

Casey Morris

Dr. Falke

English 4191

15 March 2012

Transcending the Tradition: Viewing W.B. Yeats as a late-Romantic

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century writer William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is a transitional figure in English literature. The poet's career transpired during times of societal change and unrest, leading many scholars to find strong association between Yeats's work and that of contemporary artists. Writing during the Victorian and Modern periods, he prospered without exclusively adopting either era's dominant formulas or themes. Although Yeats produced most of his poetry during the rise of modernity, his insistence on traditional forms of poetic composition and allusions to the classical age suggest many influences outside the modern epoch. These differences in style and perspective as an artist thus present a unique classification for Yeats within a literary tradition. Through examining these qualities, I consider Yeats a late-Romantic because of the methodological and thematic similarities his poetry displays with the conventions of Romanticism.

Most scholars do not interpret Yeats's poetry as a form of late-Romanticism. He is widely regarded as a modern writer, alongside T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, in view of the ideas and chronological place he shares with such writers. Leon Surette finds the perspective expressed in Yeats's work coincident with that of Pound, and to a degree with Eliot. In his book, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult*, Surette gives congruent interpretations of these authors' involvement in what he terms "the occult," or secret and supernatural knowledge comparable to

ancient mysticism. Surette writes, “the nature and the provenance of a set of ideas, attitudes, and concerns that are ubiquitous in modernism . . . are particularly strong in William Butler Yeats, in his protégé, Ezra Pound, and to a much lesser extent, Pound’s sometime protégé, T.S. Eliot. These ideas, attitudes and concerns I call the ‘occult’” (5). I do examine Yeats’s fascination with ancient and esoteric knowledge, but not as evidence for his identification as a modernist; although Surette’s method of placing Yeats alongside other modernists is prevalent in studies of literature. Yeats is also represented as a fundamental modernist in David Ross’s *Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats: a Reference to His Life and Work*. Like Surette, Ross presents Yeats as greatly influenced by the intellectual climate of his time but as also instrumental in its formation. He finds that “with Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, he laid the foundation of modern literature” (3). For Surette, Ross, and other scholars, Yeats’s proper designation is defined by the period in which he wrote and the modern conceptions he conveyed. In such a view, Yeats is also a principal modernist whose poetry shaped the characteristic attitudes of early twentieth-century literature. I contest this notion in my project by identifying Yeats with a tradition prior to modern era; that is, the principles of Romanticism more clearly explain the subtle and overt themes, such as renditions of the occult and mysticism, in his work than those of Modern literature.

The period of Romanticism in Europe is generally considered to have been from the 1780s until the late 1830s. Yeats was not born until 1865, and his first book of poetry debuted even later in 1887, so he is not contemporary with the tradition. To alleviate this problem and other contradictions in arguing for a Romantic Yeats, I use a definition of Romanticism that permits such an interpretation. I employ the conclusions of M.H. Abrams in his seminal book *Natural Supernaturalism* to both define Romanticism and Yeats’s aesthetic. Abrams’s theory dispels the anachronism in such an argument by analyzing Romantic ideas outside of socioeconomic and historical influences in the poet’s career. Thus viewing

Yeats's work as a unique body of themes with nuanced aspects specific to Romanticism supports his placement into the tradition.

In his book, Abrams defines Romanticism not as a historical or political literary tradition, but as a movement characterized by the secularization of Christian and other classical theological concepts. To do this, Abrams draws heavily from the works and philosophy of William Wordsworth in the *Prospectus* to his poem *The Recluse*. There, Wordsworth articulates the principles that Abrams isolates and uses to define Romanticism. Abrams finds that these concepts are primarily secularized versions of the Christian Providence, ethos and account of apocalypse and redemption. In this paper, the term "secular" strictly refers to ideas or symbolic meanings within a religious or mythical context that apply to non-religious experience; for Wordsworth to "secularize" Christian moral and experiential paradigms means that distinctly Christian phenomena, such as communion with God and eternal salvation, are redefined and repositioned in the non-religious realm of the self and temporal experience. For example, instead of God directing humanity, Wordsworth contends that humans guide and determine their own lives, hence the replacement of deity by the individual mind. Abrams's reliance on Wordsworth's concepts for developing his argument may be said to define the nature of English Romanticism more than the movement as a whole. However, as Yeats was an Irish poet who wrote in English, he is relevant in such a theory.

The key ideas from Abrams I use to define Romanticism are: the nature of Providence, the revival and secularization of classical myth, the theological and moral meaning of nature (later termed "theodicy of nature"), the apocalypse of nature, and the redemptive power of the imagination. Subsequent chapters explain each concept in more detail and assess their presence in Yeats's work. Also, it is worth noting that the second concept enumerated, the revival of classical myth, is not chiefly applicable to Christianity, but later suggested by Abrams to include all established mythological and

religious traditions. In this chapter, I also present two critics that associate Yeats with Romanticism from a different position than mine; namely, I explain Marjorie Perloff's argument for a connection between the views of Yeats and renowned Romantic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The other critic I present is R. Jahan Ramazani and his essay concerning Yeats's use of the Romantic sublime. Their contentions support Yeats as a Romantic in light of my use of Abrams's definition. Later in the introduction, I look at poems in the context of Abrams's theory to reveal its relevance in approaching Yeats's work. The latter also briefly previews the chapters of my project, affirming how Abrams's definition warrants a Romantic interpretation of Yeats.

The Nature of Providence

Abrams finds that Wordsworth's theodicy displaces the role of God altogether. In his scheme, divinity exists through human interaction with nature, in which the mind's conference with the natural world becomes a replacement for the Christian version of Providence. Abrams explains that "Wordsworth's is a secular theodicy—a theodicy without an operative *theos*—which retains the form of the ancient reasoning, but translates controlling Providence into an immanent teleology" (96). The external place of God to humanity is replaced by a power of intellectual governance in the individual, whose conscience possesses the same prerogative and purpose of God. The term "immanent" does presuppose creation and superintendence to humanity, but confines it in singular beings. This "secular theodicy" translates the role of deity into an intellectual aptitude that is accountable for moral discretion and development. This stresses the responsibility of the individual to interpret moral and transcendent questions usually answered by the God of Christian doctrine. All aspects of personal experience that Christianity investigates (e.g., the presence of evil, eternal life, the process of redemption) reside in the faculty of "immanent teleology."

