbols which could take the mind back to the mystery that lies deep behind the details of daily existence, something which the scientific thought of the nineteenth
century was bent upon explaining away. In doing so he began to think, as some of the French Symbolists had done before him, about the distinctive function and place of the artist in a society which seemed to be hostile to them. In one of his early poems, 'The Wanderings of Oisin', he finds symbols to reveal his position. In the poem, the conflict between the old Celtic bard Oisin and Saint Patrick represents the unresolved conflict which was found even in Yeats's own day between the ideal of art and the ideal of religion. The poem is a characteristic example of the dreamy, colourful style of his early years. In 'The Countess Cathleen', the countess is a highly idealized form of his beloved, Maud Gonne, while Aleel the poet is an equally idealized Yeats. The demon-merchants who buy the souls of the starving peasants symbolize the commercialism of Yeats's own day which was corrupting the minds of men all over Europe; and Shemus' mad song when he has sold his soul is the work of a poet who has already grasped the significance of the crisis of the modern world:

There's money for a soul, sweet yellow money,
There's money for men's souls, good money, money.

But it is in 'Adam's Curse' that Yeats writes his first really great poem about the artistic consciousness. The poem combines thoughts about love, about poetry, about physical beauty and about the labour of creating beauty since Adam's fall:

A line will take us hours may be;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been nought.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen-pavement, or break stones,
Like an old pauper in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.
The myths and characters of his early poems are symbols of the poet's emotions, and of his idealism. The legendary characters, the references to magic, occultism and fairies are all marks of his aspiration towards ideal states of being not available to him in his normal life. This desire to escape away from the real to the ideal is characteristic of his early poetry.

The Sidhe and the old heroes were calling to the wearied idealist, to come away "into the twilight" to "the townland that is the world's bane," adjuring him to "brood on hopes and fears no more." He would that he and his beloved were "white birds on the foam of the sea." With wandering Aengus he will follow the magic girl "through hollow lands and hilly lands," and through the looking glass of time, and pluck with her "the silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun." Or else it is the secret rose of the world, symbol of supernal beauty, which is one with truth, and the denial in the world of ideals of all that in reality is "uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old," and which reigns inviolate "beyond the stir and tumult of defeated dreams".

But by the time Yeats wrote the poems of 'Responsibilities' (1914), the dreamy, irresponsible land of faery is quite gone, and the opening poem is an apology for past futility:

Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain
Somewhere in ear-shot for the story's end,
Old Dublin merchant 'free of the ten and four',
Or trading out of Galway into Spain;
Old Country Scholar, Robert Emmet's friend
A hundred-year-old memory to the poor
Merchant and scholar who have left me blood
That has not passed through any huckster's loin.
Soldiers that gave, whatever die was cast;
A Butler or an Armstrong that withstood
Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne
James and his Irish when the Dutchman crossed;
Old merchant skipper that leaped overboard
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay;
You most of all, silent and fierce old man,
Because the daily spectacle that stirred
My fancy, and set my boyish lips to say, 'Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun',
Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

Here the poet poses the experiences of the present against the shadowy judges, the ghosts of his ancestors, and their high non-mortal standards. Here Yeats was trying to add a mythology of his own, a mythology figuring the ghosts of the dead. Ghosts were part of the historical past, but death and time had distanced and dignified them, by a process of sifting and patterning. Viewed in this way, the poet's dead friends and ancestors took on something of the quality of mythological heroes.

