Chapter 14: The Artifice of Eternity

O sages standing in God's holy fire 
As in the gold mosaic of a wall.
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
— Sailing to Byzantium.

For painted forms or boxes of make-up 
In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again ...
— The Gyres.

The conventional, romantic facade of much of Yeats's poetry and his cosmology made it difficult for many readers to appreciate him fully. These were not the things they expected in the writings of a modern poet. The smoothness of his verse and the traditional step-by-step structure of stanzaic verse has often given the impression that he is a romantic poet who would not write in the modern idiom; though this very quality is what pleases Professor Graham Hough, who found in Yeats a great poet who does not descend to modern cacophony or modern chaotic structure in his poems. The cosmology, on the other hand, has been a more formidable barrier. It has been so even to two of his great admires: Blackmur and Eliot. The former feels that Yeats's use of magic has caused many of his poems to be misunderstood, ignored, and the actual emotion in them which is relevant to us all decried and underestimated, merely because the magical mode of thinking is foreign to our own.

The absence of a rational superstructure adds to the difficulty, and 'this lack prevents the poetry from reaching the first magnitude'. Eliot finds Yeats getting off from a central tradition into a 'minor mythology'. But

these difficulties are only superficial deterrents. The smooth syntax and rhythms of his poems conceal the fiery conflicts of a poet who is essentially modern in his outlook and methods.

Yeats's poetry, taken as a whole, has bulk and variety, and there is a certain sense of growth and development in it such as we find, for example, in Shakespeare's works. In this respect he is a contrast to Eliot, who Minerva-like is fully developed and fully armed from the time his poetic career began. There is development in Eliot's poetry, no doubt, and the 'Four Quartets' are mature in a way that, say, 'Gerontion' is not; but each of his poems seems to be a separate achievement, each distinct in its formal perfection. Even the early Prufrock poem is perfect in its kind; there are no youthful follies or amateur fumblings. In Yeats, on the other hand, the mistakes and the moulding of the poet are both to be seen, and the later poems have not entirely lost their sense of relation with the early poems. The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, and the 'birds in the trees ... at their song' of 'Sailing to Byzantium', a product of his late years, have some element not wholly unrelated to the atmosphere of his early Innisfree poem, with its 'evening full of the linnet's wings'. We find here a poet sensitive in nature, and deeply responsive to changing conditions and moods, accepting them and allowing them to influence and shape his poetry. It is this quality which makes us feel that he is 'one of those few whose history is the history of their own time'.

This shows that Yeats, far from becoming stylized (like Hopkins for example), kept changing with the times, ever remaining a contemporary (in

the best sense of the word), this being perhaps one of the things which makes him a major poet. His development, his range and flexibility are reflected in his symbols. Even in the earliest years of his career he had interest in symbols; at that time the French Symbolists were yet unknown to him. As a young man he had some acquaintance with Victorian science, which he felt concerned itself only with abstractions and generalities, and was thus opposed to the imaginative life of the artist. He began to hate science with what he describes as 'a monkish hate'. He desired a poetry that was musical and full of colour, and this drew him towards the poetry of Spenser, Shelley and the Pre-Raphaelites. In Shelley's Platonism there was a certain imaginative depth which appealed to Yeats; and Shelley's avoidance of statements together with a vague suggestiveness seemed to be symbolist. An increasing use of symbols in his poetry was observed by Yeats, who wrote:

One finds in his (Shelley's) poetry, besides innumerable images that have not the definiteness (fixity?) of symbols, many images that are certainly symbols, and as the years went by, he began to use these with more and more deliberately symbolic purpose.

Yeats here mistook for symbols Shelley's recurrent, allegorical images, like caves and towers; their faint archetypal echoes seemed to sound the depths of what he later called the Great Memory. Yeats's early environment and romantic inclinations were mainly responsible for his fascination with the colourful imagery of Spenser and the Pre-Raphaelites. The vague 'mysticism' and dreaminess of the latter was, Yeats felt, an essential element of the truly poetic. Meantime his patriotic fervour had reached a new intensity on the return to Ireland of the Fenian hero, John O'Leary in 1885. Yeats wanted to justify his nationalism poetically, and this took him to Celtic...
folklore which seemed to enshrine the deepest aspirations of the Irish people. Here, then, were the ingredients of Yeats's first experiments in Symbolism: a belief in racial wisdom inspired by Shelley, an intense nationalism with its roots in an ancient folklore, and the rich imagery of the Pre-Raphaelite variety. With these he wrote long narrative poems which have an enchanted fairy-land atmosphere, and with an arrangement of images and characters that reminds us of a Morris poem. There is a deliberateness and dignity, a tapestry-like, static quality in these early poems which makes them like

... love-tales wrought with silken thread
By dreaming ladies upon cloth.  

These poems — poems like 'Ephemera', 'The Stolen Child' and 'The Man who dreamed of Florida' — are at best mere craftsman's work: one does not get in them 'the particularity which must provide the material for the general truth'. Yeats is not able to make these sufficiently convincing and we miss in them the immediacy and power of great poetry: the images merely glow with the tints of a Pre-Raphaelite sunset.

Yet, through all this can be seen an effort to say something significant, to discover and reveal reality, which is so unlike anything the Pre-Raphaelites did. The starting-point of Yeats's search for reality was exactly the opposite of Eliot's: while Eliot, in his early poems, began with a careful consideration of the physical and the particular, Yeats avoided these in the firm conviction that reality was to be found in the spiritual and the universal. His studies in Blake and his early interest in the occult and the supernatural made him, like Baudelaire, disdain appearances, the deceptive

5 W.B.Yeats: 'He Remembers Forgotten Beauty', ('Collected Poems', p.70.)
physical realities of the world, and seek for something deep, invisible, spiritual. This attitude made him sympathize readily with French Symbolism which was, in his view, as in Symons's, a revolution in its attempt to bring the 'spiritual' element into poetry. Yeats and his friend hailed the movement as something new, which held a message of hope for the world:

... after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and rearrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes the literature (= the writings of the French Symbolists) of which I write.

Yeats's ready acceptance of this literature was partly due to his feeling that the French poets reflected the change in himself referred to in his essay, 'The Autumn of the Body' (1885): quite suddenly he had lost all desire to describe outward things or to read any book that was not spiritual. It was in this mood that a particular aspect of the Symbolism appealed to Yeats, it was the 'spiritualism' represented by Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Maurice Maeterlinck, and that aspect he identified with the whole of Symbolism. Villiers de l'Isle Adam was a dilettante in occultism. In his writings Yeats found 'words behind which glimmered a spiritual and passionate mood, as the flame glimmers behind the dusky blue and red glass of an Eastern lamp'. Yeats was also greatly impressed by Adam's play 'Axel', from which he drew the moral that 'the infinite alone is worth attaining, and the infinite is in the possession of the dead'. In the plays of Maeterlinck, a believer in the 'cosmic subconscious', Yeats admired the way he suggested 'faint souls, naked and pathetic shadows already half vapour and sighing to one another upon the border of the last abyss'.

