WILLFUL VACILLATION BETWEEN OPPOSITIONS:  
ANTITHESIS AND SYNTHESIS IN YEATS'S HOLISTIC VISION

Po Fang

The omnipresence of oppositions, sometimes in the language of well-wrought oxymorons and sometimes in the form of subtly counterbalanced ideas, is a distinctive feature of Yeats's work. There are traditional dichotomies, physical and spiritual, mortal and immortal, subjective and objective; there is the opposition of the archetypal male to archetypal female embodied in his poetry and plays; and there is a personal conflict between the alternatives of devotion to art and enjoyment of an active, fulfilled life. Somehow Yeats assimilates all these antithetical elements into a complex system of aesthetic symbolism, making them counterbalance each other and also evince, through their synthesis, a higher, more comprehensive vision of reality.

This study will explore how Yeats's synthetic view corresponds to the holism of scientific and metaphysical philosophy. It will employ an inductive method, examining first the sources of his philosophical view which affirms the coexistence of antithetical principles, then the central iconograph of his systems of antitheses—the Great Wheel and the two interpenetrating gyres—which symbolizes the progress of the universe as a perpetual alternation of two opposing elements, and then his views of history, individual life, and dramatic art. The body of the study concentrates on how this holistic view is revealed in his idea of "unity of being," in his view of history as continuous alternative cycles of subjectivity and objectivity, and in his theory of drama as a perpetual dialectic of opposites. The later part of the study shows how Yeats uses his favorite metaphor of the dancer to symbolize the joining of antitheses in a ritual, harmonious dance. The penultimate section demonstrates how Yeats's emphasis on organic unity and single unifying image of a work of art is an important aspect of his holistic vision.

* * * * *

*I am indebted to Dr. Richard Londraville, who clarified for me Yeats's concept of "vacillation," his emphasis on the coexistence of opposite principles, and his debt to Blake.
Yeats's emphasis on the co-existence of opposites can be traced back to Blake. Starting in 1889, Yeats cooperated with Edwin Ellis in editing Blake's work. Blake's theories had a strong impact on Yeats, and in fact were at the heart of many of his writings. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake reverses the traditional values of Christian middle-class morality and religion by defining "Good" and "Heaven" as restraint, passivity, and concealment, and "Evil" and "Hell" as energy, activity, plenitude, and candor. He is not only calling attention to the importance of extremes which have traditionally been associated with evil, but also showing the need for accepting evil as well as good in order to perceive a more holistic or comprehensive vision of reality. As we must go through innocence and experience in order to reach higher innocence, we must embrace unreservedly both extremes in order to achieve a higher vision of truth. "Without Contraries is no progression," Blake asserts in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, implying that man can usually benefit from apparently opposite forces. He further explains that "Attraction and Repulsion... Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." Like Blake, Yeats develops extensive aesthetic and visionary theories with carefully constructed double visions counterposing each other.

One of the traditional binary oppositions which Yeats synthesizes in his holistic view is that between the spiritual and the physical. Yeats repudiates, especially in his later work, the traditional idea that one must divorce oneself from the physical world before one can attain a spiritual vision. It is commonly accepted that in Yeats's later poetry the human, perishable world is valued more highly than the immortal, spiritual world. We should keep in mind, however, that his awareness of the insufficiency of the spiritual world did not come to him only in his later years but began quite early in his career. Nor should we forget that the celebration of the human world in the later poetry is never at the expense of the spiritual one.\(^1\) Here again Yeats's connection with Blake is manifest. Blake always values imaginative art highly, but he emphasizes that imagination should be grounded in the concrete, physical world. While claiming that the world of imagination is "infinite and eternal" and the physical world is "finite and temporal," Blake synthesizes

---

the two by declaring that "there exist in that eternal world the eternal realities of every-
th ing which we see reflected in the vegetable glass of Nature." In the same work cited
Blake stresses the equal importance of body and soul, asserting: "Man has no Body distinct
from his soul. . . . Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound
or outward circumference of Energy." Yeats endorses this idea and further emphasizes
that for Blake "everything that lives is holy," and that since "passions" are "most living,"
they are "most holy" (E&I, 112–13). This explains why Yeats sometimes soars up to the
spiritual and artistic world but always returns to the human world of passion.

Yeats wishes to avoid making an exclusive choice between mortal and immortal,
physical and spiritual. For he sees that the antinomic principles reside at the center of all
things, and that in order to achieve a complete vision of truth one should simultaneously
embrace both of the opposing realms of reality. Each of the antithetical principles takes
turns dominating the other, and this alternation creates the energy for renewal and fights
against the tendency toward decline and entropy. In like manner, by dedicating ourselves
alternatively to antithetical principles, we may forever expand, correct, and renew our
minds.

Yeats came to realize that conflict was inevitable in life. He considered it a paradoxi-
cal harmony in the universe—a harmony which allowed the co-existence of contraries.
He realized that it was useless to deny this antithetical nature of things, as he told John
Sparrow: "Philosophers have tried to deny the antinomy and give a complete account of
existence either as unity (as in the case of Spinoza and Hegel) or as plurality (as in the case
of Leibnitz), but the antinomy is there and can be represented only by a myth." He
felt the need for a mythology to express his visionary thoughts of the universe, which
could not be explained by rational argument. Like Blake, Yeats preferred a visionary
outlook which would enable man to see through the "mind’s eye" and thus better under-
stand truths beyond rational apprehension. Throughout his poetic career, he endeavored
to create his own personal myths, using Irish legends and occult traditions which he had
learned from his early associations with the Rosicrucian, Cabalistic, and Hermetic societies.

* * * * *

3. Yeats quotes this passage in his essay “Symbolism in Painting” in Essays and Introductions (New
The fundamental symbol of Yeatsian myth, his iconograph, expresses this perpetual movement between the opposing poles embodied at the center of all things. This symbol, which he calls "the single geometrical conception" (A Vision, 11), is composed of two elements: the Great Wheel with archetypes distributed around its rim, opposing pairs facing each other, and a pair of interlocking cones or gyres (symbolizing the dance and conflict of the opposites) superimposed upon the Wheel, thereby achieving the unified image. This "geometrical" pattern is not a still, pictorial design. Its component elements, like active molecules, are always in motion. Yeats imagines that the tension between the opposites generates great energy and involves the two parts in a perpetual whirl. The two conflicting elements that reside at the center of everything, like yin and yang, which Yeats refers to as "those two forms that whirl perpetually creating and re-creating all things," produce dynamic and regenerating energy for action.

According to Yeats's symbolic system, the Great Wheel represents the twenty-eight phases of the moon, which in turn symbolize the twenty-eight historical phases in the Great Year or the whole course of an individual's life. Each wheel is part of a greater wheel so that phase one of a cycle may be phase fifteen of an even greater cycle. Each wheel unwinds back into time as soon as it completes one circle, as Yeats explains in A Vision: "Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound" (A Vision, 270). Thus contrary phases exist simultaneously, one gyre allowing the penetration of an antithetical gyre. The system shows the potential harmony between the opposites, or, rather as their co-existence indicates, the opposites remain unresolved in perpetual conflict.

Yeats's iconograph which places wheel within wheel within wheel implies endless possibilities. His comment on Blake's symbolism can be properly applied to his own complex design:

All these complex symbols contain the others in miniature within them. All is within all, and every one of the twenty-seven churches [Blake's symbols for historical eras] contains the whole twenty-sevenfold symbols in miniature. Thus, too, this great circle of day and night contains also many days and nights, many winters and many summers. 6


With this single pattern Yeats attempts to epitomize and grasp the mystery of the universe: to order the endless flux and reflux of the macrocosm in a single image, and to unite harmony and conflict in the microcosmic world of his mind.