As a result, the absence of God links this notion with “the process coterminous with our life in this world, and justifies suffering as the necessary means towards the end of a greater good which is nothing other than the stage of achieved maturity” (96). Wordsworth’s version of God interprets evil and suffering in a way similar to Christian precepts, but justifying such iniquities does not enhance one’s eternal destiny as in the Christian tradition. God does not vindicate human misery in Romantic theology; such experience rather “matures” intellectual and moral development. Abrams explains this process of maturation, stating “the distinctive Romantic genre . . . translates . . . Christian conversion and redemption into a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition” (96). The Romantic self-willed God increases understanding of one’s identity, even in the face of “crisis” and trepidation. This cognitive faculty further establishes the meaning of all good and evil experience for the subject. Thus Wordsworth also implies that there is a didactic value to human suffering, as it is a “means towards a greater good.” Addressing this point, Abrams notes that “Wordsworth’s assumption . . . is that if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things; there must be meaning (in the sense of a good and intelligible purpose) in the occurrence of both physical and moral evils” (95). The reality of “moral evil” edifies the mind for a better comprehension of the present life, and does not constitute an experiential prelude to be overcome for an empyrean afterlife as in Christianity. Hardship and pain develop one’s journey towards self-recognition and knowledge for the benefit of individual life on earth.

Revival and Secularization of Classical Myth

The question of evil and its universal and individual meaning leads Wordsworth to recall Christian concepts concerning moral and experiential questions; however, he selects what he believes to be useful from Christian thought and applies it to a secular framework to address such issues. This method of retaining what was useful in ancient theological traditions defines a common practice in

Romanticism. For Abrams, “this retention of traditional Christian concepts and the traditional Christian plot, but demythologized, conceptualized, and with all-controlling Providence converted into ‘logic’ . . . gives its distinctive character and design to what we call ‘Romantic philosophy’” (91). The role of Providence first becomes the function of the human mind’s “immanent teleology.” The secularization and demystification of aspects and functions of Christian Providence then influences Wordsworth’s interpretation of religious principles, moral or otherwise. According to Abrams, Wordsworth eliminates the transcendent qualities of orthodox doctrine, “conceptualizing” and “demythologizing” them in order to afford the same possibilities to “Romantic philosophy.” Wordsworth accepts what he considers to be morally sufficient in Christianity, and could incorporate tenets from other Near Eastern and ancient religions and mythologies (e.g., Islam, classical Greek and Roman mythologies) within such a demythologized framework. This fact becomes important in chapter three where Yeats primarily secularizes Celtic legends and classical mythology, suggesting an approach comparable to Wordsworth’s concerning ancient traditions. Nevertheless, the retention of mythological principles in Wordsworth’s philosophy displays the influence of religion in the Romantic moral system.

Theodicy of Nature

Abrams also defines Wordsworth’s secular moral compass through characteristics of the natural world, which implies themes of a Christian ethos. Wordsworth finds that nature contains moral and theological meaning in itself, without apprehension from human institutions such as Christianity. He does so through a Romantic consideration of “sublime” and “beautiful” qualities of the natural world. In Wordsworth’s view and as is common in Romantic aesthetics, the sublime and the beautiful represent antithetical aesthetic qualities in nature. The terrible, awesome, and stupefying parts of nature are defined as sublime, while things or phenomena evoking pleasure and happiness are understood as beautiful. From a secular perspective, these dichotomous attributes convey moral meaning without the

tutelage of a divine entity. Abrams writes “Wordsworth adapted the two primary categories—that of the beautiful and that of the sublime—into which earlier eighteenth-century theorists had apportioned the aesthetic qualities of the natural scene” (98). Wordsworth’s conception of beauty represents goodness and virtue, and produces feelings of love in the observer (98). On the other hand, the sublime describes the inexorable power and violence of the natural world, and Wordsworth couples feelings of pain, loss, dejection, and terror with such facets of nature. These conclusions comprise for Abrams a “speculation about the natural world—speculation whose concerns were not aesthetic but theological and moral, and which in fact constituted a systematic theodicy of the landscape” (98). Nature evokes moral qualities in an intractable two-fold aesthetic paradigm. The sublime and beautiful elements of nature propose a morality that establishes natural goodness and love opposed to terrifying and painful forces in experience. Abrams’s rendition of Wordsworth’s “theodicy of the landscape” is the Romantic theodicy that supplants Christian moral lessons. This natural theodicy arises from Wordsworth’s previous contentions about God, as the absence of deity leaves only the world and humans to investigate morality and aesthetics.

The Apocalypse of Nature

Wordsworth’s theodicy posits a moral and theological basis tantamount to Christianity in its apocalyptic implications. The Christian conception of heaven and earth, and the path leading to the former, rely on a redemptive apocalypse from Jesus Christ. This process is demythologized in Wordsworth’s moral paradigm of nature, and the Christian apocalypse is translated from an event of divine redemption into an implacable moral stasis. Abrams describes this process, noting “in consonance with Wordsworth’s two-term frame of reference, the Scriptural Apocalypse is assimilated to an apocalypse of nature; its written characters are natural objects . . . and its antithetic qualities of sublimity and beauty are seen as simultaneous expressions on the face of heaven and earth” (107). The

forces of beauty and sublimity do not reconcile in Wordsworth's theodicy, but contravene one another to create perpetual tension in experience. Their simultaneous existence in nature produces the apocalyptic quality in this moral construction. As "antithetic qualities" they uphold a moral inertia that does not pose any other truth except that it is two-faced, terrifying, and beautiful. This truth in nature is thus "a truth about the darkness and the light, the terror and the peace, the ineluctable contraries that make up our human existence" (107). These ideas are apocalyptic because they do not pose answers to moral questions that religions such as Christianity ameliorate with a promise of salvation. Wordsworth's secularized, natural theodicy contains no such promise. Finally, as will be evident later, Yeats's aesthetic dramatizes effects of the apocalypse of nature in poems that critique modernity.

The Redemptive Power of the Imagination

However, Wordsworth does not discount the possibility of temporal redemption. For him, the Romantic redemptive process interprets suffering as a path to be endured for self-salvation. This leads to an "earthly paradise" without a promise of immortality, but a more "mature" life in the world apt to promote goodness and wise insight. Christianity's notion of salvation through Christ becomes a quest for the individual in Abrams's interpretation, as he contends that Romanticism secularizes and repositions the mechanism of redemption within the imagination:

The faculty of imagination is born, then goes underground, but only to rise . . . with the intellectual love which is 'the first and chief' and in which 'we begin and end'; and it is also the indispensable mediator by which love manifests that it abounds over pain and apparent evil . . . saving the poet from 'a universe of death' . . . opening the way to an earthly paradise. (119)

The imagination coexists with the "intellectual love" present in the mind. The latter faculty intercedes in the experience of "pain and apparent evil" and helps redeem the poet from "a universe of death."

Abrams clarifies this idea, noting that “justifying fear, pain, and seeming evil as stemming from pervading love, he (Wordsworth) goes on to say that this love can neither exist nor triumph over evil except through the imagination as its complement and intermediary” (118). The imagination relies on a notion of “love” that Abrams assigns an intermediary role between human adversity and the imagination. This concept functions as a moral interpreter for the mind in its relationship with nature, and is thus the sense of moral guidance in the poet’s imagination, distinguishing what “evil” and “pain” must be redeemed. The dualistic function of “intellectual love” and the imagination is more complementary than separate as the former facilitates the latter within the redemptive process.