This type of 'spiritualism' had a ready appeal to the European mind of the

8 W.B. Yeats: 'The Autumn of the Body'.

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time. It gave writers a sense of something deep and mysterious, something quite different from the mundane commonplaces around them. But in seeking to escape from the mundane and the material, Maeterlinck, Adam and others were also escaping from life. There is something decadent in this fascination for the 'mysterious', and this spiritualism is quite different from the search, deep-reaching and intense, which inspired poets like Baudelaire and Mallarmé in their quest for the nature of reality. Their symbolism has its roots in life; it has a richness of experience behind it which gives it a peculiar power and validity. Yeats's early symbolism has little of these qualities; it has something of the vagueness and the indifference to life that characterizes Adam and Maeterlinck. It seems at this time Yeats was 'too easily impressed by work which showed a superficial appearance of romance or mysticism'. The poems of the volume entitled 'The Wind among the Reeds' have this type of symbolism, and in them we find 'dream-heavy' lines such as the following:

And when you sigh from kiss to kiss
I hear white Beauty sighing, too,
For hours when all must fade like dew,
But flame on flame, and deep on deep,
Throne over throne where in half sleep,
Their swords upon their iron knees,
Brood her high lonely mysteries.

Here is a poetry of withdrawal like that of Huysmans or Adam; common life is kept away, and we are reminded of the line in 'Axel': 'As for living, our servants will do that for us'. This poetry did not concern itself either with actual living conditions or with thoughts. The wavering and occult symbols had also given the poet a way of evading the interference of the intellect. Occultism became for Yeats what drugs had been for Rimbaud: it gave free play to the images of the unconscious. But whereas Rimbaud

9 Rothenstein: 'Scattering Branches', p.38.
insisted on the direct expression of these images in his poetry, Yeats tried to arrange them in formal, conscious patterns. For instance, the Rose, an occult symbol, appears frequently in Yeats's early poetry. The Rose had an important place in the rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn which Yeats had joined; but its immediate literary antecedents are to be found in Adam's play, where Sara shows the faded rose, the symbol or 'correspondence' of her soul and of her faith in Rosicrucianism, to Count Axel at the end of the play. Yeats used the symbol of the Rose to symbolize his ideal in Love, Politics and Occultism. Yeats tries to give it several meanings, all of which point to one reality, which he felt was spiritual in nature, but which seems to be Platonic: it brings to our mind Mallarmé's flower 'which was absent from all bouquets'. The symbol however is not completely Platonic: Yeats's instinctive attraction towards life makes itself evident in his effort to personalize the Rose (something which Mallarmé could not do). In a note, Yeats writes: 'The quality symbolised as the Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with men, and not as something pursued and seen from afar'. Yeats has tried to personalize the Rose by associating it with his sympathetic beloved, but it has a tendency to become more generalized and get identified with the ideal woman. The woman has something of the indefinite beauty of Rossetti's Blessed Damozel, and she seems to have nothing to do with the business of living:

You need but lift your pearl-pale hand,
And bind up your long hair and sigh;
And all men's hearts must burn and beat.

Her physicality is a matter of doubt; yet Yeats pins down the rose to this

10 Mallarmé: 'Avant Dire à "Traité du Verbe" par René Ghil'.
12 'Collected Poems', p. 72.
13 Cf. 'I was a romantic, my head full of the mystical women of Rossetti' (— Yeats: 'Autobiographies').
evanescent dream, and tries to make it glow with many lights, like the symbolic Japanese sword which he preserved with reverent care in his Tower.

A good example of the vagueness and lack of 'concreteness' or particularity in this symbol, is to be seen in the manner it is used in the following poem:

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
Mournful that no new wonder may betide;
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
And Usna's children died.

We and the labouring world are passing by:
Amid men's souls, that waver and give place
Like the pale waters in their wintry race,
Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,
Lives on this lonely face.

Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
He made the world to be a grassy road
Before her wandering feet.

The present woman quickly becomes Helen of Troy, then Deirdre for whom the sons of Usna died, and then Beauty herself before God's throne. If Yeats had continued in this vague, romantic strain, he would have been no more than a good allegorist and decadent.

It is true that practical life made its demands upon him in the form of love and politics, and that this prevented a complete retreat into the Ivory Tower: but he could not avoid idealizing even his practical problems. He wrote about an ideal Ireland of the past than about the real Ireland around him: to represent this Ireland of dreams he finds or invents legendary characters. Figures like Aedh, Countess Cathleen and Red Hanrahan flit across the volume of poems entitled 'In the Seven Woods'. Because of the parallels Yeats had found in the legends and folklore of many countries, he had come to regard them as expressions of a God-given

body of knowledge. It may be noted here that some of the French Symbolists too had regarded folklore as a store-house of racial wisdom which could sometimes reveal great truths symbolically. Laforgue, for example, had made considerable use of a figure from folklore like Pierrot; but he had accepted the character with irony and reservations. Yeats had too much of romantic reverence for his material to make use of their archetypal significance. He uses his material in a self-conscious manner, never getting away from the glamour of the past. He is so absorbed by their sheer beauty that he often falls into moods of contemplation, and thus imparts a static quality to his symbols which they did not originally possess. For example, the host rushing across from Knocknarea, in 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', is slow enough for our minds to dwell upon individual figures like Caoilte and Niamh. There is a lack of dramatic force or conflict, even in characters like Aengus and Kathleen, which prevents Yeats's characters and situations from becoming truly symbolic. They are unreal in that they do not apply to the situations of life. They are neither valid for the present nor are they timeless: they remain embedded in the past tense. Perhaps, it was the defect of Celtic mythology that it did not give the poet a great enough number of intuitions, nor did it give him these connectedly. Celtic mythology could not serve Yeats as a valid tradition with reference to which he could make his symbols enduring and meaningful.

These attempts to derive symbols from literary sources and use them in his own poetry was Yeats's form of revolt against the tyranny of science. The aim was clearly to produce a form of poetry which would combine all that was truly poetic with a search for the highest truth. In this we see Yeats's intense and passionate desire for a deep-rooted religion; but the artist's religion which he tried to make up for himself did not help him in the absence of real conviction. His position has been very well stated in one of his

autobiographical pieces:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians.

He looked with wistful longing to India, where a poet like Tagore, he felt, had been able to achieve the truly poetic by drawing upon the inherited traditions of his country. He was delighted with Tagore's 'Gitanjali' and wrote enthusiastically:

A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned alike metaphor and emotion. ... A whole people, a whole civilization, seems to have been taken up into (Tagore's) imagination.

In contrast he found the contemporary West had an essentially dispossessed poetry which sent down no roots in imagery, in 'inherited subject-matter', or in belief; and,'Literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times'.

But Yeats's attempt at giving imaginative strength to his poetry by denying the religious tradition available to him, and putting in its place reflections of that system, did not work; the mysticism or occultism he found in the French poets was really a reflection of the religion he had repudiated.