The wheel expresses the ideal of Yeats's holistic metaphysics, which corresponds to the holistic doctrine of "all in one, and one in all." With this "vast single design" Yeats attempts to unify and comprehend the whole range of knowledge about the universe as well as the human world and thereby offers a key to the mystery of the universe. It is, therefore, a central image of his epistemology and a single unifying symbol which represents all types of existence and all possibilities of events. Yeats describes the law of potentiality and entelechy in terms of "God's Choice" (in the form of any single wheel) and "God's Chance" (in the form of the multiplied conflicting wheels within wheels). In a note to his "Calvary," Yeats explains this theory in the voice of an old Arab poet who discusses these ideas with Michael Robarts:

Kusta ben Luki has taught us to divide all things into Chance and Choice; one can think about the world and about man, or anything else until all has vanished but these two things, for they are indeed the first cause of the animate and inanimate world. They exist in God, for if they did not He would not have freedom, He would be bound by His own Choice. In God alone, indeed, can they be united, yet each be perfect and without limit or hindrance.

Like Blake's Circle of Destiny which symbolizes all activities from birth to death, Yeats's Great Wheel indicates the movement of time in a cyclical pattern. Since the sun and the moon are traditionally associated with day and night and light and darkness, they make superb symbols for the antinomies in the cosmic world. Yeats is interested in astrology in its pristine state. As he says in A Vision, It is always the "simpler, more symbolic form, with its conflict of light and dark, heat and cold, that concerns me most" (A Vision, 246). More importantly, the changes of the moon signify for Yeats the progress of the human soul as it moves from absorption in the objective world to subjective realiza-

8. Chinese Buddhism also emphasizes this metaphysical holism. The T'ien-t'ai Sect, for example, holds that all phenomenal elements are integrated, reaffirming the idea of "all in one, and one in all." This theory demands one view things in their integrated unity or wholeness. The relationship of the One Mind (Buddha) to the diverse phenomena (dharmas) is a fundamental concern of many Chinese Buddhist schools.


tion and back to absorption in the objective world again. He wrote in the introduction to "The Cat and the Moon":

Perhaps some early Christian... thought as I do, saw in the changes of the moon all the cycles; the soul realizing its separate being in the full moon, then, as the moon seems to approach the sun and dwindle away, all but realizing its absorption in God, only to whirl away once more: the mind of man separating itself from the common matrix, through childish imaginations, through struggle—then Vico's heroic age—to roundness, completeness, and then externalizing, intellectualizing, systematizing, until at last it lies dead, a spider smothered by its own web.\(^\text{11}\)

Yeats was interested in the Western tradition that associated the moon with man's soul, calling "the increasing moon man's personality, as it fills into the round and becomes perfect, overthrowing the black night of oblivion."\(^\text{12}\) Accordingly he defined the contrast of the dark and full moon as that "between subjectivity and objectivity, between self and non-self, between waking life and dreamless sleep."\(^\text{13}\)

Closely related to the image of the Great Wheel is the "burning wheel of love," which appears in the 1906 revision of On Baile's Strand, and remains a central symbol of Yeats's view of love. Yeats's concept of the conflict between love and hate is invested with the bitterness of his personal experience. The 1903 version of the play was near completion when the news of Maud Gonne's marriage reached him. As Reg Skene points out, "Maud's marriage brought Yeats to face some crucial problems of his life he had up to now evaded."\(^\text{14}\) The immediate impact of this new perspective on his work is discernible in the variations in the two versions of On Baile's Strand. In the revised version, Yeats made "the burning wheel of love" with its alternate sides of love and hate the central theme. As suggested in the choral ode of the fire ritual, Cuchulain is under a spell that drives him to pursue beautiful, indomitable women whose kisses make "Hatred... sweet to the taste," and whose hands "shove / At the burning wheel of love / Till the side of hate comes up" (V Plays, 497). Cuchulain's comment on his experience of love is characterized by sharp polarity, featuring the battle between sexes:

\[\text{11. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, 95.}\]
\[\text{13. Yeats, Essays 1931-1936, 114.}\]
I never have known love but as a kiss
In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce
Of oil and water, candles and dark night,
Hillside and hollow, the hot-footed sun
And the cold, sliding, slippery-footed moon—
A brief forgiveness between opposites
That have been hatreds for three times the age
Of this long-established ground. (V. Plays, 489)

The imagery of sun and moon here carries on the metaphor of the wheel of love and hate.

The theme that love is often mixed with hatred reappears in *At the Hawk's Well*, a play he published in 1917. The Old Man, who has spent his whole life waiting for the magic spring to flow, tells Cuchulain that their spiritual pursuit might put them under the mercy of the same curse that

may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
With your own hand. (V. Plays, 407-08)

The few lines recapitulate the themes of Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*, *Purgatory*, and his two plays about Oedipus, as well as Greek tragedies.

In a less bitter sense, the Great Wheel also symbolizes the perpetual conflict between an archetypal male and female, and a cyclical view of history and the universe. Again we can trace this idea back to Blake. In his lyric prophecy "The Mental Traveller," Blake tells the story of Orc, whose spirit is caught and nurtured by an old woman, a nature goddess. As Orc grows older the old woman grows younger and finally becomes Orc's mistress. While Orc turns into the hoary Urizen, the woman slips backward into childhood and constant conflict erupts between them. Later Urizen is reborn as Orc and thus begins again a new cycle of birth, growth, conflict, death, and rebirth. Yeats had been fascinated by this story of the "struggle perpetually repeated between a man and a woman" (*A Vision*, "A," 133-34), seeing it an archetypal metaphor for the endless renewal of the universe, which is composed of *yin* and *yang*, the male and female principles. He therefore called it the myth of "the perpetual return of the same thing" (*A Vision*, "A," 134). In the
1938 edition of the book, he employs this archetypal metaphor of male—female conflict to formulate a theory of history as a series of never-ending repetitive cycles. He describes his wheel of history in sexual terms: "A wheel of the Great Year must be thought of as the marriage of symbolic Europe and symbolic Asia, the one begetting upon the other" (A Vision, 203). In the same book of his mystical systems, he combines the symbols of the gyres, or joined opposites, with the wheel in terms of man, woman, and child:

All these symbols can be thought of as the symbols of the relations of men and women and of the birth of children. . . . All the symbolism of the book applies to begetting birth, for all things are a single form which has divided and multiplied in time and space. (A Vision, 211–12)

The myth of the perpetual male-female conflict serves as an archetype of all possible existence, the creation of the animate and inanimate world as well as of abstract ideas. W. M. Rossetti comments that Blake's prophecy "indicates an explorer of mental phænomena."15 Yeats consciously employs in his poems the myth of "the perpetual return of the same thing," or the myth of the perpetual renewal. His collections of poems that most deliberately employ this myth are The Tower and The Winding Stair. It is clear that Yeats meant to make these two collections parallel to each other in male and female terms. The eleven poems of "A Man Young and Old" in The Tower are contrasted with the eleven poems of "A Woman Young and Old" in The Winding Stair. The titles of these two sequences of poems remind us of the rejuvenation of the characters in the Blakean myth. "A Prayer for My Son" in the former collection is paralleled by "A Prayer for My Daughter" in the latter. As for the two poems about the Annunciation, the one in The Tower—"Leda and the Swan"—emphasizes the active, irresistible, and supernatural power of Zeus, while its counterpart in the other collection—"The Mother of God"—pictures Mary accepting her mission with feminine, passive perplexity and submission. The images and subjects of The Tower are mainly those of masculinity, politics, and action and violence; while those in The Winding Stair are of femininity, aesthetics, and philosophical meditation on two contrasting goals or views of life. It is significant that the circling stair is enclosed by the masculine tower. The stair itself is a superb symbol for the concept of "eternal return" as implied in its spiral upward movement which repeats the former cycles in a higher level. Moreover, the winding stair corresponds to the two antithetical

gyres in its upward and downward circling movements.