This sort of mythologizing too could not satisfy Yeats for long. The conflict between practical life and the romantic ideals he had set before him was becoming deeper and more serious. Disappointment in love and in politics, a certain disillusion caused by his experiments in the theatre — 'Theatre business, management of men' all made him more attentive to real life. There is impatience as well as a new hold on life. There is a certain daring attitude and indignation in a poem like 'September, 1913', where he cries out against his 'foal-driven land' that he is compelled to love:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died;
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Responding bitterly to circumstance and self, Yeats discovers a new power in conflict. The vague dreaming and abstraction of his earlier writings is gone, and we get surprisingly concrete lines. The change to a new complexity of allusion and 'hardness' is already to be seen in a poem like 'The Magi':

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.
The simple phrase 'now as at all times' gives an immediate and mysterious importance to the Magi, and the wise men are made infinitely inscrutable by the four vivid lines which follow. The magi are restless in their search for a second epiphany. The poem shows a certain seriousness and maturity not to be found in the earlier poems: experience had made Yeats, like the Magi, bitter and restless. The poet was fully aware of this change which had come over him:

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart.

He looked upon his own youthful past work, in the harsh light of intellect, as something wasted. This realization, coming when he was nearing fifty, makes him feel his poetic strength has been largely misdirected:

But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.

In the last poem of the 1914 volume, 'A Coat', he expresses his weariness and his resolution to give up his 'coat' embroidered 'out of old mythologies'; he feels there would be more enterprise in 'walking naked'. He does not, however, prove successful in keeping up that determination for long. We soon find him making a new garment of speculative thought to replace the old one of myths that he had given up. The philosophy he set down so elaborately and painstakingly in 'A Vision' satisfied an urgent intellectual need of his, though he claimed the Spirits dictated it to him. By satisfying that need, it left him free to undertake the great imaginative enterprizes which have made him one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. He has made a correct judgment of the value of 'A Vision', when he says that it enabled him to 'build a system of references which would give the authority of intellect to attitudes and the intensity of good emotion to judgement'.

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart.
'A Vision' is no mere exercise in fancy, nor a way of avoiding the real. Yvor Winters, in a recent book on Yeats, gives a dry summary of Yeats's cosmological and psychological system, and describes the whole thing as 'after all ridiculous'; a literal reading of 'A Vision' may make it appear so. The account of life given by Yeats here does not have, and cannot have, the simplicity, directness and clarity of a logical explanation. For one thing, the material he was dealing with—the supernatural, the destiny of man, the cataclysmic forces which lie behind the rise and fall of civilizations—was beyond the scope of a rational approach. He did not set out to rival science on its own grounds, nor did he try to pose as a mystic. On the contrary, Yeats has here 'created for himself a myth'.

The search for a tradition and a mythology in a world of broken images was something which made him a characteristically modern poet. He made a mythology of his own, taking all that was best in Celtic folklore, magic, alchemy, theosophy, Blake and the French Symbolists. This mythology, set down in all its details in 'A Vision' furnishes a rich and coherent context for his symbols, making them greatly suggestive and meaningful.

The basic symbol, with reference to which Yeats sets down his system, is the Wheel. All types of humanity are arranged and classified according to the twenty-eight phases of the Great Wheel, corresponding to the twenty-eight phases of a lunar cycle. Every soul has to pass through these phases, and history too is nothing but a cyclic repetition of the phases of the Great Wheel. The 'system' is however qualified by a number of subtle complications; for instance, the division of each soul into four faculties: will, mask, creative mind, and body of fate. Then there are the gyres in perpetual motion, symbolizing the world of appearance, a world in which 'consciousness is conflict'.

Much seems to be made, in recent times, of Yeats's system and its relation to his poetry. Apart from its usefulness as material for detailed explications of several poems of his, a reading of 'A Vision' is not absolutely necessary for understanding the poetry. The poetry is, as all great poetry ought to be, meaningful in itself. This is not to say, that 'A Vision' is irrelevant to a full understanding of Yeats's poetic method. It would perhaps be nearer the truth to say that the attitudes developed by Yeats with the help of his 'system' are more important to the poetry than the details of the system.