From this dilemma Yeats was awakened by a sudden and deep awareness of the conflict between the ideal and the practical. This awareness shows itself sometimes even in his early poems; for instance, we have an early poem like 'The Song of the Old Mother' which tells us about the hard domestic life of an Irish peasant woman. The development of a

16 W.B. Yeats: 'The Trembling of the Veil'.
17 Yeats's preface to Tagore's 'Gitanjali', pp.xiv,xvi.
18 'Ideas of Good and Evil', p.201.
deepening seriousness can be seen in certain poems of the 1908 volume, in poems like 'The Folly of Being Comforted' and 'Adam's Curse', where 'something is coming through, and in beginning to speak as a particular man he is beginning to speak for man'. There is a tendency to come to grips with the actualities of daily life, a determination to be clear-sighted and realistic, and to express himself in the idiom and movement of modern speech: the ornate language and decorative images of his early poetry are gone. We feel, 'Yeats's dissatisfaction with a poetry of dreams reflected his dissatisfaction with dreams themselves'. We get now the irony, the bitterness and the disillusion of a man who has struggled: it is like 'an awakening out of drugs', a disintoxication:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;  
Now I may wither into the truth.

Yeats had learned the hard way the lesson that reality was to be found in life, and not away from it: and he could exult in his new-found freedom:

I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
From heel to throat;  
But the fools caught it,  
Wore it in the world's eyes  
As though they had wrought it.  
Song, let them take it,  
For there's more enterprise  
In walking naked.

The poem came at the end of the 1914 volume, 'Responsibilities': in the volume which followed we find Yeats making symbols, which did not derive from any received tradition, but came directly from the poet's lived experience, symbols like Gregory, Michael Robartes and the Dancer. These symbols are

not allegorical or decorative or directly archetypal. There is a freshness of approach and a convincing quality in them which we do not find for example in an early symbol like the Tree. In 'The Two Trees' ('Collected Poems', p. 54), Yeats uses a familiar and traditional image of growth and prosperity. The distinction between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge is also simple: it is allegoric of the distinction between Imagination and Abstraction. The former is represented as a 'holy tree', whose branches start from the joy in the heart of a beautiful woman who does not think: it is inhabited by Love, and is responsible for a universal harmony. It has, the poet says, inspired him to song, and,

... made my lips and music wed,
Murmuring a wizard song for thee.

The other tree, which Eve was persuaded to rob, 'The demons with their subtle guile, Lift up before us'. This tree with its broken branches and blackened leaves, has its roots half-hidden under snows, and is inhabited by

The ravens of unresting thought;
Flying, crying, to and fro,
Cruel claw and hungry throat ...

The tree calls up many associations of a general nature, but it fails to become a personal, intimate symbol: the poet seems to be looking at it from outside. Yeats does not, like the French Symbolists did, identify himself with the reality he is presenting. Because of the absence of this identification, Yeats's early symbols often stop on the verge of the 'literary pose' or 'stock response'. They have neither a sense of struggle or of the achievement of something new. The later symbols, on the other hand, have nothing conventional about them, but are deeply exploratory. They boldly bring in contradictory or conflicting elements, and transcend them in what Kermode calls 'momentary victories'. This tension brings a dramatic and imaginative quality into his poetry, which makes it so different from his early poetry as well as from most
Victorian poetry. 'The prime defect in Victorian poetry was', as Prof. Cleanth Brooks has observed, 'that it subordinated the imaginative act of assimilating the incongruous to the logical act of matching the congruent'. The poet's way of knowledge is through imagination and intuition; and imagination can come at reality only by resolving conflicts. The realization that conflict is essential for the imaginative life was a great discovery that Yeats made for himself. Creating symbols is the poet's way of meeting and resolving conflicts; it is for him 'an intellectual daily recreation of all that exterior fate snatches away, and so that fate's antithesis'.

The alternative to symbol-making (= the imaginative way, the life of contemplation) is the life of action. The choice he has spoken about in a late poem:

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

A symbol of that conflict was Yeats's friend and countryman, Gregory. In the elegiac poem Yeats wrote on his death in action during the first world war, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', we have Yeats's first successful symbol. The poem gives us Yeats's understanding of the meaning of Gregory's life, which became clear only after he was killed. Yeats sees him as an artist who had made the choice, and escaped into action; it was a joyful release from the cruel dilemma imposed by the nature of the artist. The escape was made by a way which other divided men had not found, or dared to follow. These other men were all known to Yeats, as Gregory was known: they were Pollexfen, once active, who 'had no enterprise but in contemplation', when age defeated his physical force; Johnson and Synge, who were always at his side. Of these, Synge, obsessed like Gregory with the inward growing of dream and symbol, was persuaded by Yeats to make his escape. Johnson was

23 W.B. Yeats: 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae'. 
the 'formal antithesis' of Gregory in his solution. All the friends, Yeats says:

.. were my close companions many a year,
A portion of my mind and life, as it were,
And now their breathless faces seem to look
Out of some old picture-book.

But Gregory has not become a picture-book figure; he lives on in the memory.

He has been described as a man of many parts: a soldier, scholar and horseman;
but above all he is an artist

... that practised or that understood
All work in metal or in wood,
In moulded plaster or in carven stone ...

Gregory had richness and variety of powers, and was a true aristocrat. The poet
calls him 'our Sidney and our perfect man', and says that all he did was 'done
perfectly'; as though he had but one trade alone'. He was 'as twere
all life's epitome'. Above all, Gregory represents Yeats's ideal of the
undivided man. The elegy is remarkable for sustaining 'the personal note
of a man speaking about his personal friend in a particular setting', while
the character and the setting gradually acquire a public significance. The
poem also brings out the realization that perfection in the life of action
was death, as perfection in the life of contemplation was artifice. Death
was consummation of his life's work, and in attaining this consummation
Gregory becomes a symbol.

Yeats was not using a character as a symbol for the first time, but
Gregory has a power and significance far beyond the woman who unfolds as
a multifoliate rose in his early poems. The woman, the rose, and the poem
which frames both, remain vague, general, remote, while this elegy has something
of the hard clarity of 'cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn'. Here
the poet was not casting a character into a ready-made symbol like the Rose,

24 W.H. Auden: 'Yeats as an Example' ('The Permanence of Yeats', p.350.)
but exploring the symbolic significance of a real character from real life. This also makes for the difference from Eliot's way of symbolization: Gregory stands for an ideal, but he is also individualized, unlike characters like Prufrock or Sweeney who are at best types rather than particular figures. The character of Gregory helps Yeats to attain the objectivity that a symbol requires, without sacrificing the intensely personal emotion which gives rise to the poem. Yeats's frank acceptance of the subjective element is also so different from Eliot's efforts to conceal the personal emotion behind a character like Prufrock: in Eliot the emotion comes out through implication and irony, in Yeats it comes into bold conflict with the objective element. The recognition of conflict, and its imaginative resolution enables Yeats to make an event in time, the death of Major Gregory, something of timeless significance. In the symbol of Gregory we have an ideal, a standard, by which we in this disordered world, can measure ourselves. The symbol gives a sense of value and a meaning to the endless struggle that is life: we are left with the feeling that the sufferings and failures of life do not turn the world into a chaos as long as there are men like Gregory, who can triumph over the divided world to achieve 'unity of being'. This valuation of life and of experience is made by Yeats not in mystic or magic terms, but in purely poetic terms.