In this sense, Abrams concludes that “it is apparent, then, that in Wordsworth’s sustained myth of mind in its interchange with nature, the imagination plays a role equivalent to that of the Redeemer in Milton’s¹ providential plot” (119). The imagination redeems the poet not for peace in a heavenly realm, but in an “earthly paradise.” The secularization of the main agent of redemption and its consequent paradise is complete; the imagination, and its functionary “intellectual love” replace Christ’s purpose and heaven becomes an imaginative “earthly paradise.” This internalized dialogue between the mind and nature as means for redemption will also be seen in Yeats’s poetry that evokes a path for redemption in the temporal realm. Finally, this concept exemplifies Romantic individualism, particularly in the endeavor to save oneself from personal or public degradations or a “universe of death.”

Yeats and Goethe

Marjorie Perloff argues for a Romantic Yeats in her essay comparing the writer with the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Perloff asserts that Yeats’s Romantic understanding of himself as a poet derives from the views of Goethe, specifically about what constitutes an artistic temperament. Goethe posits that conflicting elements of a writer’s character interact with and acquiesce to one

¹ Reference to John Milton’s epic-poem *Paradise Lost*, which presents a “providential plot” of redemption through the power of Christ.

another during the creative process, hence painting the Romantic “self.” Perloff describes this state, writing that “Goethe is seen as the poet who combines Romanticism and Classicism, the subjective and objective, he is viewed as the poet who achieved what Yeats was to call ‘Unity of Being’” (126). Goethe ultimately fused his personal qualities conducive and averse to creating art; and consequently Yeats considers Goethe an ideal artist because of this balance of his multifaceted disposition. This “Unity of Being” is thus the recognition of what mental properties inspire or abate artistic creation, and the ability to manage these qualities.

Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* expresses this plight for a “Unity of Being,” where in the protagonist “the opposition between the man of emotion and imagination and the man of reflection and self-control occurs repeatedly” (128-129). Perloff observes that Yeats describes the same self-conflicting nature in his work, noting that “the conflict between artist and practical man . . . in Goethe’s work is precisely the same as that between Yeats’s Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, antithetical man and primary man. . . . Like Goethe, he knew that Unity of Being was man’s goal but that it was a difficult reconciliation of opposites” (129). Yeats’s presentation of the writer as an aspiring “Unity of Being” seems to be predicated and inspired by Romantic thought. This understanding of the Romantic “self” also extends to his position as a poet. In Perloff’s reasoning, Yeats viewed his poetic self as Romantic because he adopted Goethe’s rendering of the artist’s character, essentially a unity of opposed attitudes that mitigated the tension between passion and reason, or “antithetical and primary man” during the creative process.

Perloff’s argument for a conflicted Romantic self in Yeats recalls Wordsworth’s theodicy of nature. She presents Yeats as simultaneously an “artist” and “practical man,” proposing a dichotomy comparable to Wordsworth’s conception of the beautiful and the sublime; in other words, both critics highlight the contradictory Romantic self upon the basis of aesthetic antitheses. These perspectives

concern what Abrams calls “the ineluctable contraries that make up our human existence,” (107) illuminating the divisive nature of the Romantic self and moral paradigm. Perloff thus arrives at an interpretation of Yeats’s creative personality along the lines of Wordsworth’s aesthetically based ethic. She also expands my argument and Abrams’s definition because she verifies a Romantic Yeats derived from the ideas of Goethe and not Wordsworth. From such a point the poet is more comprehensively a part of the tradition, including through other interpretations of Romanticism.

Yeats and the Romantic Sublime

R. Jahan Ramazani finds that Yeats implements a Romantic version of sublimity. For Ramazani, Yeats’s poems “The Gyres,” “Lapis Lazuli,” and “The Second Coming” epitomize the Romantic sublime, or qualities of greatness and power in the natural world. He does so by identifying two ways the poet demonstrates this concept, through what he terms the psychological sublime and the rhetorical sublime. For Ramazani, by examining such works “in the light of the poetics of the Romantic sublime, we can better understand the structure and genealogy of their affective movement from terror to joy (the psychological sublime) as well as their . . . violent figures and fragmentary images (the rhetorical sublime)” (163). The psychological sublime alludes to the event in literature when characters whose fortunes have elicited so much pain and suffering, their subsequent feelings are converted into joy (e.g., King Lear’s despair after losing everything, and his descent into madness). However, this new emotion is a synthesis of terror and joy that supersedes both essential feelings. For Ramazani, this synthesized emotion from the psychological sublime is called “tragic joy.” He writes “‘Tragic joy’ expresses as well as any other formulation in the history of criticism the emotive structure and ambivalence of the sublime, since the sublime involves the conversion of affects from defeat and terror to freedom and joy” (164). Ramazani finds that Yeats’s poem “Lapis Lazuli” presents an example of sublime emotional transition; he writes “the Shakespearean actors in ‘Lapis Lazuli’ do not ‘weep/ They know that Hamlet and Lear are

gay' (294). In generic terms, the unexpected joy of the sublime arises from the relinquishment of elegiac pathos" (165). Yeats releases Lear and Hamlet from their proverbial sorrow by describing them as "gay," using the Romantic sublime to transform the characters' sentiments into "tragic joy." For Ramazani, this use of the psychological sublime corroborates the influence of Romantic aesthetics in Yeats's poetry.

The rhetorical sublime is also part of Ramazani's theory of a Romantic Yeats. This form of the sublime refers to violent images and rough metric patterns dispersed throughout a poem. Ramazani finds Yeats's "The Second Coming" to illustrate this aesthetic effect. Considering the poem's opening lines, he writes "the initial stanza is a vision of anarchic repetition, a turning and turning without center, pounding in its first line with an insistent dactylic rhythm and, in its last lines, leaving the imagination exhausted by the effort to totalize" (167). The poem's harsh rhythm and its haunting images induce effects of the rhetorical sublime. The lines greatly differ from the common iambic meter of Yeats, and "the very strictness of Yeats' tightly controlled aural patterns makes rhythmic variation seem all the more reckless" (168-169). The rhetorical sublime disrupts formal patterns and scansion of "The Second Coming" and therefore enhances the work's tone and apocalyptic subject matter.

Ramazani's argument coincides with two of Abrams's notions: the theodicy of nature and the apocalypse of nature. The connection lies in their view of the sublime as a violent and dissonant force that changes sorrow into joy or disrupts poetic rhythms for Ramazani; and as a force that produces terror and apocalyptic tension within worldly experience for Abrams. Ramazani's ideas are useful when I treat the sublime later in my project, because they expand on the possibilities of the concept as not only a part of nature, but as a subjective effect as well.