It is understandable, then, that Yeats imagines his poetry as a microcosm, involving both the male and female principles which are mutually indispensable for the creation of all things. More significantly, poetry-writing itself is an act of creation, an expression of something in the "deeps of the mind," or a manifestation of "mental phenomena." To use the words of Coleridge, it is the "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite. I AM." In writing poetry, Yeats repeats with his "conscious will" the God-like act of creation. Yeats's own comment on Goethe's words re-emphasizes the significance of creation for a writer: "We never learn to know ourselves by thought, said Goethe, but by action only; and to a writer creation is action."17

* * * * *

The coexistence of antitheses constitutes a primary theme of Yeats's literary work as well as an important part of his outlook on life. Brought into direct contact with the late nineteenth-century decadent milieu, Yeats was conscious of his role as poet in a world of turbulence. Personally acquainted with many of the poets of the late nineteenth century—Wilde, Lionel Johnson, and Dowson, for example—he was sympathetic with their viewpoint but wondered whether the dramatic contradiction between their search for purity in art and their lives of disorder and decadence was caused by the spirit of the time or by their desire to "pursue antithesis" (Autob., 304). Yeats incorporated this concept of double personality, a common theme in many portraits of artist in literature of the turn of the century, into a theory of the anti-self and mask which becomes a predominant theme of his writing.

Yeats's idea of the mask may be simply defined as a dramatic persona with an opposite personality from one's self. For a better understanding of the basis of this theory, we may trace the idea back to his symbolic system. Regarding life as a constant war of opposites, Yeats believes, as he postulates in A Vision, that each man's destiny is worked out in the interaction between Will and Mask, Creative Mind and Body of Fate. He relates these "Four Faculties" to the twenty-eight phases of the moon and explains

17. Yeats, Samhain, No. 7 (Nov. 1908), 8.
that the Mask opposes the particular phase of the moon to which each man belongs. Therefore, the Hero of phase twelve opposes the Hunchback of phase twenty-six. Moreover, each man's phase is in perpetual conflict with the time he lives in, and his soul in conflict with his temporal self. The poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," for instance, opposes the self's pursuit of a life of action to the soul's spiritual quest for wisdom and immortality. Yeats believes that every man and woman acts out a myth ("an activity of the Daimon") imposed on an individual by fate. Maud Gonne, for example, is driven by her daimon to act, as his poems imply, the myths of Leda and Helen in an era antithetical to her own nature. Yeats associates himself, on the other hand, with the Irish heroic age, an age which could be characterized by Homeric images of "savage strength," "tumultuous action," and "overshadowing doom" (*Uncollected Prose*, 363), when "the soul had only to stretch out its arms and fill them with beauty" (*Uncollected Prose*, 295).

What Yeats called the Daimon (sometimes Daemon or Demon) is related to the Mask. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he describes the Daimon as the anti-self of each man: "Man and Daimon feed the hunger of one another's hearts" (*PASL*, 85). In *A Vision* he suggests that the Daimons of all men are related to one another since a tie unites all beings made of the same physical material and informed by the same ordering principles. This invisible tie helps us to understand our inner self and the mind of others and thus break down the psychological barrier between individuals. In this respect, Yeats's theory of the Daimon resembles Jung's idea of the collective unconsciousness, especially in its assertion that the Daimon constitutes a kind of group memory which enables one to understand the mystical bond that unites all humanity. It is because of this mystical group memory that a poet is able to receive revelations from the anti-self in the *Spiritus Mundi*. A successful poet, says Yeats in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, is able to call from "the realm of the dead a Daemon *most unlike himself*" who serves as the medium for those symbols and images which have their origin in a "great memory passing on from generation to generation" (*PASL*, 55, italics mine). This theory of artistic creation through communication with the anti-self shows Yeats's indebtedness to Blake, Swift, and Berkeley.19

In a positive sense, the Mask is the anti-self each man seeks to counterbalance and integrate into his character. We obtain special energy, the unique Yeatsian élan vital, by assuming a mask, by welcoming into the heart a principle entirely antithetical to our own nature. Yeats believes that our ability to assume an anti-self can make us happier, more

complete, and more creative persons:

I think that all happiness depends upon the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a re-birth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed. (Autob., 503)

In this connection, we may think of “Lapis Lazuli,” a poem which epitomizes Yeats’s concept of the proper attitude toward life: “Gaiety transfiguring all the dread.” Though Yeats might not consciously present an Irish mentality here, the effort to maintain a cheerful mood in spite of life’s troubles is typically Irish. Even though the gaiety depicted in the poem is more like a quiet resignation to life, and even if it is consciously adopted or forced, it helps one deal with one’s present predicament with reinforced perseverance. The poem draws on an Oriental culture remote from the tragic-oriented Western tradition, to emphasize that gaiety is a mask to be striven for and that it is attained by seeking completion of character in a personality much unlike oneself. Yeats imagines the two Chinese scholars and their servant, immersed in the peaceful, huge mountains, staring at the “tragic scene” around them with their “ancient, glittering,” and “gay” eyes. Just before the last two stanzas about the Chinese Taoists, Yeats concludes:

All things fall and are built again;  
And those that build them again are gay.  
(C Poems, 292)

He implies that those who rebuild the fallen tragic world are those capable of assuming an attitude of gaiety in the face of tragic events, since otherwise they too would be victims of the fall.

Again we can relate this idea that one can benefit from assuming a mask of the anti-self to Yeats’s theories of the converging gyres. According to Yeats, each man is only “a gyre or part of a gyre” and is “unhappy because incomplete.”20 He needs an anti-self,

20. Late in life, Yeats wrote down in “Seven Propositions” what he called his “private philosophy.”  
The sixth one:
   The acts of nature of a Spirit during any one life are a section or abstraction of reality and are unhappy because incomplete. They are a gyre or part of a gyre, whereas reality is a sphere. (Yeats’s MS, quoted by Adams, 288.)
an antithetical gyre, a more complete mask to complement his "partial mind." Moreover, he believes that the projection of a personality contrary to our natural self may enrich our character and experience and edify our soul, as he says in *Estrangement*:

... If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of arduous full life. (*Autob.,* 469)

This explains why Yeats was attracted to certain prominent figures in society, ranging from political leaders to artists and philosophers. "Always it was some physical or intellectual quality missing in himself," as James Flannery points out, "that attracted Yeats even when he disagreed with the man in specific aspects of his philosophy."21 When Yeats later became acquainted with Wilde, he even went as far as imitating the aesthete's pose, manner, gesture, and clothes, trying to live "artistically" like the famous (or perhaps notorious) artist. Yeats most admired the kind of man who enjoyed both a rich inner life and a successful public career at the same time—"someone who had achieved," to use Flannery's words, "a measure of inner tranquility while exerting a powerful public influence as an artist or man of affairs."22 The Irish patriot John O'Leary represented such a type of man. So did William Morris, whose versatility as poet, painter, printer, mythologist, aesthete, and social reformer impressed Yeats greatly. More significant for Yeats, however, was Morris's ability to achieve a harmony among these various careers and produce "organization and beauty." In fact, Morris, his living "chief of men," became one of the principal models by which Yeats transformed himself from an introspective dreamer into a man of action who enjoyed his role as a publicly influential man.23 Here we notice an echo of Nietzsche, whose ideas gave Yeats's theory of the mask a philosophical depth, especially in the emphasis of self-discipline required in order to live up to one's ideal image of self.