The poem is also notable for bringing up two of Yeats's ruling problems: the problem of the 'divided man' in the modern world, and the value of tension or conflict in life. Both these occupied Yeats's attention and his creative energies till his last days: and in the symbolic poems he created to meet with these problems lie his claim to be considered as a great poet not only of our times but for all time.
The problem of the 'divided man' or of what Eliot called the 'dissociation of sensibility' has exercised the minds of most of the great writers of the modern world. The Symbol is one means of attaining that 'Unity of Being' which would give the poet direct, unmediated and complete knowledge of Reality. The attempt to justify this power of the poet to have symbolic knowledge of reality involves the theory of 'dissociation', and that involves the hypothesis of an age when such knowledge of reality was accepted and valued. Yeats, like Eliot, searches history for the critical moment after which 'Unity of Being' was lost: according to him the date is about the year 1550. The idea that 'Unity of Being' was well within reach of the poet at a certain stage in Western civilization, and that a 'dissociation of sensibility' set in with the advent of the scientific mode of thinking has become the subject of much controversy in recent times. Two notable challenges have been those of Frank Kermode and Kathleen Nott. The former, in a brilliant essay, points out that there is no historical basis for such an idea:

One often hears the term 'dissociation of sensibility' used as if it stood for a real historical event like say, Pride's Purge: after it, feeling disappeared from certain mental transactions, leaving a rump of intellect with which we are still conducting our business. ... The truth is that it is difficult to find a time when a roughly similar situation did not exist. In other words, the chronological placing of the 'dissociation' is suspect. That is to say, the idea of 'Unity of Being' is like a mirage: the further we pursue it in history, the further it recedes. Apart from the wrong implication of such criticism, that the intellectual has always been in conflict with the artistic or emotional, we have here a denial of the impression which we surely have of years of dazzling artistic heights achieved in a community, preceded and followed by periods which are, by comparison, barren, eras when genius has blossomed and eras when it has lain

The acceptance of the view that in some periods of history artists have been able to experience a sense of wholeness, and that it has been lost in other periods, partly explains this variation. It also helps us to understand better certain other facts. For instance, the power of a poet like Dante writing in the undissociated Middle Ages: what he expresses may be a private hurt, but it is at once both a private hurt and a universal problem implying the world-view of Christian doctrine and of St. Thomas Aquinas. We have also a sense of profound calm and poise in the art of certain ages when the disturbing schism was not felt, as in the sculpture of the classical Greek era and of the Ajanta period in ancient India. May it not be that the Symbolists were making efforts to regain this sense of 'unity of being'?

According to Kermode, however, the emphasis on the inseparability of the formal, intellectual and emotional aspects of a work of art, is one way of claiming that the artist has a 'distinct and special way of knowing truth' which needs to be defended against the 'mechanical and systematic modes of inquiry' mainly represented by science. In order to justify this claim, the supporters of the theory of 'dissociation' postulate a golden age when the artistic truth was one of self-evident importance, and a theory of the 'Image' as a means of attaining this truth. The order of reality that the poet gives is usually granted supernatural attributes, and thus the ideal epoch would be a religious one: hence 'the mediaevalism or Byzantinism of Hulme and the Decadents, of Yeats and Henry Adams'. 26 Kermode points out that it would be incorrect to assume such an age and the setting in of the 'dissociation' after it, because the split that is said to have disturbed the balance cannot be located at any particular point; the phenomenon seems

26 Ibid., p.182.
to be recurrent, something which Yeats himself admits, while

... a once-for-all event cannot happen every few years; there cannot be, if the term is to retain the significance it has acquired, dissociations between the archaic Greeks and Phidias, between Catullus and Virgil, between Guido and Petrarch, between Donne and Milton.27

On this argument, it would be futile to put the blame on Science. In fact, Kermode sees in this theory of 'dissociation' an attempt by the Symbolists 'to project upon the history of poetry a modern theory of the image'. For Kermode, it must be observed here, 'image' and 'symbol' are cognate terms: this makes him regard symbolism as a development and extension of Romanticism. The 'image' or 'symbol' is also what makes for the alienation of the artist from society. These ideas of the value attached to the image, and the retreat of the romantics and the symbolists from society seem to be part of the attempts to place modern symbolism in a literary 'tradition'. Edmund Wilson, whose book entitled 'Axel's Castle' was one of the first attempts at serious criticism of the Symbolists, regarded Symbolism as a 'second flood of romanticism'.28 Some others like Cleanth Brooks, have placed symbolists like Yeats and Eliot in the metaphysical tradition, the 'line of wit'. Implicit in the effort to find the support of a tradition for the symbolist position is the acceptance of its opposition to rationalism.

This opposition has been unacceptable to some moderns, notably Yvor Winters and Kathleen Nott. To the former, 'A poem is first of all a statement in words'.29 Since he does not believe that poetry deals with a different order of truth from that of science, he is necessarily in opposition to the Symbolists. Winters thus does not accept the 'unity

27 Ibid., p. 182.
of being' of the symbolists; to him reason is the directing force of poetry as much as it is of science. Kathleen Nott, too, takes the scientific standpoint, in 'The Emperor's Clothes'; she has three important ideas, which all hit at the theory of 'dissociation'. They are:

1. Those who prefer to believe in 'unity of being' are themselves really rational,
2. That the scientific method has all along been a help rather than a hindrance to life and poetry, and that whatever 'dissociation' might have taken place is not due to science,
3. That the scientific mode of 'knowing' is the only method of gaining knowledge (thus denying the intuitive knowledge of the symbolist).

These attitudes cannot be refused from a purely rational point of view, but at the same time it is not possible to accept them completely.

Rational statement has never been the only aim of poetry; even the eighteenth century neo-classicists did not succeed in completely rationalizing poetry.

The position taken up by Kermode and others, of trying to show that symbolism is an extension of romanticism, is also untenable. The romantics were more interested in expressing their emotions than in bringing out any clearly defined reality. The symbolist does not surrender himself to half-understood impulses or to the romantic trance. Kermode has a tendency to confuse the romantic conception of a poet as mystic, or a magician communicating his emotions, with the symbolist in full possession of his feelings and convictions, looking upon the world with self-conscious and confident detachment. 'Unified Sensibility' for Eliot and other symbolists is not the equivalent of the 'organic sensibility' of the romantics. The term stands for a wide consciousness and lucidity that can devour any kind of experience (that is perhaps why Eliot does not use the term 'imagination' with all its romantic associations).