Chapter One: Yeats and the Nature of Providence

In the first chapter, I treat Abrams's account of a secularized edition of Providence and explicate this theme in Yeats's pieces "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation." Another poem I analyze,

“The Tower,” expresses the poet’s thoughts about old age, the significance of memories and the imminence of death. Abrams’s internalized vision of deity is manifested in themes such as the meaning of existence in a perishable world, especially in the following lines:

And I declare my faith
 I mock Plotinus’ thought
 And cry in Plato’s teeth
 Death and life were not
 Till man made up the whole
 Made lock, stock and barrel
 Out of his bitter soul. (145-151)

This excerpt indicates a view of humankind in a God-less universe. The transference of an omniscient deity into an “immanent teleology” can be delineated in this excerpt and other examples that imply Yeats’s “faith” is not inspired by ancient mythological or religious conventions. His faith addresses only what he experiences “lock, stock and barrel,” which is his mortal state. Yeats’s secularized thinking in these lines towards a charge traditionally assumed by God suggests a Romantic spirituality. I also examine excerpts where Yeats presents issues traditionally assuaged by God (e.g., investigating the soul, questions of suffering, old age, and the material world) that the poet confronts on his own.

Chapter Two: Revival and Secularization of Classical Myth in Yeats

I discuss in chapter two how the poet reanimates “the form of ancient reasoning” in works like “Leda and the Swan” and others where he confronts issues of his own epoch. In this poem, he secularizes classical Greek myth in a Romantic fashion; for instance, the mythological rape of Leda takes on a symbolic meaning for the social milieu of early twentieth-century Europe. After detailing the encounter, Yeats writes “Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak

could let her drop” (14-15). He alludes to many questions of the modern era in these lines, notably the inception of more secular intellection and culture in the Western world. The violent and indifferent “knowledge” and “power” characteristic of modern Europe finds expression in a classical image of an awful begetting, hence the beginning of modernity. The rape of Leda also metaphorically signifies societal instabilities definitive of the modern age. I analyze “Leda and the Swan” alongside other works to reveal how Yeats retained what he considered intellectually or symbolically pertinent in such accounts, but in a demystified and conceptual way that illuminates modern experience.

Chapter Three: The Apocalypse and Theodicy of Nature in Yeats

In the third chapter, I assess how Abrams’s theory of apocalyptic meaning in nature corresponds to themes of Yeats’s poems, such as “The Second Coming.” In this work he envisions a world imperiled by anarchy and death, yet awaiting the arrival of a redeemer figure. Yeats also expresses his belief in a cyclical pattern of history concerning the advent of the modern age. Such an apocalyptic outlook recalls Abrams’s paradigm, and thus I focus on the sublime and apocalyptic sentiments in the work. For example, this vision is enunciated in terms of the sublime:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity. (3-8)

The “blood-dimmed” and “passionate” images resemble the aesthetic qualities of the sublime detailed by Abrams. The “terrifying” capacities of nature for destruction, fear, and a “universe of death” are implied in Yeats’s pronouncement of an ill-fated world. I expand on this topic in the third chapter to

reveal more applications of Romantic aesthetics in Yeats's work. "The Second Coming," and poems such as "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Gyres," display the affective and moral consequences of the sublime.

Chapter Four: Yeats's Redemptive Imagination

Chapter four reveals a poignant Romantic attribute in Yeats's poetry: the significance of the imagination. I highlight the imaginative experience of antiquity presented in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" and other works that empower the imagination, and present it as a means for secular redemption. For example, in "Sailing to Byzantium" Yeats comments on the world he sees as a place of deformed, "sensual" culture with "unaging intellect." The poet is alienated in such a setting, one "That is no country for old men" (1) and unlearned in eternal measures of experience, but rather "studying/ Monuments of its own magnificence" (13-14). Unwilling to participate in such vacuous indiscretions, Yeats imaginatively travels to the ancient city of Byzantium. Upon arrival he writes, "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" (17-20). The poet is saved from the meaningless death of his body, and gathered "into eternity" because of the transcendent ability of art and the imagination. Through imagining the glorious and golden values of Byzantine culture, Yeats's desire for meaningful experience comes to fruition.

This imaginative redemption recalls Abrams's treatment of Wordsworth's secularized theology. In "Sailing to Byzantium," the imagination saves Yeats from modern distortions and will lead to a realm of paradise; however, such a domain that is solely construed by the poetic imagination. More precisely, Yeats is redeemed from flawed aesthetic and moral values definitive of modern culture. I devote chapter four to examining more of Yeats's Romantic imagination, and its extension to the poet's self as a means for eternal life through art. The imagination can thus create immortal works of art to serve as

representative of the self in life and thereafter. These assumptions will affirm Yeats's use of the Romantic imagination in place of traditional religious systems, such as Christian salvation.

In the following chapters, I treat each notion separately and delineate its prevalence in Yeats's work. I intend to suggest that Yeats was a principal poet in the Romantic tradition, but to do so through relating the nuanced themes of his poems to ideas derived chiefly out of a secularized theological framework, mainly premised upon Christian principles. Abrams's definition is not the only accepted theory of the age. Indeed, other interpretations of Romanticism would not merit Yeats a part of the tradition (e.g., definitions focused upon the movement's historical setting and socioeconomic factors). Abrams's approach nonetheless permits studying Yeats as a Romantic because of its foundation in the philosophy of Wordsworth, which expounds a movement not necessarily indicative of early nineteenth-century literature, but a distinguished effort cherishing the aesthetic and moral values of the classical age. Further, Wordsworth reinterprets such traditions not for religious revelation as much as for their assimilation to his secular worldview. Thus the fundamentally natural and human components of Wordsworth's system, such as the theodicy of nature or the redemptive imagination, came to represent a renewed sense of spirituality in art that Yeats also expressed. Under provision of these timeless concepts, Yeats's work will correspond to Romanticism independent of historical shifts in literature or popular sentiments of the modern era.

CHAPTER TWO: YEATS AND THE NATURE OF PROVIDENCE

This chapter reveals the implications of a secularized Romantic deity in poems by Yeats, specifically "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "The Tower," and "Vacillation." I begin with how the concept of an "immanent teleology" is the version of Providence in the Romantic tradition and is concomitant to Abrams's general thesis of a secularized theology. I then discuss Yeats's personal religious beliefs and the influence his Irish Protestant background and experimentation with occult and magical practices had in his work. Detailing Yeats's spiritual experiences will also provide clues for why he rejected established religion and favored other creeds. The writer mainly committed to occultism throughout his career and remained largely esoteric in his spiritual life, resulting in an independent pursuit of metaphysical truth. This sense of spiritual autonomy permeates much of his poetry, especially in the three pieces I examine. Thus to thematically link the poems above with Abrams's approach, I specify Yeats's assertions pointing to a kind of Providence defined by spiritual self-determination.