Yeats "imposed" a similar kind of "discipline" upon his own writing. Aware of an excess of "soft aestheticism" and femininity of his work of the nineties, he sought to

22. Flannery, 10.
pursue a more masculine style so that he could bring the masculine and feminine qualities of his own art into a unified balance. He found an antidote for his early effeminate lyricism in writing for the theater. When he was extensively revising his plays in 1906 he wrote, “every rewriting that has succeeded upon the stage has been an addition to the masculine element, an increase of strength in the bony structure” (Expl., 22). Defending his diversion to the theater against his friends who were encouraging him to stick to his lyric poetry, Yeats replied:

*to me drama... has been the search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret. (V. Poems, 849)*

In a reversed manner, Yeats tried to counterbalance the overly masculine Irish culture by introducing to his countryfolk Pater’s more feminine cultural ideal: “Culture of this kind produces the most perfect flowers in a few high-bred women. It gives to its sons an exquisite delicacy” (Autob., 477). When Yeats was later earnestly involved in the theater, he proposed to create an Irish theater by an image of the mask (rather than of the mirror), the mask of the antithetical self of modern Ireland. As Flannery observes: “In play after play... he sought to rid Ireland of sentimentality, by challenging her, as he challenged himself, with all that by nature he [sic] was not.” In his own dramatic work, he sought to rid Ireland of sentimentality by creating a new image of Ireland contrary to its tawdry, turbulent present.

Likewise, Yeats proposed to complement Pater’s more feminine cultural ideal with the “culture of the Renaissance,” which he characterized as masculine and energetic. He saw the contemporary culture as degenerated because it had lost what he called “classical morality,” a traditional, pre-Christian morality based on “certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age” (Autob., 490). According to Yeats, this classical morality dominated the Western cultural tradition during the Renaissance and “passed from Milton to Wordsworth and to Arnold, always growing more formal and empty until it became a vulgarity in our time—just as classical form passed on from Raphael to the Academicians” (Autob., 490). Consequently he saw the Decadent Movement, which separated art from life, as an overreaction to a “formal and empty” morality of the middle
class. He hoped, however, his masculine Renaissance ideal would restore fundamental human values to the arts and rejuvenate a decadent culture. As typical of Yeats, he saw the oppositions of masculine and feminine qualities embodied in cultures and proposed a true fusion of these antitheses into unified beauty and strength. As F. C. McGrath puts it:

In terms of Yeats’ system of antitheses, his Paterian ideal represents lunar beauty while the more masculine Renaissance ideal represents solar beauty. Beyond these ideal opposites, however, is the Yeatsian Unity of Being in which the opposites are fused. In striving for a masculine ideal he was striving for the opposite mask, "choosing whatever task's most difficult / Among tasks not impossible"; and out of this struggle would result not the rejection of the feminine ideal, but its fusion with the masculine in unified beauty, or, in terms of culture, an empty feminine form rejuvenated by a masculine classical morality and both fused into a new modern cultural unity. 25

Obviously Yeats keeps his theory of the anti-self in mind while creating dramatic personae for his own work. Among the various characters Yeats presents in his plays and poems, Cuchulain best exemplifies his idea of the mask. Yeats makes him a kind of Irish Achilles, a tragic hero who enjoys a glorious, adventurous life, and his was the mask Yeats wore throughout his life to counterbalance his sedentary life as poet. He is almost in every way the opposite of the poet. He is valiant, vital, and indomitable, always ready to accept any challenge that life presents. Naturally he enjoys a kind of adventurous, heroic, and romantic love. To accentuate his heroism, Yeats creates another type of character as an antithesis or a foil. In *On Baile's Strand*, Yeats makes High King Conchubar both his contrast and complement. As the hero is passionate, warm-hearted, and valorous, Conchubar is cold, pragmatic, cunning, and treacherous. As Cuchulain is a man of action and passion, Conchobar is a man of circumspection and reason. It is clear then that Yeats means to make them a contrast of the "hot sun" and the "cold moon." Cuchulain is his own master, and will not be bound by other men's law or order; High King Conchubar is concerned with his social responsibility and takes steps to insure the stability of his country and the continuity of his lineage. Different from each other as they are, each counterbalances the other to make him a more complete person. The sharp contrast

and complementarity of character is pinpointed in the High King's statement: "You are but half a king and I but half; / I need your might of hand and burning heart, / And you my wisdom" (V Plays, 491). As Cuchulain pursues individual freedom and anarchic heroism with a desire to transcend human limitations, Conchobar protects social orders, domestic comfort, and family heritage and property. Yeats creates a fascinating discourse—a dialectic of opposites—when he organizes all these opposite ideas into a fervent debate which forms an extended philosophical enquiry concerning the contrary qualities and values represented by the two characters: heroism versus mediocrity and mundaneness; anarchic individualism versus social responsibility; fame and power gained by heroic enterprises versus fame and power gained by strategic political maneuvering or inheritance; love as a wild, romantic pursuit versus love as simple, faithful devotion; life glorified by brief, brilliant exploits versus life enjoyed with ease and comfort and extended through one's descendants.

Aside from this external antagonism, Cuchulain experiences an inner conflict which is caused by his constant battle with himself. In a letter to Frank Fay, Yeats describes his idea of the hero:

The touch of something hard, repellent yet alluring, self assertive yet self immolating, is not all but it must be there. He is the fool—wandering, passive, houseless and almost loveless. (Letters, 425)

Moreover, Yeats intends to make him a man of subjectivity born in an objective world and finally absorbed into it, but not before he wields his sword fiercely against his fate and the era which is antithetical to his nature.

* * * * *

It is understandable that the enthusiastic search for the anti-self creates an inner conflict. However, Yeats chooses to avoid making an exclusive choice and embraces the conflicting elements with equal heartiness. This is the main theme of the poem "Vacillation," in which he postulates that man runs his course between extremes. Here vacillation means not "hesitation," or "indecision" but rather a determination to vacillate or waver between two alternatives. The tension produced by this deliberate alternation works to perpetually renew the mind with creative energy. It is better, therefore, for a man to live
in both of the spheres between which he vacillates. Instead of adopting Christian faith which would eliminate doubts and set him free from the complexity of life and the necessary vacillation of an artist, Yeats chooses “Homer . . . and his unchristened heart” for his model. But even this decision is not final, as he says in his diary:

I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease. (Diary, 19)

It is a continuous dialectical struggle between self-realization and self-surrender; and it is through this constant vacillation between extremities that one regains renewed forces for life.

One of Yeats's devices is to juxtapose different points of view, as in On Baile's Strand, creating a series of fervent debates among different personae. Usually these personae are distinct dramatic characters with unequivocal, strong-voiced points of view. This particular technique enables the poet to express opposite ideas with passionate conviction without falling into the obligation of making the metaphysical choice. Moreover, as Alex Zwerdling points out, it permits Yeats to remain in suspended vacillation between two contradictory views without making his poems vague, ambiguous, or confused. 26 Many of his later poems, like “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” “Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” “Ego Dominus Tuus,” employ this technique to postulate the relative value of two contradictory pursuits.

One of the themes upon which Yeats expresses vacillation is the relative value of active life versus philosophical contemplation. In many poems, particularly the seven lyrics that make up Meditations in Time of Civil War, Yeats ponders on the ultimate value of contemplation: the worth of the isolated poet in his lonely tower when the world around is threatened by turbulence and destruction. “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” on the other hand, contrasts the self’s pursuit of a life of action against the soul’s spiritual quest. The form of discourse allows the two opponents—the Self and the Soul—to explore the intrinsic value of each pursuit, and, at the same time, reinforces each opposing argument by contrast. Hence the mind is allowed, like the wild swans at Coole, to wander in two

spheres: the spiritual world of aesthetics and wisdom and the solid, physical world on which real life is grounded.

In this connection, it is clear why Major Robert Gregory impressed Yeats so deeply, for he was a man who had simultaneously mastered the spheres of both action and contemplation. Yeats admired his unique talents as artist and scholar and his rare versatility in horsemanship, boxing, and aviation. According to Yeats, he was a perfect Renaissance man ("Our Sidney and our perfect man") who transcended all partial, divided men. Yeats saw his untimely death in an airplane crash as the fulfillment of a gifted artist's wish to enact a gesture of a tragic hero and to end his short brilliant life with a daring feat. In the related poem, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," the young hero speaks in his own voice, and the poem explores the tension he feels because of his desire to fulfill action. His death is shown as a moment of perfection, an instant of insight that balances "all"—the image he embodies as a man of contemplation and his desire for the glory of heroic action ("A lonely impulse of delight") [C Poems, 133]. Frank Kermode speculates in Romantic Image:

“In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” is Yeats’s first full statement of what he took to be a complex and tragic situation: the position of artists and contemplatives in a world built for action, and their chances of escape, which are in effect two, the making of Images, and death.27

Certainly Major Robert Gregory epitomized the conflicting situation many artists of his age faced, but Yeats would see his death not as an escape but as a moment of fulfillment, the fusion of action and contemplation and the realization of an artist’s heroic dream.