The modern tendency to interpret romanticism from the symbolist point

30 Kathleen Nott: 'The Emperor's Clothes'.
of view has been partly responsible for this confusion. Wordsworth, for instance, has been placed by some critics in the symbolist canon. To call Wordsworth a symbolist is to place more weight on the term than it can bear: he does not fuse 'content' and 'form', object and experiencing subject: he talks about and draws conclusions from, the relations of perceiver and perceived. Again, the 'image' though used by both romantics and symbolists, has different functions for the two. As Cleanth Brooks has rightly pointed out in 'Modern Poetry and the Tradition', the fundamental difference between the symbolists and their predecessors, the romantics, lies in their use of imagery: this difference corresponds to that between intuition and imagination. In view of all this, Kermode's attempt to coerce Yeats and Eliot, Hulme and Richards into the romantic brotherhood seems unreal.

The problem of the 'dissociation of sensibility' is central to Yeats's work: but Yeats is not so much concerned with giving an explanation of the 'split' as in trying to overcome the difficulties that can be caused to a poet by such a split. Early in his career, he had developed the feeling that poetry has a special way of coming near truth. In the essay on Shelley, he wrote: 'I am now certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that reason has not'. This distinction, he continued to contemplate, and later came to the conclusion that poetic wholeness can come only from 'unity of being' on the part of the poet. He tried to give an intellectual justification of this theory in 'A Vision', where he pointed out that there were instances of such unity in the history of art.

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that architect and artificers — though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract — spoke to the multitude and the few alike....

31 W.B.Yeats ; 'A Vision'. 
Later on, he says he uses the term 'Unity of Being' as "Dante used it when he compared beauty in the 'Convito' to a perfectly proportioned human body." The French Symbolists had long battled for this perfection, and in Yeats's view Verlaine had been the most successful among them in achieving a poetry that was most clearly 'a physical presence without separable intellectual content'. The Symbol by achieving this perfection is 'as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life as the body of a flower or of a woman'. It has something of the concrete particularity, the fullness and completeness of life; for, as Yeats says, 'the abstract is not life, and everywhere draws out its contradictions'. But the most effective answer to these 'abstractions' and to the problem of 'dissociation' came in the form of Yeats's own symbols.

One way of achieving the 'unification of sensibility' that was essential for successful symbolization was the inclusion and conquest of conflict. Dramatic irony is one of the marked features of all symbolist poetry. The apparently local battle against the Parnassians, against Hugo or Tennyson, is the fight against their emotionalism: this resulted in the destruction of the aesthetic of the lyric poem which is so compactly stated in Wordsworth's formula, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. The emotion is the object of the recollecting poet, and 'tranquillity' is the measure of his objectivity, his distance from the emotion. In the symbolist poem the two conflicting aspects get fused into an imaginative whole.

Yeats saw conflict as an important element in the progress of mankind. In 'A Vision' we have Yeats's own rendering of history, which he viewed not as a chronological progression, but as a cyclic process. He replaces the linear conception of time by a 'lunar' progression which beautifully suggests

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32 W.B. Yeats: 'The Symbolism of Poetry'.
the whole process of gradual growth, maturity and decline of civilizations. It brings to our mind Spengler's view of history as cyclic progression. Yeats himself noticed this, and pointed out that his 'system' was complete before he had read Spengler.

According to Yeats, every civilization has a span of two thousand years. This cycle is divided into two sub-cycles each with its point of climax: full moon and dark. In this context, he discusses western civilization. The section 'Dove or Swan' gives a panoramic view of western civilization, together with a symbolic interpretation. The age of Pericles and the Renaissance are the peaks of achievement in the two subcycles. Yeats also introduces a conflict into the pattern: there was the 'westward moving', humanistic or dominantly antithetical ideals of Hellenic and Renaissance culture, as well as the 'eastward moving', transcendental or dominantly 'primary' ideal of Byzantium. And, there is a relation between the two movements: the wheel of each era 'must be thought of as the marriage of symbolic Europe and symbolic Asia, the one begetting upon the other .... Christ or Christendom was begotten by the West upon the East. This begetting has been followed by a spiritual predominance of Asia. After it must come an age begotten by the East upon the West that will take after the mother in turn'.

The Wheel, with its twenty-eight phases—the phases of a lunar cycle—is an attempt to do justice to the antinomies of unity and plurality, objectivity and subjectivity, necessity and freedom, in their historical manifestations. The wheel is 'every complete movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgement or act of

33 'A Vision', p.257 (1937 edition)
34 Ibid., p.203.
thought. It begins in unity with the matrix of nature at the dark of the moon (complete 'primary' or 'solar'), moves toward self-conscious individual life at full moon (complete 'antithetical' or 'lunar') and then, with the shattering of individual unity, lapses back into the matrix, now conceived as God. In Byzantium, 'a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato', Yeats finds that 'primary' and 'antithetical' merge in a dominantly solar full moon, a subjective and yet transcendental and corporate ideal. The result was a wholeness in art, so that all 'were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people'.

If history is a progression through conflict, a cyclic repetition of the phases of the Wheel, so is individual human life. Every soul has to pass through the phases, corresponding to the phases of the moon. Men are classified according to their mixtures of the subjective and objective, and their proportion determines the phases: 'the phase of an age does not determine the phase of men living in that age! The personality of a man is determined both in terms of his own phase as of the historical phase. Thus, 'a man of phase 20, for example, like Shakespeare, may live in some other historical phase than 20 — Yeats assigns him as a matter of fact to historical phase 16'. The system is further complicated by the division of each soul into four faculties: 'will', 'mask', 'creative mind' and 'body of fate'. Thus, Yeats's system is a highly complicated one, having subtle qualifications. Yeats's acceptance of history is at one with freedom and creativity. It is not an 'objective' history, a chronicle of facts as perceived by historians whose minds have become mirrors, but an 'ideal' history, the consequence of assuming a 'subjective' or fully human

35 Ibid., p.81.
point of view. The mirror has turned lamp, and events become luminous with the radiance of indefinitely suggestive symbols, microcosms of the total universe of Yeats's symbolic vision.

'A Vision' cannot therefore be regarded as a 'magical system' or a minor mythology. What we have, the result of an attempt to understand life through symbolism: had he been content to indulge in fairy tales and random superstitions he would have need neither for the system nor for symbols. His poetry would then perhaps have been read today as Walter de la Mare's is. What Yeats wanted was a system which would not violate or oversimplify experience. The account of experience given by science is abstract, and unconcerned with values or interpretations: Yeats wanted to surmount such shortcomings. The 'system' may have its own limitations, but this is only because it is a direct, individual attempt to bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations, emotions and ideas which flood the poet. This ordering had been done in past ages by custom, tradition, religion: they had helped the poet in 'the choice of the principles and presuppositions in terms of which he can make sense of his experience'. The modern poet, not having the support of any generally accepted system of thought or belief, has to find his own way of establishing the truths of his poetry. In his early poetry we find Yeats using magic, mysticism, legend and the occult; but none of these gave Yeats the truths he wanted. What Yeats learned from his experiments with all these was the possibility of an imaginative ordering of experiences. This possibility is given a finite shape in the account presented by 'A Vision'. The account has been much criticised there has been a tendency to regard it either as something fanciful or as a private, eclectic philosophy. Eclectic it is because it supports, in the teeth of evidence presented by contemporary trends against it, an order of thought and of society which no longer prevailed. For instance, he supports

aristocracy and imagination in an age when the trend was all toward democracy and science. In his 'Vision' as in poems like "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "The Wild Swans at Coole", Yeats identifies aristocracy with the pride of life: in democracy, popular as it was, he saw the life-rejecting thirst for universality. In all this, he may seem to be 'escaping' from life instead of being faithful to it. Instead of swimming with the tide, he was praising ways of life with all the more zest because they were unpopular.