The 'system' was particularly helpful to Yeats in two important ways. First, it provided a sort of justification for his poetic protest against the 'universal levelling' that modern democracy encourages. Yeats praised aristocracy and an ordered hierarchical society, even if this meant going against the popular tide. He was in favour of the exceptional individual, one who through personal endeavour could attain to 'Unity of Being'. Yeats also glorified certain values of a passing order with great zest in the belief that 'mankind is older than all remembered civilizations and will outlast' the present popular tendencies, and 'at some time or other move again towards creative joy'. And in doing all this he felt the support of the 'system': he could say with confidence, like his own Michael Robartes, 'I have principles to prove me right'. The other great benefit he received from the 'system' was that it provided him all the tensions or 'conflicts' that he needed for his poetry and that he could handle. The perpetual merging of opposites symbolized by the Gyre was the basis of the system itself. From the beginning, Yeats's poems were dominated by the clash of opposites. We have, in his early poems such conflicts as between the human world and the

4 A.G.Stock: 'Art, Aristocracy and the Poetry of Yeats' ('The Literary Criterion', Vol.3, p.139.)
5 'Collected Poems', p.198.
world of faery, between the familiar and the heroic, between the Christian and the pagan. These conflicts were not only simple but remote from actual life. They did not provide him with the intensity of vision that great poetry requires; something which he himself realized later, when he decided to overcome his fondness for 'Players and painted stage', that is, for the dream, the work of imagination which relegates real life to a position of minor importance. But in his later poetry we find the conflict taking on a tragic intensity, while at the same time remaining deeply true to life. It is in such poems that we find Yeats's true power:

A significant experience is a revelation, but it grows from life as well as transcending life's limits. The circumstantial world may be of subsidiary importance, but its existence is necessary in art as in life; the crisis joins the temporal and eternal, so we may assume that to present a significant experience, a work of art must in all honesty and fullness admit the claims of time.

One of the first poems in which Yeats succeeded in symbolizing a conflict from real life and its resolution was 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'. Yeats was a great friend of Lady Gregory and her son, Robert. Lady Gregory was the typical, haughty aristocrat, a type Yeats greatly admired; and he often had good company at 'Coole Park', the Gregory estate. When in 1916 Yeats bought the near-by Tower, an old Norman edifice, Robert, who was a good soldier, scholar and artist painted it. Two years later, Gregory was killed in action, on the Italian front. In the elegy that Yeats wrote, he regards Gregory primarily as an artist; his situation thus becomes one of particular relevance to the poet. Gregory was not only a born aristocrat, but one who had the courage to keep to the aristocratic ideal of perfection. Gregory was able to achieve that 'Unity of Being' which is the ideal of the personal life, and which the present age denies. Rising above all imperfect, divided men, he was able to attain perfection in the life of action, and this

6 Thomas Parkinson: 'W.B. Yeats: Self-Critic', p.84.
meant death. Thus he becomes himself a radiant symbol, setting up, by his achievement, 'a standard, an ideal, before the shifting world and its struggling artists'. Realizing the symbolic value of Gregory's sacrifice and victory over a world which was hostile to art, was Yeats's great achievement. In this poem, the values are those he formulated later on in 'A Vision', but they are poetically realized within the symbolic character of Gregory.

The way that Gregory took to perfection was not possible for Yeats himself. Yeats had been disqualified for active service, and this exclusion from the life of action had made him unhappy. It was in this mood that he was reminded by his father (in a letter) that 'Art is solitary man'. The poet's life was that of contemplation, but contemplation took him to solitude. The solitary, silent suffering of the poet had a symbolic meaning. 'Poets and artists must go from desire to weariness, and so to desire again, and live for the moment when vision comes like terrible lightening'. The vision exacts much, but it also gives joy; the poet's sensibility makes both the suffering and the joy intense and exceptional. The joy and the sorrow are fused in the symbol, by creating which the artist obtains release. That is why Yeats said, 'We begin to live when we have conceived life as a tragedy'.

The suffering of the poet may be, as Eliot has said, his own private affair, and by itself may not concern the reader; but it can achieve a symbolic quality and then be admitted into the poetry. The symbolic value of suffering is life conceived as tragedy, which, according to Yeats, is ultimately a matter of joy; even 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'. The poet, forced into solitude by suffering, cannot cut himself off from the world. The symbol is what he gives the world, and since he pays for it in terms of human suffering, it belongs to life.