The theme of vacillation is also expressed in terms of the mortal versus the immortal world, and the perfection of art versus the fulfillment of life. Although it is commonly accepted that in his later poetry Yeats values the actual, perishable world more highly than the spiritual world of unchanging perfection, we must notice that even in his early work, he often emphasizes that the flawless spiritual world taken alone is insufficient. He suggests, for instance, that the imperfect human world is highly desirable to the immortals. In The Trembling of the Veil he tells about his fondness of a remark which George Russell ("AE") once heard "an old religious beggar" repeating: "God possesses the heavens, but He covets the earth—He covets the earth” (Autob., 249). His early poem “The Stolen

Child" tells the story of an immortal fairy snatches a "human child" to her own world. "The Two Kings" implies that man's mortality and the very fact that his happiness and passion "must end at the dumb stone" make his life more precious than the eternal life that the gods enjoy. Here Edain tells her immortal husband, when he asks her to return to the fairyland, that the very fact that the youth and passion of her mortal lover will finally pass away makes their love more cherished:

"...Never will I believe there is any change
Can blot out of my memory this life
Sweetened by death, but if I could believe,
That were a double hunger in my lips
For what is doubly brief." (C Poems, 436)

The idea that human life is "sweetened by death" is echoed in the play The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919). There Cuchulain, the brave mortal hero, rejects the Woman of the Sidhe for the human world. The Chorus comments:

He that has loved the best
May turn from a statue
His too human breast.
(V Plays, 562)

Here Yeats echoes a famous saying of his favorite poet, William Blake: "Eternity is in love with the productions of time."28

It is equally misleading, however, to suggest that Yeats values the human world more highly than the spiritual one. In fact, he never emphasizes the one at the expense of the other. The point is not which to choose, but how to avoid the necessity of making an exclusive choice between the two. Alex Zwerdling clearly argues this point when he quotes from St. John of the Cross—

It is, therefore, supreme ignorance for any one to think that he can ever attain to the high estate of union with God before he casts away from him the desire of natural things—

28. Blake, 89.
in order to show Yeats's "important quarrel with the traditionally accepted idea" of the antinomic system of Christianity. Zwerdling concludes that Yeats's later poetry carries on a fundamental pattern established early in his career—the "longing for the unattainable and scorning the easily attainable." The only difference is that the objectives have been reversed: "In youth it was abstraction, wisdom, philosophy which one longed for, because they seemed so difficult to reach. In old age, on the other hand, the physical vigor which has been so prodigally wasted in youth seems much more desirable than the 'wisdom' which has come." The change is shown in the two poems about Byzantium. In "Sailing to Byzantium," the poet wishes to abandon the physical world which is subject to change and decay and sail to the world of "monuments of unaging intellect." In "Byzantium," the eternal world of art is also seen as the world of death and spiritual purgation. At the end of the poem, the poet is called back to life with the conviction that art should be nourished by life.

* * * * *

Vacillation is therefore a means of reaffirming the coexistence of two antithetical principles by refusing to accept the necessity of commitment to either of them. But another way of resolving this dichotomy is to show the possibility of actual communication or fusion between the two elements. A favorite metaphor which Yeats uses to describe the intersection of opposites is that of sex. Yeats depicts the sexual experience as a moment of ecstasy (he employs the ambiguous connotations of the word) that transforms one mode of existence into another. The two opposite worlds could be that of the mortal and the immortal, the physical and the spiritual, or the coarse and the refined. In the poem "Ribh Denounces Patrick," eternal creation is seen as sexual reproduction of the biological world:

Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed. As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead begets
Godhead. (C Poems, 283)

Yeats's obscure play *A Full Moon in March* tells the story of a swineherd coming to woo

29. Zwerdling, 80.
30. Zwerdling, 88–89.
an immortal queen, implying again the marriage of the fair and the foul. In the choral
song, when the Second Attendant asks why the immortals descend from their “emblem-
matic niches,” the First Attendant replies: “For desecration and the lover’s night” (V
Plays, 989).

His finest sonnet, “Leda and the Swan,” exploits his favorite theme that “all things
are the creation of the conflict.” The myth of Zeus, a symbol of supreme divine and
passionate masculine power, visiting a mortal in the guise of animal has a great appeal to
Yeats, for he sees it as a miracle of the union of conflicts—both in the spiritual and
animal power of divinity and in the union of divine and human. The poem shows the
fruit of this union as man’s spiritual incarnation: man is granted partial divinity because of
this union. Paradoxically, divinity comes to man in an animal guise and spirituality is
obtained by a purely physical act. What Yeats tries to emphasize is that Leda, who is
overpowered by the brutal and procreative power of the God-bird, must gain some divine
knowledge at the moment of physical union, as the rhetorical question at the end of the
poem indicates: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent
beak could let her drop?” The poem thus exemplifies Yeats’s myth of creation from
conflict, his theory that “all things are from antithesis” (A Vision, 268). Yeats sees
Zeus’s visit to Leda as an “annunciation” marking the beginning of Greek culture. The
poem therefore serves as a proper introduction to his discussion of history in A Vision.
In this sonnet, a traditional form for a love lyric, Yeats gives a mythical explanation of the
engendering of human civilization—the joining of primitive humanity and Godhead.
According to the myth, Leda gives birth to two eggs after this mystical visit of the God-
head. From the first comes Helen—a symbol of love and ideal beauty who causes the fall
of Troy. From the second egg come Castor, who becomes a Spartan war god, and
Clytemnestra, who conspires with Aegisthus to murder Agamemnon. Thus the joining
of the opposites begets, as Hazard Adams puts it, “a race of beings in which contraries
are continually warring, the animal blood against the spiritual.”

Yeats also illustrates other types of transfiguration. The idea that beauty is produced
out of something crude, mundane, and sensual sets the central theme of a group of his
poems. “Easter 1916,” for example, shows that the Irish young men transformed the
meaningless, “casual comedy” of the pre-revolutionary Ireland into something of tragic
beauty by their seemingly “needless” death. It was their heroic dream, which was founded

31. Adams, 204.
on “excess of love” of an ideal, that urged them to action, and defined their fervent action as heroic. In the play *The Death of Cuchulain*, Yeats implies that the spirit of Cuchulain inspired these young heroes’ action:

> Are those things that men adore and loathe  
> Their sole reality?  
> What stood in the Post Office  
> With Pearse and Connolly?  
> What comes out of the mountain  
> Where men first shed their blood?  
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed  
> He stood where they had stood? (*V Plays*, 1063)

Here Yeats suggests that man’s imagination is capable of creating an entire realm of reality. And, as the last two lines indicate, when the thoughts are intense enough, like the heroic dreams of the young men, they lead to action. Yeats suggests that their heroic exploit has united their dream and action into one.

“The Circus Animals’ Desertion” develops the same theme from a different perspective. Looking at his own work in retrospection later in his life, the poet reasserts that though all the “masterful images . . . / Grew in pure mind,” their origin is not only in the actual world, but in the most downright physical part of it. Though the “ladders” of artistic creation elevate poetry and the enchanting dreams to the skies, they must inevitably start from the actual and physical world—from “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (*C Poems*, 336). The apparent dichotomy of the actual and the spiritual is seen therefore as potential harmony, for it is in his real physical state that man “embodies” spiritual truth. It is a harmony achieved not through exclusive selection, nor even so much through reconciliation, but through the actual intersection or “marriage” of the opposites.