Part of the strength of his poetry comes from this refusal to yield to the opposition, the determination to be true to his beliefs even when they seemed to be passing out of favour. Miss Stock has given a beautiful account of Yeats's position, when she writes:

In a sense, indeed, the vast sweep of his thought comes from the very fact that he belonged to a defeated world. A poet's imagination must start from where he stands, in the circle of his own experience, and if he has any philosophical bent, must impose a symmetrical pattern on what he sees. If he stands at the hub of his own age he need not see beyond it: the accepted values and the commonplace assumptions will interpret his vision. Tennyson in his time was such a poet, so perhaps was Walt Whitman. But if he is near the rim of the wheel his world will not look symmetrical; either he must shut his eyes to most of it, or to complete his pattern he must take in realms beyond it, seeing it as a single movement of a vaster cycle. Milton did this in his old age after the defeat of his cause; Yeats's master Blake did it most notably of English poets, and Yeats did the same. At war with the contemporary democratic consciousness, he defeated it subjectively by extending his vision to a ghostly universe where two thousand years of recorded history were a transitory incident. A sociological critic who can make his judgments confirm to his thesis may label this "escapism"; but "escapist" though a defensible adjective for his early work will not stick to the poetry written after he had defined his social bearings. It is not unrealistic, but is like a lonely torch from an unexpected angle, throwing disconcerting lights and shadows on all that moves within its range.

The artistic justification which Yeats felt he had found for his beliefs supported him through his later poetry. The system has almost the fructifying force of a myth or a religion, giving a certain intensity and power to his symbols. But it would be wrong to say that the symbols of his later poetry

are dependent upon his 'system' for their meaning: equally wrong would it be to question the philosophical validity or mystic value of the ideas Yeats has propounded. The symbols in the poems can be understood independently without explicit reference to the 'system', though such reference would mean an enrichment of the meaning: they do not usually need any editorial gloss (such as is provided by Eliot in his 'notes' to 'The Waste Land') to enable us to have a full understanding. Nor are they like some of Eliot's symbols, 'captives tied to his Christian chariot'. Miss Margaret Rudd has remarked that Yeats is 'rather inferior mystic when compared to Blake. This may be true, but one cannot help saying that the Blake of the prophetic books is an inferior artist when compared to Yeats: they have to be approached as even Yeats's 'A Vision' need not be, with a primarily extra-literary interest.

The greatest value of the 'system' for Yeats's poetry is that it gave him 'the authority and meaning of a religion, combining intellect and emotion as they were combined before the great analytic and abstracting process of modern science broke them apart'. It gave him that sense of 'Unity of Being' which enabled him to create the great symbolic poems of his later years. One of the great symbols he found for that unity was Byzantium. He had other ways of representing the ideal state where form and content, thought and feeling, literature and life, were one: such were the symbols of the sphere, with its sense of mathematical perfection, and the egg, an emblem borrowed from Greek mythology. Though they were primarily abstract, these symbols fascinated the poet's mind for some time: this was not strange, for the experience of other poets too shows parallels. Wordsworth, during a

39 Margaret Rudd: 'Divided Image', Chapter V.
period of intense mental stress, tried to find relief in the perfection represented by Mathematics, and found that

Mighty is the charm
Of those abstractions to a mind beset
With images and haunted by herself.41

But the mathematical ideal represented by the sphere or the ovoid could not provide any continuous sustenance for poetry. In Byzantium, Yeats found a rich and complex symbol, supported by the historical background worked out by him in his 'system'. He makes use of the symbol in two poems, and though there is a shift in emphasis from 'movement' to supreme 'stasis',

Substantially, ... Byzantium remains an ideal image of unity of being, whether as an absolute state, or as a final achievement beyond human life. Byzantium not only represents an ideal phase in civilization—that of full moon—but also a 'state of mind'. By sailing the sensuous seas of life he could become ready to take the 'pure' form of the golden bird, and attain that ideal state in which great poems could be created.

The two Byzantium poems have been separated by a distance of four years: 'Sailing to Byzantium' was composed in August—September, 1926 and 'Byzantium' between April and September, 1930. There is also a difference in the era referred to in the two poems: the Byzantium of the first poem is about A.D.550, the period mentioned in the famous description in 'A Vision': a little before Justinian opened St.Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. While in the second poem, it is that of A.D.1000, 'towards the end of the first Christian millennium'. But it is futile to take these historical differences too seriously. Byzantium is rather a city of the imagination representing Yeats's ideal in art and life, and a real complex symbol with infinite and indefinite associations.

41 'The Prelude', VI, 152-154.
43 F.L. O'Wynn: 'Yeats's Byzantium and its Sources', 'Philosophical Quarterly', January, 1953, pp. 9-23:
44 'A Vision', 191.
Yeats's Byzantium symbolizes the poet's heaven, where being is perfect. The fever and fret of becoming gives place to the peace of being; Byzantium is free from all the 'ills of flesh'. In 'Sailing to Byzantium', the journey is the pattern of experience symbolized. It is movement from time to timelessness. The journey enables the poet to transcend the limitations of Nature and of Time, and achieving the form of the golden bird he can sing, with the voice of prophecy

Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Let us analyze the 'poetic action' in 'Sailing to Byzantium'. In the first stanza, there is a contemplation of old age. The charm, the glory of life (which is so obvious in the young), seem to have gone. The old man, having lost his physical strength, seems to have lost his capacity for enjoying life. He is incapable of love and incapable of action. This impotency makes him sad, but he remembers there is something denied to the young. In their preoccupation with the sensual, they neglect things of permanent value (— 'monuments of unaging intellect').

In stanza II, the idea of 'That is no country for old men' is developed. The old man is a paltry thing in 'that' country (Ireland). He has to seek his happiness elsewhere; he can develop that very thing that the young have neglected, namely, the spiritual life. But there is no singing school where he can develop this new power. He can only do that by studying the monuments of the soul's magnificence in 'the holy city of Byzantium'. Therefore he has sailed to the new country of Byzantium.

Having come to Byzantium, the poet realizes his own earthly limitations. He also finds preceptors here, the 'sages standing in God's holy fire'. He prays to them to 'consume his heart away', to free him from the hold of the sensual, to release his soul from his body, and to refashion him (like gold glorified by the touch of fire, he would be purified and made immortal).
In the last stanza the poet tells us what he would be after the transformation. His soul would now be embodied, not in any natural form, but in the eternal form of a work of art (a golden bird). In this state of incorruption the poet has the power (like the golden bird of Byzantium) to be the 'singing voice of eternity'.