7 Frank Kermode: 'The Romantic Image'.
8 W.B. Yeats: 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae'.
The element of conflict was used with increasing success by Yeats in his later poems. Though conflict is of central importance in his poem on Gregory, it did not have all the intensity and urgency of a deep, personal struggle. In his later poems, the conflict of his 'self' and its ironic counterpart, the 'anti-self', is often developed to form a firm basis for all the contradictions in the poem. In doing so his poetry became more real. In these poems the poet was not only able to get closer to life, but could also render poetically some of the great thoughts that came to him. Though 'A Vision' provided a basis for this thought, it would be a mistake to say that it encouraged a movement away from life towards an esoteric cult.

'A Vision' actually gave him a sense of release from certain pressures and he was free to write the great poems which were published under the title, 'The Tower' (1928). The Tower itself, rising from amid the storm-beaten cottages, is the symbol of a bloody and arrogant power, which rose out of the race, mastering it. The blood-stained power of the tower is contrasted with the unstained wisdom symbolized by the moon.

The full quality of Yeats's symbolism, however, comes out in a poem like 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Byzantium and Byzantine art had a natural fascination for Yeats: in 'A Vision' he had shown how Byzantine art was one aspect of the Renaissance, a period of great achievement. He believed that in Byzantium, 'a little before' Justinian's time, civilization had reached a stage of achievement in which 'religious, aesthetic and practical life were one', and men attained 'Unity of Being' in great numbers. That perfection is one of the ideals before Yeats.

In 'Sailing to Byzantium' the poet speaks about the ideal region of art symbolized by Byzantium, and his attempt to reach it. He feels the need for such an ideal, particularly because of old age and the diminishing power that follows as a consequence. He has described his condition in another
poem as: 'this caricature, / Decripit age that has been tied to me / As to a
dog's tail! By creating a symbol like Byzantium, he feels that sense of
escape and joy that a poet gets in a world of his own making.

A beautiful analysis of the 'argument' of the poem has been given by
Elder Olson: he writes,

In 'Sailing to Byzantium' an old man faces the problem of old age, of death
and of regeneration, and gives us his decision. Old age, he tells us, exkl
excludes a man from the sensual joys of youth; the world appears to belong
completely to them: it is no place for the old, indeed, an old man is scarcely
a man at all — he is an empty artifice, an effigy merely, of a man; he is a
tattered coat upon a stick. This would be very bad except that the young
also are excluded from something; rapt in their sensuality, they are ignorant
utterly of the world of the spirit. Hence if old age frees a man from
sensual passion, he may rejoice in the liberation of the soul: he is
admitted into the realm of the spirit; and his rejoicing will increase according
with the magnificence of the soul. But the soul can best learn its own greatness from the great works of art; hence he turns to those
great works, but in turning to them, he finds that these are by no means mere
effigies, or monuments, but things which have souls also; these live in the
noblest element of God's fire; free from all corruption; hence he prays for
death, for release from his mortal body, and since the insouled monuments
exhibit the possibility of the soul's existence in some other matter than
flesh, he wishes re-incarnation; not now in a mortal body, but in the immortal
and changeless embodiment of art.

Yeats wishing to become the golden bird is in fact saying that he wishes to
be the singing voice of eternity, fashioned by the eternal artificers, as he
thought Blake was. Byzantium represents that heaven of the singing voice
where being is perfect. The bird combines in itself all that is best in
animate nature and in inanimate art. The bird has a soul which is not
'passive as it would be in a young and sensual mortal body, nor
is it lodged in a dying animal, as it would be in the body of an aged man'.