* * * *

As has been mentioned, the conflict of opposites creates great tension and involves the two parts into a perpetual whirl. This circling movement joins the two antithetical parties into a harmonious dance. Later in his career Yeats found dance a superb metaphor for the unity of antitheses. Though Pater’s theory of “lyric unity” had helped Yeats to develop, as McGrath demonstrates, a new dramatic aesthetic of greater unity,32 he later

32. McGrath, 125.
rejected Pater’s identification of music as the most appropriate embodiment of the unity of form and matter—the ideal unity all arts aim to achieve (E&I, 267–68). Yeats preferred a symbol that expressed a joy of “the whole being”—body and soul, intellect and emotions. Instead of music alone Yeats offered the example of a “guitar player” whose physical movements, as well as fingers and mind, join to express the whole experience (E&I, 268–69). Yeats’s metaphor of the “guitar player” thus incorporated Pater’s ideal of lyric unity into an even larger unity, a unity which he later embodied in his symbol of the dance.

The metaphor of dance fascinated Yeats because it exemplified for him, as indicated at the end of “Among School Children,” the perfect fusion of the dancer and his dance, and, by analogy, the “guitar player” and her music, and the artist and his art. Its unique form involves both movement and poise, time and space, the pictorial and the sculptural arts. Besides, since the whole body as well as emotion join in the performance, it symbolizes a unification of body with soul and the intellect with emotion.

More significant, however, since dance involves actual motion, it is a better from for representing the active human body than Greek sculpture, which has often been praised for its illusion of motion. Pater considers this illusion of motion as one of the great achievements of high Hellenic sculpture and as the main feature that distinguishes Greek from ancient Egyptian art:

The Greek apprehends of it, as the main truth, that [sculptured man] is a living organism, with freedom of movement, and hence the infinite possibilities of motion . . . ; while the figures of Egyptian art, graceful as they often are, seem absolutely incapable of any motion or gesture. . . . The work of the Greek sculptor . . . becomes full also of the human soul.33

The concept of motion, as discussed earlier, resides at the center of Yeats’s aesthetic theories. In the poem “The Statues” the sculptured figures “moved and seemed to move.” “Motion, gesture, and soul,” as Edward Engelberg comments, are the “ingredients of Pater’s (as of Yeats’s) aesthetic which animated the opposing qualities of quietude, stillness, silence.”34

Yeats found dance an excellent mode to represent the paradoxical order of the

universe. Often the cyclical movement of the conflict is represented as a cosmic dance. The poem “Rosa Alchemica” shows that the rhythm of human life corresponds to the dance of the heavens—the alternation of the sun and the moon. “Under the Round Tower” describes this sun-moon conflict again as a dance. In the dream of the beggar, Billy Byrne, the conflict of the sun and moon is expressed in the imagery of lovers’ dance:

That golden king and that wild lady
Sang till stars began to fade,
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,
Hair spread on the wind they made;
That lady and that golden king
Could like a brace of blackbirds sing.

(C Poems, 135)

At other times Yeats presents dance as a ritual that joins the two antitheical parties in a movement of harmony. Dance of this type symbolizes a union of the Self and the Anti-Self. “The Cat and the Moon” dramatizes the subtle correspondence between the dance of a cat and the dance of the moon itself. Because the changing pupils of the cat’s eyes seem to reflect the waning and waxing of the moon, Yeats thinks of “the cat as the normal man and of the moon as the opposite he seeks perpetually.”35 The poem expresses beautifully the moment when the Self and the Alter-ego are joining in a ritual dance: “When two close kindred meet, / What better than call a dance?” (C Poems, 164)

Around the year 1916, Yeats was introduced to the Japanese Noh, and it was the time when he began to think seriously of using dance as a proper mode of expression for the theater. He was especially interested in the slow, attenuated, but intense movement of the dance in the Noh drama because it exemplified a fine fusion of the time and space arts. As Makoto Ueda explains:

[The] no, because of its emphasis on intuition, minimizes the elements of time and movement; one little movement in a lengthy duration of time is made to suggest a great deal. In other words, the no drama, primarily a time art, is made to approach the space arts.36

The restrained, symbolic movements of the *Noh* dance express the inner conflict a character feels or the antagonism he has toward the external world. The *Noh* plays dramatize this conflict reflected in the "deep of the mind," as Ueda observes:

> The *no* drama may be considered as an art which attempts to illuminate internal and external reality reflected in the deepest depth of the mind's eye, a level of reality which cannot be known through the ordinary senses. The world of the *no* is primarily that of the subconscious. 37

When the inner conflict grows more intense, it takes the form of dance because dance is a direct and spontaneous expression of emotion.

The special convention of the *Noh* allows the subconscious to wander in a realm outside reality so that two things normally contradictory to each other may co-exist like the sun shining at midnight. 38 The antithetical elements build up great tension through the play, and at the climax the major characters start to dance, because, as Ueda observes, "dancing signifies the most intense form of man's psychical energy." 39 In that final dance, the contrary forces in the play are resolved in its rhythmical movement. 40 For the same reason, Yeats often presents dances at crucial moments of his plays. The battles and duels in his plays are actually dances which express the intense long-built conflicts while maintaining at the same time the ritual structure of the play. 41 In *At the Hawk's Well*, the Guardian of the Well starts to dance when the well of eternal life is about to bubble up. Adventurous as he usually is, Cuchulain rises to chase the hawk-woman, but retires from his fruitless pursuit only to find that he has lost both the woman and the water of immortality. The chase itself is actually a dance which suggests, as Richard Londraville points out, "a *pas de deux*," or, to state more explicitly, the joining of two opposing forces in a rhythmical and counterpoising movement. "There is a unity established," Londraville

38. Ueda, 25.
41. Yeats wrote in 1910, regarding the antithetical nature of all things: "I think that all noble things are the result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy, of invisible warfare, the division of the mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself." "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time," *The Cutting of an Agate* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 145–46.
comments, "when male and female, active and passive, join in the dance."\(^{42}\)

Yeats imagines that the whirling circle propelled by the conflict of antitheses sometimes turns so rapidly that it reaches a momentary equipoise between motion and rest. Again, he presents such perfection of balance in the form of dance. "The Double Vision of Michael Robarts" presents a visionary moment when the "mind’s eye" is caught between opposite goals, between "the pull / Of the dark moon and the full" (169). In his dream, Michael Robarts sees a Sphinx and a Buddha, and between them, a girl dancing. The dance symbolizes a precarious balance between two antithetical principles, two historical cycles, or between order and chaos. It captures a momentary release from the conflict before either Sphinx or Buddha overpowers the delicate balance. The dream-feature of the vision enables the mind to reach out of time and to achieve, like the "spinning-top," a perfect fusion of motion and rest:

Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top. (C Poems, 169)

The spinning top poises at the vortex—"the still point of the turning world"—in the midst of the onrushing currents of antinomy, as implied in the little poem "A Needle's Eye":

All the stream that's roaring by
Came out of a needle's eye;
Things unborn, things that are gone,
From needle's eye still goad it on.
(C Poems, 287)

The girl dancing in "The Double Vision of Michael Robarts" is the "needle's eye" drawing the antithetical Sphinx and Buddha into counterbalancing forces. The mind struggling between opposites may achieve a moment of peace in the midst of conflict:

For certain moments at the the least
That crafty demon and that loud beast
That plague me day and night

At such a moment man is able to put aside inner conflict and become one with his true Self. His mind achieves the unification of motion and arrest, and his body reaches the perfection of balance of a dance. Thus the dancing body, as well as the spinning mind, symbolizes a unified mental state achieved at the moment of illumination which discerns the higher unity of all things.