Romantic Providence

As I explained in my introduction, Abrams's idea of an "immanent teleology" in Wordsworth's system replaces the God of Christian doctrine. The scholar writes "Wordsworth's is a secular theodicy—a theodicy without an operative *theos*—which retains the form of the ancient reasoning, but translates controlling Providence into an immanent teleology" (95-96). This "immanent teleology" assumes the same provisional and transcendental qualities of deity, but locates them in the poetic self. The discretion and purpose of Providence in Christianity is here attributed to the human mind, with subsequent questions of moral good and evil left to the individual's discernment. Abrams clarifies this idea, stating "in other words, the Wordsworthian theodicy of the private life . . . translates the painful process of Christian conversion and redemption into a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own

reward" (96). Furthermore, because Abrams terms this faculty to be "immanent," the human mind is necessarily divine in its ability to interpret experience. Thus in the absence of Providence, the intellect is responsible for the "painful process" of self-understanding and recognition, essentially forging its own spiritual basis upon the virtue of independent volition. Finally, in this light the intellect integrates all experience into sensible conceptions, such as right and wrong or good and evil, in order to secularize the human experience for ends that are "its own reward."

Yeats's Spiritual Development

Yeats began his career during a time of strong religious consciousness, which explains his early acquaintance with Christianity. Growing up in the Protestant Orthodox traditions of his family and social class, as a young man he developed a more skeptical attitude toward the church which greatly predicated his eventual rejection of conventional religion. The Yeats family had a history of involvement in the Church of Ireland. Yeats's great-grandfather Rev. John Yeats and grandfather Rev. William Butler Yeats both graduated from Trinity College and served as clergymen in the Church. According to historian R.F. Foster, Yeats's paternal family history followed a familiar course: "by the early nineteenth century the Yeatses appear firmly located in the world of the Protestant middle classes: Trinity College, the Church of Ireland, professional occupations" (2). Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats, also attended Trinity College and briefly studied law, but later chose to pursue his ambition for painting. Foster's assumptions about Irish Protestantism also suggest that the Irish middle class were largely Christian not only for religious purposes, but as means for social identity. Thus Yeats undoubtedly had a firm sense of Christian mores and standards through familial and public traditions during youth.

Yeats came to reject Protestantism, however, adopting like his father more suspicious views on organized religion. David Holdeman finds that "his father's influence and the narrow conventionality he encountered in both Protestantism and Catholicism combined to make him averse to mainstream

religious institutions and their official orthodoxies" (5). Yeats did not deny the validity of some Christian claims about universal truth, but he could not unify his experience in the world with the prescriptive doctrines in the scriptures. Resisting blind allegiance to Irish orthodoxies, he rather sought to expand his knowledge of spirituality and the divine from other sources. Holdeman concludes that "insisting on intuitive spiritual truths inaccessible to his father's outlook, he embarked on a lifelong search for the secret, symbolically expressed wisdom he believed the world's various orthodox and unorthodox religious traditions might have in common" (5). The poet surveyed the principles of orthodox faith, in Abrams words "retaining the form of ancient reasoning" in the denominations he encountered. However, a sense of individual curiosity and skepticism led him away from Protestantism and towards a solitary journey through the milieu of other traditions, including occult and mystical theologies. The self-reliance and determination posed by the Romantic view of Providence evidentially had an early beginning in Yeats's disposition.

Yeats began his experience with occult wisdom in 1884, after graduating from Erasmus Smith High School in Dublin, Ireland. His aunt, Isabella Pollexfen Varley, provided him with a copy of Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. Foster notes that "this was a founding text of the fashionable New Age religion, Theosophy, blending East and West in a spiritual synthesis readily absorbed by its devotees" (45). Sinnett's book introduced Yeats to popular spiritual trends throughout Ireland during the late 1880s. After attending Theosophist meetings in Dublin, he founded his own occult circle, the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885. The guiding principles of the society immersed Yeats in Theosophy, corresponding as they did with his skepticism about the supernatural. Much of the poet's work during this period addresses mystical exploration, as he studied Hinduism and other eastern religions (47). He found occult teachings to encourage spiritual freethinking, rather than the rituals and orthodoxies he had dismissed. Experiences with organized skepticism also contributed to his efforts for unifying the natural and supernatural worlds into a sensible whole through his art. In other words, as an outgrowth of his

increasingly autonomous spirituality, Yeats found occultism to influence his poetic attempts to explore the supernatural.

Yeats's interests also led him to experiment with magic. The poet attended séances with fellow artist George Russell, and deepened his study of eastern religions when he moved to London in 1887. For Holdeman, Yeats's preoccupation with magic and spiritism significantly influenced his literary prescience. He notes that "these experiences eventually affected not only the substance of Yeats's works but also . . . what he perceived them to be: for him, there was a tantalizing similarity between the aesthetic wholeness created by a poem and the harmonizing supernatural powers of a magic spell" (5). Yeats discovered more premises of spiritual and aesthetic unity through "the harmonizing supernatural powers of a magic spell," which tellingly matched his occultist motivations: in spiritual matters he pursued only what he deemed useful and relevant, without considering a law-giving God.

Yeats's religious background seems to evince a longing for internal unity and more significance in the secular world and not the supernatural. For all of the theologies he studied and participated in, it was necessary for him to "retain the form of ancient reasoning" to ascertain which ideas he considered tenable for his own esoteric system. In other words, without fully believing in their respective doctrines, the poet considered some of the claims of orthodox religion, the occult, and magic to be valid in their own right, but secularized their divine bases to accommodate his individualized understanding of religious experience. For instance, Foster notes that Yeats held a belief concerning the mediation of eternal truth between life and the afterlife that echoed Christianity; he writes "the spiritual and real worlds, in WBY's (his acronym) mind, interpenetrated each other, allowing for belief as a metaphorical rather than a literal truth. In this, of course, he was not far from the apologetics of conventional Christian religious faith" (51). Yeats approved of Christianity's claim to unite heaven and earth, but "as a metaphorical rather than a literal truth" about modern experience. This is a basic example of a

secularized appropriation of Christian themes. To explain such Romantic indications, I will begin a comparative analysis of Yeats's poetry alongside Abrams's contentions.