The soul has found its ideal embodiment, incorruptible and secure from all
the ills of flesh. The journey to Byzantium enables the poet to transcend
Time and Nature. Freed from his mortal frame, and assuming the unaging form

9 Elder Olson, in 'The Permanence of Yeats'; p.290.
10 Ibid., p.291.
of the golden bird, he is able to speak, as common divided men cannot, with the voice of prophecy 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come'. The dynamic pattern of experience presented in the poem, the pattern of living, dying and creating, serves a vision of art. Byzantium becomes a rich symbol 'concentrating the feeling and idea of art's nature'. It symbolizes a vital process of conflict and reconciliation, and creates in us a state of being that is altogether harmonious; by gathering in a gleam the essence of art and eternity, the symbol makes us forget, even if only for a moment, the tormented seas around us.

'Sailing to Byzantium' is a great poem by any standards. It marks the great triumph of Symbolism in modern English poetry. Here he gets away from the romantic subjectivity of the previous century and of his own early years, and succeeds in objectifying an intense personal experience, making of it something universal and timeless. In his earlier poems Yeats had attempted this objectivity by using some traditional symbol like the Rose, or the Swan or the Tree in such a manner that it expressed some intuition of his own while at the same time setting it in a wider context of human experience. The tradition offered the poet a scale of values with which he could measure and test his own intuitions; but in Yeats's case the tradition seems to have a constraining effect. If 'what a writer finds in real life is to a large extent what his literary tradition enables him to see and to handle', then the traditions which Yeats found and adopted in his early years seemed to have given him a very limited vision. But when he substituted for accepted traditions his own 'system', when he set up his own standards of value, he gained a wider and a closer grasp of life. This grasp brought him

nearer the natural and centrally 'human' values of life, values which society has accepted, by and large, for the past so many centuries. This is mainly responsible for making the poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium' really 'language charged with meaning to the utmost degree'.13

We feel this difference when we compare 'Sailing to Byzantium' with a Romantic poem like Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. In Shelley's poem there is an attempt at objectifying a particular experience, and giving it a universality; and thus we have present here a mythic quality not to be found in poems like 'The Sensitive Plant' or 'The Skylark'. But the subjective and the objective elements are not brought into conflict and fused into a unity. On the other hand, the poet finds a similarity, and he is 'One too like thee: timeless, and swift, and proud', and then the poem becomes an outpouring of personal emotion. The images too are 'end-stopped', there is no sense of growth and organic relationship in them. Once we come to know the wind as 'destroyer and preserver', the myth gets equated with a meaning: the sense of mystery is lost. It is not so with 'Sailing': the images seem to be continually moving and creating a feeling of 'action' or 'movement'. The symbol of Byzantium has a dynamic force which Shelley's West Wind is unable to attain, and it does not get pinned down to a meaning that would tell us all that it is.

How great a power the Symbol had given to Yeats's poetry can be seen more clearly by comparing it with a characteristic poem of his early days, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. Both poems give central importance to the idea of a journey from one place to another, or from actuality to the ideal. In the earlier poem, we have a young man's ideal, something sensuous: he enjoys all

13 Ezra Pound's conception of great literature in 'How To Read', 'Polite Essays', p.167.
the thrill he gets in the sensuous music of the 'lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'. The attraction of the honey and hum of the 'bee-loud glade' and the 'purple glow' of the noon is strong, and it shows all the young man's eagerness to enjoy life. The images have a cloying beauty: they are vague, dreamy, romantic. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' the imagery has a packed beauty, a firmness and concreteness; music is still an important thing, sensuous beauty is still valued, but it is harmonized with its opposite (the 'tattered coat upon a stick') in a larger scheme of things. In the earlier poem there is more emotion than thought, the thought-content is almost negligible; in the later poem, emotional richness and complexity is not wanting in spite of the harshness of the realistic touches, and there is more thought than all the philosophies can give. The earlier poem operates on a purely personal level, it is the poet and his joy that are central to the poem; the Byzantium poem is more universal, it dramatizes an experience. The early poem is characteristically romantic in its nostalgia, in its desire to escape, to get away from life with its fever and fret into the peace of the ideal home which he knows is 'in the deep heart's core'. In "Sailing" too there is the desire to get away to an ideal place, but it is not because of boredom that he wants to make the journey, but because of a deep, compulsive force; and he reaches, after the journey, a state of being, which has eternal validity. For the poet now, life is no longer a dream but a dynamic flux, caught motion frozen, formed and arranged, into the artifice of a poem.