The spinning-top therefore symbolizes for Yeats a philosophic equipoise between motion and rest, an idea bearing a close resemblance to Pater’s position in the first three essays of Plato and Platonism. Both Pater and Yeats attempt to reconcile the motion and rest of reality, to unify Heraclitus’ theory of “eternal flux” and Plato’s “Doctrine of Rest” into one. Yeats’s image of the spinning-top exemplifies such perfect balance—a balance in which, as Engelberg observes, motion is checked by rest and rest animated by motion.

“The Double Vision” is set at a crucial moment analogous to that of annunciation, foretelling the arrival of a new era and the decline of the old one. As Yeats originally presented the third stanza of the poem in the first edition of A Vision, he intended to use it to illustrate the last phase of the Christian cycle:

Constrained, arraigned, baffled, bent and unbent
By these wire-jointed jaws and limbs of wood,
Themselves obedient,
Knowing not evil and good; (C Poems, 167)

Yeats commented on the lines: “Then with the last gyre must come a desire to be ruled or rather, seeing that desire is all but dead, an adoration of force spiritual or physical, and society as mechanical force be complete at last” (A Vision, “A,” 213).

The Resurrection (1931) describes the same kind of dance that symbolizes the turbulence at the transition point between two antithetical cycles. Here the spinning circle has just lost its delicate balance, and the new era is getting control over the fading one. The

43. See Engelberg, 180–204.
44. Engelberg, 185.
dance of the followers of Dionysus in the play does not take place on the stage, but is described by the Hebrew to the Greek (*V Plays*, 926). The play is set at the time when the subjective Dionysian cycle is being replaced by the objective Christian millennium. It is significant that the worshipers of Dionysus should dance silently and off-stage, for they adore a god who is now losing his power and gradually fading away.

"Among the School Children" demands a more detailed discussion here since it exemplifies the important role of synthesis in Yeats's aesthetic theory, which is so often noted for its emphasis on polarity and antithesis. Yeats's synthetic vision that unifies disparate elements into an coherent entity is made clear in the final rhetorical questions of the poem:

> 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?

(*C Poems*, 214)

Here Yeats demonstrates how different parts or disparate elements are unified into an organic whole in a thing as natural as the tree or the human body. The leaf, the blossom, and the bole are all the indispensable parts of the tree, which both prescribes a particular form for the parts and relates and unites them into an organic whole. Therefore the ideal world of form intersects, or, more appropriately, intermingles with the actual world of the particular, and the two are almost indistinguishable. We cannot "know the dancer from the dance" because they are inseparable. The dance functions as a ritual that unifies the antithetical elements—body and soul, intellect and emotion—into a rhythmical and harmonious movement. Another synthesis in the poem is implied in its unified vision of reality that sees both the actual and the ideal, the form and the tree, and the dance and the dancer. It is a synthesis of the Platonic vision of nature as mere appearance ("spume"), veiling the spiritual and ideal reality, and an Aristotelian perspective of nature as embodiment of reality.

* * * * *

Yeats's synthetic theory corresponds to some fundamental ideas of modern holistic thinking. Holism (from ὅλος = whole) is a scientific and metaphysical philosophy first
formulated by Jan Christiaan Smuts, who considers the universe an organic whole. In *Holism and Evolution* (1926) he emphasizes the "synthetic tendency in the universe" and postulates that the evolution of the universe is the record of the activity and making of "the origin and progress of wholes" in the cosmos.\(^{45}\) One of the central concepts of holism is its emphasis on the organic unity between the parts and the whole—the idea that a total entity is more than the sum of the parts. Smuts's comment on this point serves as a remarkable explication of Yeats's images of the "chestnut-tree" and the "dancer":

This idea of wholes and wholeness should therefore not be confined to the biological domain; it covers both inorganic substances and the highest manifestations of the human spirit. Taking a plant or an animal as a type of a whole, we notice the fundamental holistic characters as a unity of parts which is so close and intense as to be more than the sum of its parts; which not only gives a particular conformation or structure to the parts but so relates and determines them in their synthesis that their functions are altered; the synthesis affects and determines the parts, so that they function towards the "whole"; and the whole and the parts therefore reciprocally influence and determine each other, and appear more or less to merge their individual characters: the whole is in the parts and the parts is reflected in the holistic character of the functions of the parts as well as of the whole.\(^{46}\)

Smuts further asserts that matter, mind, and spirit share some common elements:

Among the great gaps in knowledge those which separate the phenomena of matter, life and mind still remain unbridged. . . . And yet they are all three in experience, and cannot therefore be so utterly unlike and alien to each. What is more, they actually intermingle and co-exist in the human, which is compounded of matter, life and mind. If indeed there were no common basis to matter, life and mind, their union in the human individual would be the greatest mystery of all. What is in fact united in human experience and existence cannot be so infinitely far asunder in human thought, unless thought and fact are absolutely incongruous.\(^{47}\)


\(^{46}\) Smuts, 86.

\(^{47}\) Smuts, 2.
This reminds us of Yeats's declaration that the "ladder" of artistic creation starts from "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart," and his assertion of a close connection between the physical, everyday life and the ideal, spiritual world.

Moreover, Yeats's ideal of comprehending and unifying the whole range of knowledge through his "single geometrical conception" parallels the holistic doctrine of "all in one, and one in all." This ideal shows his ambition to order and comprehend the mystery of the universe as well as the human world in the microcosmical world of the mind. And it is through this comprehension, he hopes, that we are able to bring order and unity to confusion and chaos.

Directly related to this holistic view is Yeats's idea of Unity of Being which he learned from Plotinus, whose work he read during the twenties in Stephen Mackenna's translation. In On the One and the Good, Plotinus speculates on the nature of Unity of Being:

```
Generative of all, The Unity is none of all; . . . not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time: it is the self-defined, unique in form or, better, formless, existing before Form was, or Movement or Rest, all of which are attachments of Being and make Being the manifold it is.
But how, if not in movement, can it be otherwise than at rest?
```

Plotinus answers his question by declaring that "movement and rest are states pertaining

---

48. Because of the advances in modern physical science, especially the publication of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity in 1915, the holistic thinkers began to see Time and Space as a related unit that determines the action of the universe. As Smuts observes:

This joint and inseparable variation of Space and Time was not only most important in itself, but led directly to the revolutionary conception that neither of them existed independently, but that together they form the Space-Time medium of the real physical world. From this point of view bodies and things as merely spatial are not real but abstractions, while events, which involve both Space and Time, Action in Space-Time, are real and form the units of reality. (Smuts, 22)

We may also relate this to Yeats's attempt to unify time and space in the art of dance. Moreover, the central image of the two penetrating gyres forms the thesis of his dynamic theory of the action and structure of the universe in relation to the dimension of time, which is conceived in cycles of millenniums. Again we can see a connection between this speculation and Smuts's idea that the Time-Space unit functions as the medium for the action of the universe:

The new Physics has traced the physical universe to Action; and Relativity has led to the concept of Space-Time as the medium for this Action. Space-Time means structure in the widest sense, and thus the universe as we know it starts as structures, but continually overflows into their "fields" and becomes the basis for the active dynamic Evolution which creatively shapes the universe. (Smuts, 318)

to Being, which necessarily has one or the other or both. Thus Plotinus' idea of Being, like Yeats's metaphor of the dance, unites motion and rest, and time and space. According to Plotinus, this Unity is achieved by virtue of "number" and measurement, or by proportioning, through careful calculation, disparate parts into adequate symmetry. He considers this principle the prerequisite of a work of art, or what he calls "Ideal Form" in The Ethical Treatises:

All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form... is ugly...; an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern...

But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence...

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum.

Yeats endorses Plotinus' premise of organic unity. He believes that an artist should try to commingle disparate elements and shape them into a unified "pattern," so that the final effect is not simply a sum of all parts but "one harmonious coherence." Thus a successful work of art signifies for Yeats, as well as for Plotinus, the triumph of a single unified object over chaos and disordered.