The poem thus shows a progression from rejection (of the sensual) to acceptance (of immortality). In 'Sailing to Byzantium' artifice is glorified, nature is disdained. Only what man has created out of his imagination is of value. In 'Byzantium', the Byzantine mosaics come into his mind. The artificers of these great works of art have symbolized in 'caught motion' all the stages of purification and attainment to the 'artifice of eternity'. Again, as in the earlier poem, Yeats returns to the work of art as a symbol for the timeless (eternal) reality.

'Sailing to Byzantium' brings out a number of conflicts: that between youth and age, between the sensual and the 'monuments of unaging intellect', and between the unregenerate life of the earth and the 'condition of fire'. It is a poem which moves from regret and rejection to a rich acceptance. For, even after he has taken the form of the golden bird, the poet cannot resist the temptation to return to the sensual life. In the desire to sing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium of what is past, present and to come, the interest in the temporal survives. This desire also gives an ironic force to the bitterness of the poet at the loss of youth and of the aged man is but a paltry thing. But the bitterness is not sterile; though he does not deceive himself about what he has lost, 'the regret itself becomes in the poetry something positive'. The rage and the sense of impotency yield to the determination to strive for a form 'out of nature', to become one of the 'monuments of unaging intellect', and thus win a victory over old age.
The central reality that the poem symbolizes is the conflict between time and timelessness, and its resolution. The conflict is brought by means of a complex and subtle structure. "Sailing to Byzantium" does not present the rugged appearance of an Eliot poem; it seems to have a clear, logical progression of ideas (though images like that of the soul clapping its hands, or of a golden bird singing out of its own will, may frighten away the logically-inclined reader). There have been critics who have found a 'syllogistic framework' in the poem, and accept the sort of rational argument that Cleanth Brooks has given, when he writes:

The poet reasons as follows: His country is a land of natural beauty, beauty of the body. But his own body is old. The soul must, therefore, sing the louder to compensate for the old and dying flesh. ... But, there is no singing school for the soul except in studying the works of the soul. "And therefore" he has sailed to Byzantium, for the artists of Byzantium do not follow the forms of nature, but intellectual forms, ideal patterns. He appeals to them to

Consume my heart away: sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal,
and by severing him from the dying world of the body, to gather him into what is at least "the artifice of eternity".

Such a summary seems to give all the main thoughts of the poem, though it leaves out certain important and difficult points. The poet, seeking monuments of the soul's magnificence, is thinking of the masterpieces, the 'gold mosaics' of the Byzantine artisans. But instead of invoking them, he appeals to the sages 'standing in God's holy fire'. There are also other difficulties: in what way can the singing of the soul compensate for the failure of the flesh? and what precisely does Yeats mean by the term 'soul'?

The poem is a paean to the glory of art, expressed through a complex structure. The 'artifice of eternity' for which he prays is a state of attainment, which is reached only after long striving and discipline. Hence the reference to the soul clapping its hands and singing louder with an effort; and to the need for 'studying'. That is to say, the attainment

\[\text{\textsuperscript{45} Cleanth Brooks: 'Modern Poetry and the Tradition'.}\]
of the ideal 'state' is a difficult process. Significantly, Byzantium is reached by sailing the seas, that is, by breaking utterly with the country of the young; all passion must be left behind, and the soul must be free to study the unchanging monuments. In the paradisal life of Byzantium, all those delightful manifestations of change and growth in which the scarecrow has forfeited his part, give way to a new condition in which marble and bronze are the true life and inhabit a changeless world beyond time. The poet himself becomes a changeless thing of beauty, purged of the shapelessness and commonness induced by labour, himself a self-begotten and self-delighting artifact. For, as Yeats says elsewhere: 'It is possible that being is possessed completely by the dead'. Those who generate and die, perpetually imperfect in their world of becoming have praise only for that world: the old man, having no part in it, looks forward to an escape into the world of complete being, the world of the self-begotten, the artifact of eternity. The work of art retains perpetual value and thus is in the state of perfect 'being'.

The artifact of the golden bird is the symbol of the artist's triumph over the 'fury and mire of human veins', the torment of living. 'In Yeats's thought, the greatness of the achievement of the creative will is to sacrifice tragic life on altars where the pure gold of idea or art or ritual is purged of the dross of actual living and becomes transformed, symbolic, artificial life'. The poet is not justified merely by his passion or vision but by his capacity to produce something impersonal, a symbol. The greatness of Yeats is that instead of being preoccupied with the problems of personal existence, he makes his experience a means to create transcendental objects or symbols, like the golden bird, which have a higher existence, a life concretized in death. Yeats by projecting his vision into the symbol, also

gives it, as it were, a life or super-life of its own, outside his own subjectivity. Yeats wishing for death, for his body to be consumed way, seems to be regarding death as a consummation or perfection whereby the poet can achieve a transformation, can become a symbol of a superhuman pattern of living. It is within this pattern that the poet can achieve that 'unity of being' which would enable him to have a glimpse of Reality. 'Sailing to Byzantium' is a poem which symbolizes the journey or movement from becoming to being, but he is not able to achieve in the poem the finality and changelessness of being. The poem is a spiral of movement from becoming to being and back to becoming, giving it a dynamic quality. A delicate balance or poise is achieved, but the golden bird does not seem to transcend the world of becoming, nor does it have the arrested beauty of Keats's Grecian Urn. The golden bird, purged of the 'desire ... fastened to a dying animal', is not content to remain (self-contented) in its state of perfection; it returns to the sensual life of the world. Set upon a golden bough it sings

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

That is to say, the order of reality which the bird symbolizes is not wholly different from the order it is trying to move away from, that represented by the life of the senses. To put it in another way, the distinction between the ideal of artifice, the golden bird, and the bird of the 'dying generations' is not absolute. It was this suggestion that the song of the golden bird was as sensual a music as that of the living bird that made Yeats's friend Sturge Moore observe that the antithesis between the two birds was imperfect, and since the distinction between the two orders of reality represented by these was an important one to the poet he felt that 'the idea needed exposition'. The exposition comes in the form
of another poem, 'Byzantium'. Yeats, intent on symbolizing the timelessness and changelessness of perfection or being, seems to have concentrated on this element in the later poem. There, the break with the natural world is complete. The very opening lines make us aware that we are not in the sun-drenched, golden world of 'Sailing to Byzantium', but in the world of night and death, where 'the unpurged images of day' and the 'resonance' of sensual music recede. In this world of 'flames begotten of flame' which 'disdains/All that man is', the golden bird achieves almost the perfection of a miracle. Now it can 'like the cocks of Hades crow', and have the power to scorn aloud

   In glory of changeless metal
   Common bird or petal
   And all complexities of mire or blood.