A Dialogue of Self and Soul

The first poem I would like to examine is Yeats's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" from his 1933 collection, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. This work relates to Abrams's theory mainly through its presentation of the sovereign consciousness and power the self has over the soul and its eternal prospects. Yeats presents a dialogue between two introspective entities called "My Soul" and "My Self" in the first section, with a soliloquy by the Self in the following stanza. Though the poem professes to be a "dialogue," the two entities do not respond to each others' questions (from the Soul) or vagaries (from the Self). There is rather an unremitting sense of reverie and reflection in the Self juxtaposed with the pressing theological questions of the Soul. Considering the poem's first section of monologic interchange, the Soul raises questions and issues that seem aimed at eliciting the Self's realization of its transcendent Soul. This is illustrated chiefly in the first stanza, where the Soul inquires:

I summon to the winding ancient stair
 Set all your mind upon the steep ascent
 Upon the broken, crumbling battlement
 Upon the breathless, starlit air

 Fix every wandering thought upon
 That quarter where all thought is done
 Who can distinguish darkness from the soul. (1-8)

The Soul invites the Self to consider the vastness of its intellectual capacity because of its immortality, stating "set all your mind upon the steep ascent" of the Self's grandiosity. The Soul here requests a

dialogue with the Self because it desires recognition of its own transcendence as part of the overall Self. Yeats would correspond to Abrams's notion in this sequence, resulting from the Soul's unaffected intercourse with the Self concerning its essence. Moreover, the Self's disregard of the Soul indicates a fixed willfulness in the Self to govern its own concerns, spiritual or otherwise.

As the poem proceeds, the Self does not attend to the Soul's inquiries, instead focusing on its imaginary obsession with its desires. The Self persists in its reflection:

The consecrated blade upon my knees
 Is Sato's² ancient blade, still as it was
 Still razor-keen, still like a looking glass
 Unspotted by the centuries. (9-12)

The Self's pretentiousness disregards the inquisitive Soul so greatly that its own concerns reflect its image, "like a looking glass." The spiritual issues raised by the Soul are thus usurped by the Self because of its own conceit and willfulness. Harold Bloom elucidates this discrepant relationship further, writing that "the poem's largest irony is that the Soul is an esoteric Yeatsian, and the Self a natural man. . . . Where the soul insists upon a darkness and worships a plenitude of supernatural influx so full 'that man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,' the Self confesses its blindness but lives in . . . the vision of self-confrontation and self-forgiveness" (375). The Soul's subordination is now clear: the Self's "blindness" to all "supernatural influx" suppresses its need to apprehend the Soul's entreaties; the Self's unwillingness to consider the Soul and its proddings about transcendence confirm not so much its "blindness" as a maintenance of its spiritual sovereignty, and manifests its own "confrontation" and "forgiveness," and disinterest in any spiritual modus to propitiate the Soul. Hence, any "darkness" the Soul encounters is

² Junzo Sato gave Yeats a sword before publication of this poem. Yeats later used it as a symbol of "the passions man experiences lifetime after lifetime" (Hirschberg 23).

not only “deaf and dumb” to the Self, but the latter interprets such matters as they relate primarily to its objective compass, resolving them on its own terms. Bloom concludes that “What the Self fights free of is everything in Yeats that has mythologized at its expense” (375). In Yeats’s “Dialogue,” the Self resists the conventional “mythologized” state it receives under religious and spiritual creeds. This lack of transcendence in the individual conferred by the Soul’s intercourse with religion proposes a secular view of the Self.

Furthermore, Yeats’s Self in the work is reminiscent of the Romantic understanding of Providence. Although Abrams does not openly discount the Soul in his definition, his concept implies that the “painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition” definitive of the “immanent teleology” constitutes Yeats’s Self in the poem; the Romantic version of God defined by spiritual self-determination, “self-formation” and “self-recognition” describes the nature of the Self in Yeats’s poem. Their correspondence lies in the presentation of the Self as the governing arbiter of all moral and spiritual circumstances widely answered by orthodox traditions, while refusing any religious discourse with the Soul. Though Yeats’s Self in the “Dialogue” marginalizes the Soul, perhaps for the poem’s sense of irony, the Self portrayed dominates the Soul’s calls for conference about the “steep ascent” of religious and ephemeral experience. The volition, and for Bloom the acute “solipsistic” character of the Self, permits its own desire for autonomy in instances where the Soul is conventionally involved (373). An immanent and internalized view of God therefore dictates the Self’s treatment of the Soul and reliance upon its own discretion in all spiritual affairs. In this light, the Self in Yeats’s “Dialogue” is properly secularized to fit Abrams’s view of Romantic Providence.

The Tower

In “The Tower” from the 1928 collection of the same title, Yeats presents a speaker who is a frank edition of himself aged and with all the cynical and nostalgic distresses that follow (Holdeman 83).

Though the work's first two sections treat the poet's defiance to old age and consideration of memories, the third section closely alludes to Abrams's theory. In this section, Yeats focuses upon his subjective view of the world and himself through addressing the effects of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and its establishment of an Irish Free State. Until this time Ireland had been governed as a colony of the British Empire, but the country gained autonomy in 1922 when the treaty took force. This reference in the last part of "The Tower" implicitly concentrates on a certain social group in wake of the treaty, namely the Irish Protestant minority, of which Yeats's family was a part; he then associates the minority's specific concerns under the accord with his own:

I choose upstanding men

 They shall inherit my pride
 The pride of people that were
 Bound neither to Cause nor to State
 Neither to slaves that were spat on
 Nor to the tyrants that spat
 The people of Burke and of Grattan. (122-132)

The speaker is contributing a particular quality of himself to "the people of Burke and of Grattan," which is his "pride." How this can relate to the notion of a secularized Providence seems remote, but what Yeats pronounces his "pride" to be and what he is sharing with "the people of Burke and of Grattan" provides a strong basis for this assumption. His "pride" will in fact be demonstrative of his self-ordained religiosity, which he reveals later in the poem and thereby invokes Abrams's conception. Later in the stanza, Yeats writes:

And I declare my faith
 I mock Plotinus' thought
 And cry in Plato's teeth
 Death and life were not
 Till man made up the whole
 Made lock, stock and barrel
 Out of his bitter soul. (145-151)

After having just conveyed his opinion of a certain political tract (i.e., minorities affected under the Anglo-Irish treaty), the speaker boldly proclaims his spiritual convictions. The rebuff to the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus implies Yeats's aversion to metaphysical claims about providential truth. His faith rather seems to be more materially or secularly grounded. If "death and life were not" bifurcated until humans understood their differing corporeal and spiritual realities, then any religious doctrine answering such claims through God must be false. The speaker instead recommends an irreligious interpretation of life and the afterlife, suggesting that individuals explore spirituality through independent motivations, not through God. The Romantic inclinations in this passage are further explained by Virginia Pruitt, who affirms the poet's secularized rendition of God.