It was this very quality of life in the poem that came to be considered a flaw by Yeats's friend Sturge Moore. It seemed to contradict Yeats's main argument, that it was the lifelessness or artificiality of the golden bird that made the attainment of Byzantium possible. Yeats, keeping this in mind, tried to put the entire emphasis on 'artifice' in the next poem that he wrote, with Byzantium as the central symbol. 'Byzantium' is more specifically and directly supported by the 'system' he had worked out in 'A Vision'. There is
a certain clarity and directness in the structure such as is not to be found 
in 'Sailing to Byzantium': as T.R. Henn has observed,

The poem itself falls into five divisions: the city which is the background, 
with its violent contrasts; the exploration of death and the wisdom of the past; 
the goldsmith's art which can give that permanence and significance in life 
unattainable by flesh; and the mosaics which depict the spiritual experience 
stabilized by the knowledge and the technique of the artists. At the last 
the spirits unified and made triumphant by the art of goldsmith or worker in 
mosaic, triumph over the limitations of the body, the dolphin's mire and blood.

The dolphins, the smithies, the marble and the gomog, opposed to the mire and 
the blood, the flood, the dancing floor, the furies of complexity and the sea 
allude to the gradual liberation of the soul in its flight from circle to 
circle. The perfect image of beauty is found when the soul has freed itself 
from impurities. The escatology in the poem and the deliberateness with 
which the distinction between the living and the dead is made by the poet, 
remind us strongly of the 'machinery' of the 'system'. There is also a sense 
of unresolved conflict, which makes it inferior in appeal and power as compared 
with 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

The death-like, cold, other-worldly quality of 'Byzantium' does not come ever 
into a symbol like the Dancer. The Dancer is Yeats's symbol for the living 
beauty that attains artistic perfection. This symbol has been used by Yeats 
in many of his poems. In 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes', the dancer is represented as having brought her 
body to perfection by dancing. She appears between two heraldic supporters: 
a Sphinx, representing impassive intellect, and a Buddha in the attitude of 
benediction representing Universal Love. The girl, following the rhythm of 
the cosmic dance has perfected her body so that it is only the expression of 
soul. She has reached, in the terms of Yeats's 'system', the phase of full 
moon, of perfect beauty; that is, she has danced herself into the perfection 
of death; for this state of being is not a human state. The poet admires,

but is tormented by this image of the ideal,

this image of perfection, but is tormented by

Being caught between the pull
Of the dark moon and the full.

The symbol of the Dancer appears in a more human guise in the next poem, 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer'. On the surface the poem appears as a dialogue between a man and a woman in which he tells her that the only work of a beautiful woman is to be beautiful, and that she must despise opinion and bookish knowledge. This reflects a favourite idea of Yeats, that a woman must not be rationalistic or argumentative. But the poem has a deeper layer of meaning: it gives us Yeats's philosophy of life and death. Far from being a piece of advice to young ladies, it is symbolic of a human situation. The Dancer is the symbol of the human endeavour to attain perfection.

Perfect beauty is a state of being, wherein 'the blessed soul' becomes a composite unity, body and soul becoming one.

The Dancer attains greatest symbolic value in Yeats's masterpiece, 'Among Schoolchildren'. The poem 'combines a love poem for Maud Gonne as she was and as she is now, the poet's feelings about old age, the immediate scene of the convent school, with subtle utilizing of myth and philosophy, Christianity and painting, to make out of simple words a rich tapestry of images'. It touches upon the problem of the unbridgeable gap between appearance and reality, body and spirit. In the last stanza, he asks why this should be so, since in all great and beautiful things spirit and matter seem to be indivisible:

Labour is blossoming where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
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?