He commends the accomplishment of the anonymous artificers of Byzantium who collectively create a single unifying image of their culture:

The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that [sic] the vision of a whole people. They could copy 'out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image... (A Vision, 279-80)

This passage is one of Yeats's most explicit statements of the organic unity between the parts and the whole. The Byzantine craftsmen impress him because, in spite of the self-sufficiency of their individual works, collectively they form a vast unifying design. Yet it is typical of Yeats that his emphasis on the whole does not lessen the intrinsic value of

50. Plotinus, On the One and the Good, 143.
the individual; rather, individual talents are made more distinctive by their incorporation into a larger pattern.

In certain aspects, Yeats's synthetic vision parallels Pater's idea of "lyric unity." In the same essay quoted earlier, McGrath proposes that Yeats's emphasis of organic unity, which is shown in the reinforced intensity of his dramatic work, is an "expansion and refinement of a somewhat vague notion of lyricism into a more precise and profoundly Paterian concept of lyric unity." It is the unity of lyric poetry which Pater would substitute for the old Aristotelian unities because it preserves, "in spite of complex structure," a perfect "unity of impression," the "unity of a single passionate ejaculation." In the concluding passage of "Shakespeare's English Kings," Pater reemphasizes this lyric unity:

It follows that a play attains artistic perfection just in proportion as it approaches that unity of lyrical effect, as if a song or ballad were still lying at the root of it, all the various expression of the conflict of character and circumstance falling at last into the compass of a single melody, or musical theme. As historically, the earliest classic drama arose out of the chorus, from which this or that person, this or that episode, detached itself, so, into the unity of a choric song the perfect drama ever tends to return, its intellectual scope deepened, complicated, enlarged, but still with an unmistakable singleness, or identity, in its impression on the mind. Just there, in that vivid single impression left on the mind when all is over, not in any mechanical limitation of time and place, is the secret of the "unities"—the true imaginative unity—of the drama.

This "true imaginative unity of the drama" can be applied to many of Yeats's plays which tend to" [fall] at last into the compass of a single melody" of the choric song, though Yeats made no explicit mention of this passage. The concluding choric songs of Yeats's plays deepen, complicate, and enlarge the "intellectual scope" explored and unify the whole play with a "vivid single impression" on the mind.

It is obvious that Yeats's attempt to keep antithetical elements in an unresolved dialectic and his desire to achieve an organic unity for his work create an intense conflict. Yet Yeats somehow manages to solve this paradox. The antithetical forces in his plays

52. See Engelberg, 200.
53. McGrath, 125.
create the great intensity and complexity desired, but his concern for unity urges him to strive persistently for clarity of structure, stringency of style, and, consequently, unity of impression. In his efforts to achieve simplicity and unity, however, he does not sacrifice complexity. Rather, the greater clarity allows for a greater complexity: the simple unity clarifies the complexity of his ideas, and the clear unifying image is enriched by the underlying complexity of his aesthetic system.

This attempt to bring complex ideas into simple unity has governed Yeats's aesthetic throughout his career. Moreover, his self-determined goal is to "arrange much complicated life into a single action" (Expl., 108). He enjoys seeing an epic amplitude conclude in the simple unity of a lyric, for the commingling of epic, lyric, and drama produces "ancient simplicity and amplitude of imagination." Robert Bridges' The Return of Ulysses (1896) impresses him because of this fine combination: "it moulds into dramatic shape...those closing books of The Odyssey which are perhaps the most perfect peotry of the world, and compels that great tide of song to flow through delicate dramatic verse." Engelberg comments that Yeats's "epic imagination is in conflict with, but also sustained by a lyric-dramatic talent." He gives a fine interpretation of Yeats's fascination with Odysseus' heroic gesture of fighting against the tide—the tremendous external force:

When, at the end of the fifth book of The Odyssey, Odysseus makes a desperate, final attempt to emerge from the tumult of the sea by gripping, with both hands, the rough edge of a rock, as the angry waves spill over his exhausted body, the single image—perhaps for the first time in European literature—thwarts the design: the design of the gods and of men. Odysseus' strength and his cunning, the Prometheus in him, are as necessary to his success as are his fear of the gods and his rational mistrust of the divine order. The fearful sceptic and the believing but proud man: this is the Odysseus who sets in motion his own shaping powers against those that shape him. And in the end he survives and triumphs precisely because he chose to fight the design while never for a moment losing sight of its real and potent existence, never underestimating its strength, as did his crews. He accepts the game; he sticks to the rules.

56. McGrath also deals with this subject (see p. 136). He over-emphasizes, however, Pater's influence on Yeats, for as a writer conscious of the organic coherence of his work, Yeats deserves his credit for the holistic unity he has achieved.

57. Engelberg, 204.

58. Engelberg, 205.
We may also apply Odysseus' heroism to Cuchulain's fight against the waves—the "single action," the single lasting heroic gesture which Yeats wishes to assert after "all is said." Certainly the tremendous waves will engulf the hero, but in order to assert his power, to actively will his fate, and to reaffirm his own existence, Cuchulain must fight the almighty external force. It is the premise of Yeats's philosophy that the hero should keep a perpetual dialectic between the Self and the Divine Order, shifting always from the impulse of self-assertion to the impulse of surrender. The Divine Order thus functions as the Anti-self, against which man is engaged in this eternal dialectical struggle. God and man, therefore, stand at the opposing sides of the same antinomy.

* * * * *

In review of Yeats's aesthetic theories, we can see that the antithesis between opposites is always at the heart of his writings. His central symbol of the Great Wheel, with archetypal opposing pairs facing each other, represents the antithetical nature of all things. The two sides are placed in such a way that both assert equal importance: Good and Evil—or Heaven and Hell in the Blakean sense—both have their turn for dominance and are indispensable components of reality. Yeats deliberately avoids making a commitment, an exclusive choice between the two, so that his mind can forever waver between the two poles. His purpose is to emphasize the special tension created by the conflicts, the energy and "vibrance" generated by vibration between the two. This energy whirls the wheel into a perpetual circling movement and thereby propels the action and progress of history, civilization, and individual lives. To be sure, the replacement of a dying cycle with a new cycle entails destruction and violence: there is a fear of the unknown, and antipathy toward the new dominating principle antithetical to the old familiar one. But the arrival of the new era brings with it renewed energy, and it is through the alternation of the opposing principles that the universe keeps on renewing its energy against the tendency of entropy.

Yet Yeats's emphasis on antithesis is only part of his larger holistic vision which synthesizes the antithetical elements and assimilates the disparate parts into an organic whole. The mind is thus emancipated from conventional restrictions and is better prepared for disinterested intellectual and aesthetic contemplation. Yeats's synthetic vision posits a potential unification of antitheses—the actual and the ideal, and the physical and the spiritual. Thus the two antithetical gyres are indispensable parts of the complete sphere
of truth: they are both antagonistic and complementary to each other. His efforts to keep a perpetual dialectical struggle between opposites create successfully great intensity and complexity in his work, but his artist’s concern for organic coherence enables him to bring this complexity into simple unity.

What Yeats enjoys most is seeing the two antithetical elements join in a ritual dance. The dance itself is a manifestation of the tension or energy engendered by the conflict between opposites, but in its rhythmical movement the conflict of antinomy is resolved. The ritual dance therefore symbolizes the joining of the contrary elements as counterbalancing forces. There is a moment when the whirling circle turns into an equipoise between motion and rest. It is a moment when the spinning mind, like the dancing body that reaches the perfection of balance, achieves a moment of illumination which discerns the higher unity of all things. At such a moment Becoming and Being, and the Heraclitiusian theory of “eternal flux” and the Platonic “Doctrine of Rest,” are one.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources


_______. *Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty.* Dublin: Cuala, 1944.


_______. *A Vision: An Explanation of Life Founded upon the Writings of Giraldus upon Certain Doctrines Attributed to Kusta Ben Luka.* London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925. [A Text]


Secondary Sources


McGrath, F. C. “Paterian Aesthetics in Yeats’ Drama.” In *Drama in the Twentieth Cen-