Commenting on Yeats's profession of "faith" in the third section of "The Tower," Pruitt finds he expresses a self-willed edition of spirituality; Yeats's faith "mocks Plotinus's thought and its quest by way of pure intellect for union with that quintessential abstraction, the Infinite, and declares in behalf of an individualized immortality" (153). More simply put, Yeats rejects the mind's intercourse with "that quintessential abstraction" of Providence, rather committing himself to gain immortality through individualized effort. The prerogative of Providence to give spiritual and moral guidance is here left to the intellectual will of the poetic self. This conclusion directly recalls the purpose of the "immanent teleology" substituting for God in the Romantic tradition, as the human mind becomes responsible for a

plight of “individualized immortality.” Pruitt concludes, noting that “in ‘The Tower,’ he declares that even as man has created life and death, so man can create Translunar Paradise. . . . To its exalted place in his personal hierarchy of convictions, Yeats has restored the power of an indomitable will” (154). Yeats leaves the entire divine realm to the human mind’s calculation and “will,” comprehensively demystifying the place of an omniscient God and the afterlife. Pruitt’s conclusions therefore equate to Abrams’s prospect about a secularized version of deity in the Romantic tradition; and more significantly, Yeats’s secular declaration of faith in this passage resembles the adoption of such principles into his private theology.

Yeats’s faith now seems clearer in light of Abrams’s position. He reiterates his creed in two key places following the passage above. Following his declaration, Yeats adds:

Aye, sun and moon and star, all

And further add to that

That, being dead, we rise

Dream and so create

Translunar Paradise. (152-156)

It is remarkable that this sequence follows his exhibition of faith. Yeats posits that it is the individual’s capacity to understand the universe, from the material realm to the “sun and moon and star” of the heavenly firmament; and further that one’s personal will and journey must create spiritual fulfillment or “Translunar Paradise” in this life. This statement evokes the guiding principle of Abrams’s conception, which insists on the mind’s aptitude for spiritual motivation and fulfillment.

Concluding the poem, Yeats admonishes the “young upstanding men” he mentioned in regards to the Anglo-Irish treaty. The “pride” he advised them to “inherit” from him is now understandable, as he writes “I leave both faith and pride/ To young upstanding men” and later vows that “Now shall I

make my soul" (173-174, 181). Yeats declares not to only propagate his self-willed faith and pride to "young upstanding men," but to exemplify the soul-making volition encompassed in his Romantic beliefs. The secularized implications of Providence in Yeats thus attest to the same facility of the intellect to assume the provisional and transcendental role of God.

Vacillation

Another poem from *The Winding Stair* collection entitled "Vacillation" demonstrates the tenacious power of the "immanent teleology" by focusing on the process of artistic creation. In the work, Yeats confronts the decline of his creative powers near the end of his career. For Bloom, this indicates a similar tendency of Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge to challenge the same problem. Commenting on this thematic connection, Bloom writes that "*Vacillation*, in asking and then attempting to answer this question, puts itself in the central line of the Greater Romantic Ode, with *Intimations*, *Dejection*, the *West Wind*, the *Nightingale*, and their series of later nineteenth-century descendants" (394). The italicized poems are canonical Romantic works of the nineteenth century. The "question" or problem Bloom proposes that "Vacillation" and the canonical Romantic poems try to resolve is the poet's decline of imaginative and creative power; but Bloom further clarifies this issue, writing that "all these are poems lamenting not the decline of creative power, but the loss of an instinctive joy in the exercise of such power. And all vacillate, in different ways, in their balancings of loss against compensatory imaginative gain" (395). The poet's "instinctive joy" derived from creating art is the precise matter at hand in "Vacillation," and requires a certain kind of "lamenting" because it is portrayed as lost.

The particular methodology Yeats describes in the poem to ameliorate this feeling is related to an individualized and internalized prospect of God, as the poet will vow to individually reinvigorate his spirit and creative prowess. Yeats will use the same volition conceptualized as a secularized Providence

to restore his artistic vigor. To express this feeling of loss, he begins the poem with reflections on his dejected and aged state:

Between extremities
 Man runs his course
 A brand, or flaming breath
 Comes to destroy
 All those antinomies
 Of day and night
 The body calls it death
 The heart remorse
 But if these be right
 What is joy? (Yeats 1-10)

The bewildering question of what happened to the “joy” Yeats once felt in creating art is initially addressed. The experiential “antinomies” or contradictions of “body” and the “heart” that facilitate his creativity fail to inspire him in his current state. Yeats’s reliance upon corporeal and spiritual experiences for poetic substance naturally falters near life’s end. Bloom expands upon this point, noting that “man runs between extremities, negations, and so more than divinity lies beyond our death; experience itself does. Many times Yeats has denied death, and cast out remorse in the name of the ‘joy’ or ‘genial spirits’ that are so crucial to Romantic creativity” (394). The subjection of divinity to the “experience” provided by the poet’s “body” and “heart” suggests a significant point: Yeats insists on his own will for creativity, and not from the influence of “death” and “remorse” dictated by religious traditions.

The autonomy of Yeats’s poetic self, apparent in the lines above, reveals the connection between Yeats’s creative process and Abrams’s position. Yeats is not propounding a secularized vision of

deity in "Vacillation," but he is necessarily venting about what he contends to be the main impetus in writing poetry; namely, the "joy" and "genial spirits" he derives from his efforts. Bloom notes that this self-willed endeavor is not always the case, especially among Yeats's Romantic predecessors. Yeats does not strive to balance his loss of creativity with old age as other writers have done. Again, the poems Bloom compares with "Vacillation" are the canonical Romantic works approaching this same question; among which, "the occasions are disparate, and Yeats's is the only one of these poems that hesitates towards a conventionally religious resolution of the balancing" (395). Pointedly, Bloom concludes that "I find it very difficult to believe that Yeats the man was much tempted by Christianity . . . But Yeats is much subtler anyway; he vacillates here not toward belief, but toward a different kind of poetic subject matter, and then veers back toward his own individualized concerns" (395). Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Yeats rejected a "conventionally religious resolution" to negative experience, specifically to his artistic struggles. His vacillation "toward his own individualized concerns" results in a different kind of effort to remain creative; Yeats depends upon himself and believes that "a different kind of poetic subject matter" must express his creative decline, one that necessarily calls for a restoration of volition rather than a renewed abstract source of inspiration. Such a method recalls Abrams's assumption, as Yeats tries to reconcile the deterioration of his work and life on his own.

The poet confirms this willful resolution to his decreasing powers in the last stanza. There, Yeats vows in the final lines that the immortal "Homer is my example and his unchristened heart" (87). As Yeats does not vacillate towards transcendental intercession for his troubles, he does not desire God to amend his creative decline. He rather strives to follow the solitary path trod by poets before him, whose work was not perpetuated by divine powers. B. L. Reid comments on this passage, noting that the poet seems tempted by Christianity in his deflated, age-laden state; Reid notes that "'I,' says Yeats at the end, though I feel the pull of available creature comfort 'did I become a Christian man,' 'play a predestined part,' the part of secular man involved in pagan myth and passionate experience: 'Homer is my example

and his unchristened heart'. . . one feels as Yeats does the Christian threads that adhere in that last great negative adjective" (1). Yeats does not find rest in Christianity for the toll that time has placed on his abilities. The "last great adjective" about Homer as an "unchristened" poet exposes Yeats's temptations with the eternal promises of Christianity, which he still eschews as a remedy for the loss of poetic power and inspiration. The "passionate experience" of writing poetry remains for Yeats the labor of a "secular man," as he is a poet responsible for his own craft and its interchange with his individual spirit. The autonomy of the poetic self in spiritual matters definitive of the "immanent teleology" thus relates to Yeats's process of creation. Moreover, *Vacillation* expresses Yeats's similar self-understanding of what he must do to remain productive: even as his muse seems to wane, Yeats digs deeper and deeper into himself to empower his will once more to create; and though the poem is not explicitly about religion, Yeats still clarifies his place as a theologically free-thinking poet, relying upon his own provision to preserve the creative and spiritual liberty he does not want to lose.