The dancer is the symbol of the living beauty, not a static image: it is a beauty different from that of the most perfect object of art. It is the dancer's movement, contrasted with the immobility of sculpture, and the fact that this movement is passionate, controlled not by intellect but by rhythm and the demands of plastic form, that make her a symbol of joy and give her a reality above life.

The poet's vision of the contradictions of life and the integration of these conflicting elements into symbols continues in the poetry of his last years. In 'The Gyres' he symbolizes the conflict between appearance and reality. The Gyre represents the reconciliation of opposing elements, as well as the cyclic movement of history. In the introduction to 'A Vision', Yeats had written: 'Life is ... an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall, but a whirlpool, a gyre'.

The poem opens with an injunction to 'old Rocky Face' to look at the Gyres as a cosmic phenomena. 'Old Rocky Face' has been interpreted in various ways, but he seems to be the poet's 'opposite' or antithetical self. The conflict between 'self' and 'antiself' is universalized into a dynamic principle which accounts for development, both individual and social. 'The great cyclic energy of the Gyres, which as they whirl away the memory of the ancient lineaments, and refine away the vitality of an unrepplenished art and morality, foreshadow some kind of positive deliverance'. The noble, 'lover of horses and of women' is now seen by Yeats in the service of the gyres of history. The noble, together with the cyclic processes which are endlessly in action, will contrive to bring about a return to the conditions that Yeats thinks are necessary for 'Unity of Being'.

16 Vivienne Koch: 'W.B.Yeats, the Tragic Phase'.
The reality of the last poems of Yeats is of a terrible kind; there is a blunt intolerance of any glossing over of the evils of the human condition. He ironically pictured himself as a 'wild, old, wicked man'. This old man shouts and raves, prophesies, asserts and mocks. In a poem written when he was sixty-nine years old, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', he gives a symbolic summing-up of his past career. Yeats calls up some of his early characters to show the imaginative power he had then, which he now feels is lost. The poem also brings out the relation of the images of poetry to experience, and a confession of his deep realization that the poet cannot reach the absolute and create images which grow only in 'pure mind'. For, the ladders of analogy and symbol which lead up towards the ideal all start from 'a mound of refuse': all the images are born in the 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'.

Yeats tried to key up his courage and assert the appearance of poetic vitality mainly through haunting refrains: 'What matter if the ditches are impure?' 'What matter if numb nightmare ride on top/ And blood and mire the sensitive body stain?'; 'What matter' seems to be a charm which can resolve every situation, and liberate him from every dilemma.

In the harsh realism of his last poems we have almost the strident notes of Lear's ranting. In the name of the past, he berates the present. Nor does he spare himself: in poems like 'The Man and The Echo', 'An Acre of Grass', 'What Then?', 'Are You Content?' he asks himself remorseless questions. Going over the past is also re-interpreting it: he feels impatient with the 'beggars on horse-back', and hopes for a revolution. But not only does he think of the past and the possibilities of the present, but of his own future. The subject of death pre-occupies him in his last years. The process of life and death is like the process of making a poem; that too must begin with
sensuous images, which are dissolved at the critical moment by analysis, and the whole of image and idea formed as pure unified experience. All images can be dissolved only after the most painful and rigorous self-examination this moment of completeness, of perfection, of unity of being, is also the moment of death. It is about this moment that he speaks in 'The Man and the Echo':

There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,
Nor can there be work so great
As that which cleans man's dirty slate,
While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Waking he thanks the Lord that he
Has body and its stupidity,
But body gone he sleeps no more,
And still his intellect grows sure
That all's arranged in one clear view,
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
Then stands in judgment on his soul,
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

Death is the final stage of the process of purification for the man who has dared to face himself. With this clear and intense view of experience, this readiness to meet life (and death) on its own terms, Yeats is able to complete his quest for meaning. He is now able to get at the heart of realities with glowing intuitive power, and is able to pluck words out of his depths. It is thus that he is able to take his place as the greatest among modern English poets.