But even this vision of changeless 'being' cannot make the poet forget the sensual music of earthly life, the 'dolphin-torn', 'gong-tormented' sea which he has crossed to reach Byzantium. Though Byzantine artifice supposedly breaks the flood of time to attain eternity, both the poems end by returning, as we have seen, to the world of time and of generation. The golden bird and the dolphin are themselves images out of the world which Yeats disparages in the poems. Perhaps this connection with the sensual world is what gives the poems a concreteness and attractiveness which makes them great poetry, though they may have failed 'as positive prophecies in the sense that we accept Blake's "The Tyger" as positive'. Yeats never clearly tells us, as Blake does, what nature is, whether or not it is delusory, and whether or not our images are our reality. The antithesis between Blake's tiger and

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47 Hazard Adams: 'Blake and Yeats, the Contrary Vision'.
48 Adams has observed: "'The Tyger' is the sudden brightening of a shadow in the jungle of the speeding, expanding and contracting flux of space-time. When caught and held it appears as the spring of the beast — the self separated off from the soul by the 'vegetable glass of nature', crashing through in violence to total resolution."
the worldly tiger is as complete as can be. But Yeats has not been able
to make such a distinction.

This inability of Yeats to resist the call of flesh gives his poetry
a special power and appeal; this can be illustrated by comparing him
with a poet like Eliot. The theme of Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' and
Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' is basically the same, namely the rejection of
sensual joys for the life of the spirit, but as Alvarez points out,

It is hard to conceive of two major poets so close in time who could write
so differently on the theme of renunciation. Neither poem is more marshalled
in its progress than the other, but they move in opposite directions: one a
poem of acceptance, the other of regret.

Yeats feels each image as Leontes feels the 'statue' of Hermoine in 'The
Winter's Tale' — 'O, she's warm'; and while he is talking of ascending the
spiritual steps he does so only with many a backward glance, and with regret for
what he has lost. After he has overcome the corrupting force of time
and taken the form of an unaging monument, he does not aspire to remain, like
the saints, in the 'condition of fire', but he must continue to sing. What
Yeats really celebrates is not a religious immortality such as Eliot would
wish for, but an aesthetic one. He praises beauty; the 'lunar', or what
is 'self-begotten', not illumination coming from outside (for example, through religion). In a way, it is a return after a long, roundabout journey,
to the Lake Isle of Innisfree, to the music in his 'heart's core'. In
Eliot's poem we do not find any such 'dimension of human error': everything
is cold and finalized in his march upward on the purgatorial stair. Though
he glances through the 'slotted window' at the 'hawthorn blossom and a pasture
scene beyond', he is able to summon up a 'strength beyond hope and despair'
and continue climbing.

The antithesis between the 'marble and bronze' repose of Byzantine artifice and the 'fury and mire' of living is resolved in the symbols of the Tree and the Dancer. The former, a time-sanctioned and tradition-sanctified symbol calls up associations of the Tree of Life — Ygdrassil — in Scandinavian mythology, which was believed to have roots in hell and branches spreading out into heaven, the Biblical Tree of Knowledge, Blake's image of the tree and the tree of Kabbalistic rituals. The image of 'Tree' had been used by Yeats in many of the earlier poems in an allegorical manner. But in 'Among Schoolchildren', this organic image symbolizes the perfect unity and vitality of nature, and exists beyond the possibility of 'dissociation'. Since the Tree embodies so powerfully the sense of integrity (of 'root, shoot and blossom') and of independent life that we expect in a true symbol, it is in a sense necessary to the artist, whose image is the Dancer. 'Among Schoolchildren' which culminates in a magnificent analogy between the two images, is one of Yeats's greatest poems.

The poem seems to have a loose structure; it seems to meander along like a stream, with an apparent aimlessness, floating along its course. References to Plato, Aristotle, the ugly duckling, Pythagoras, and Leda. In the poem Yeats dramatizes himself. Here, visiting a schoolroom, he notes the accomplishments of the children, suddenly thinks of his old love talking about her childhood, and how her talking about it had brought him and her together. He wonders if he might not have looked exactly like one of these children. He thinks of her 'present image' and then realizes that he too has grown old. This sends him on to an inquiry into the value of a life in which men grow, in spite of their minds, so shockingly old. What makes it worthwhile living? And the answer is: passion. Somehow through that passion out of which are born art, love, religious devotion and maternal affection, men can reach through to what endures through all the changes of
times, bodies and civilizations. So, from one thought to another the poem moves on while at the same time summing up Yeats's views on life. It touches on childhood, old age, growth, decay, change, on love between man and woman, on motherhood and religious emotion, on art, philosophy and public life; the poet's mind illuminating all these aspects of life. But a vein of irony runs through the poem and deepens all the insights. The man who sees and says all this is 'a sixty-year-old smiling public man' who wanders dreamily through a schoolroom, one who is amusingly mad, as when he prides himself on his youthful good looks:

And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once ....

But he catches himself up, and resolves to be genial:

Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

This is the mask that he prefers to wear while meditating on the antithetical nature of life. There are three kinds of ideal images: that of the Ledaean body, known by the lover's passion, that of a saint's (the Virgin's or Christ's) 'marble or bronze repose' known by the nun's piety, that of the restless, lively, growing child known by the mother's affection. Opposed to these are the Tree and the Dancer. Man's enterprise and woman's labour have the naturalness of flowers and the harmony of the dance when the body is not sacrificed to the soul (as did Plato, Pythagoras and Aristotle), when beauty, like the beauty of the aging woman in an earlier stanza, does not express the soul's despair because of the decay of the body, when wisdom does not come from reading which ruins our eyes. To think of body and soul apart is to deny the unity of life, and to mistake abstract notions for realities. What is needed, and also what is in some ultimate and mysterious sense, the truth about the universe, is harmony, unity.
Yeats, like Eliot, struggled the hard way up to the world where poetry and religion meet, and found, through symbols, the answers to some of the fundamental problems of life. The questions had been raised and answered in former times by religion. But with the ebbing away of the sea of faith, a new way of answering the questions had to be found. Yeats could not, like Eliot, reconcile himself to dogmatic religion as an established system to give validity to his experiences and discoveries. In this he was like the French Symbolists; like them he built up the meaning of reality out of his experiences. The 'world-view' or reality of the poems are built through the dramatic tensions, the recognition of complexities and contradictions and the sense of 'coherence' or wholeness of the symbols. That is the point made by Alvarez when he writes,

'While Eliot's Christian orthodoxy is part of the order and allusiveness of his writing, Yeats merely needed the complication of his fairies and theosophy in order to write of the great common world of the passions. His delicacy is all in the poetry, not at all in the beliefs.'

Yeats gives the great 'human passions' which are timeless. Yeats has 'the great central human view, a little like Tolstoy, though not so profound nor so wide-ranging'. There is nothing of the Christian mortification of the flesh in Yeats that we find in Eliot, but on the other hand there an almost pagan sensuousness which is perhaps older than any religion. Eliot's poetry no doubt makes us feel the presence of the mind of Europe, but it is a scholarly, almost bookish mind. Yeats is Shakespearian in the touch of life that he gives, and in the appeal to human values: he is unconsciously natural like his own great rooted blossommer.

50 A. Alvarez: 'Stewards of Excellence', p.35.
51 Ibid., p.44.