Yeats's concordance with Abrams's conception is explicit through the examination of these poems. He did not neglect the teachings and mores he encountered in orthodox religion, nor those from his experiences with occultism and mysticism. However, as these poems consistently attest, Yeats did convey a secularized understanding of God defined by spiritual self-determination. Even as the works treat unique subjects, from the poet's clashing subjective identities to his creative aptitude, the prospect of an irreligious, individualized adaptation of God remains apparent. This link with Abrams thus conceives Yeats as a Romantic in theological matters concerning the nature of God.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIVAL AND SECULARIZATION OF CLASSICAL MYTH IN YEATS

Abrams finds that another fundamental part of Romanticism is the revival of classical mythology. Romantic writers admired the moral and aesthetic teleological claims offered by ancient mythologies and religions such as Christianity. More specifically, Wordsworth adapted many Christian principles into his moral vision. Abrams also insists that the Romantics separated ethical teachings from the spiritual stratum of such theologies and applied them to a secular frame of reference. Thus in this chapter I begin by elucidating how Romanticism secularized classical myth; that is, the method of reanimating such accounts not for divine revelation or enlightenment, but to relate to non-religious experience and provide a secular teleological understanding of morality and aesthetics. Concerning Yeats, I provide some biographical information on how and why such sources became a recurrent motif in his work. I also explain how the poet's compositions inspired by Irish folklore and Celtic myths indicate themes of secular relevance. I examine "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "Leda and the Swan" from the 1928 collection *The Tower*, and Yeats's epic mythological work "The Wanderings of Oisín," which revivifies the story of the legendary Celtic hero Ossian (pronounced "ah-SHUN"). To equate these poems with Abrams's position, I reveal the peculiarly Romantic tenor in their use of classical myth. Yeats's redefinition of transcendent themes with a secular teleological meaning associates him with Abrams's approach, thereby suggesting the importance of mythology in the modern era.

The Secularization of Ancient Mythology

Abrams treats classical myth in terms similar to his interpretation of Providence. His statement from the previous chapter about "retaining the form of ancient reasoning" in Romantic interpretations of ancient myth applies here as well. Instead of explaining the ancestral history and religion of the classical world, Romanticism celebrated the beauty and secular teleological meanings such myths gave

to current experience. In a passage on this matter, Abrams suggests the distinct ways Romantic and Enlightenment thinkers viewed classical myth; he finds that “a conspicuous Romantic tendency, after the rationalism and decorum of the Enlightenment, was a reversion . . . to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life, turning on the extremes of destruction and creation, hell and heaven, exile and reunion, death and rebirth” (66). Romantic writers cherished not only the pragmatic aspects of ancient traditions, such as Christianity, but preserved their anecdotal purposes. Themes of individual or collective experience, such as “destruction and creation” or “exile and reunion,” that ancient myth expressed were not subject to rationalization because they were true in a secular frame of reference. Such motifs had the same purpose in a non-religious aesthetic and moral paradigm that sought to understand the human experience.

Mythologies often chronicle the legendary or historical imagination of entire civilizations, and the Romantics respected this deep significance to humanity and therein derived inspiration for their poetry. Like their Enlightenment predecessors, the Romantics did not refrain from “rationalizing” the foundations of classical myth, but did so in a way that upheld the teleology of their teachings. Abrams notes that when compared with Enlightenment writers, the Romantics “revived these ancient matters with a difference: they undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny, the experiential paradigms, and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being” (66). What was rationally acceptable from an Enlightenment perspective was not enough for the Romantics. The effort to “save the overview of human history and destiny” suggests sensitivity to the “emotional pertinence” of archaic human expression. The moral and “experiential paradigms” provided by myth also influenced the Romantic ethos, but were ultimately negotiated to promote secular themes. When writing about mythology, Romantics preserved principal schemes and characters; but what the writer and reader understood them to represent was totally different, hence the intellectually and emotionally

relevant ideas above. Within a secular teleological framework, Yeats followed suit by restoring myths to broad imaginary and moral importance for readers.

Mythology in Yeats

The appeal of classical mythology and Irish lore was no less poignant in the poetry of Yeats, where he used such materials to propound Irish culture and political freedom. From a young age, he became acquainted with Celtic legends and myths that celebrated the folkloric history of his homeland. As a child growing up in the northwestern County Sligo region of Ireland, a place known for its terrestrial beauty, Yeats also developed an appreciation for the Irish landscape alongside its ancient culture. However, during his later years and movements throughout the urban environments of Dublin and London he encountered derogatory public opinion and prejudice towards the Irish people. David Holdeman comments on this grim reality, noting “the British sometimes justified their empire in Ireland and elsewhere by describing those over whom they held sway as savages. In texts ranging from novels to political cartoons, they stereotyped the Irish as irrational, effeminate, and drunken: in other words, as unfit to govern themselves” (7). The British deplored all things Irish, thus disparaging Irish writers who sought to publish such mythologies. Yeats’s passion for Irish lore led him to confront these adversities, however. One of the most significant ways he employed mythology was to dispel the discrimination he experienced in Ireland; he advanced Irish legend to illuminate its beauty and value against British allegations of cultural vapidness.

Yeats also used mythology to support the cause for Irish nationalism in the early twentieth century. Holdeman agrees, noting that Yeats answered his “political questions in the folk beliefs of Ireland’s western country people and in the heroic myths of the whole island’s ancient Gaelic culture” (7). Political concerns in contemporary Ireland often took symbolic form in the poet’s mythological works, while he devoted some entire compositions (e.g., “Easter 1916,” “September 1913”) to bolster

Irish legitimacy and autonomy. Political strife between the occupying British and nationalists was exacerbated by the Catholic Church, whose sympathetic relations with British authorities in turn restored national pride for legends that fostered an Irish identity, such as “The Wanderings of Oisín.” In this poem Yeats revives the story of the Celtic hero Oisín, a legendary poet and warrior and progenitor of the Fenians³. Yeats also mingled with other artists and thinkers supportive of a nationalist agenda in late nineteenth-century Ireland; and among these, an acquaintance with the chauvinistic Fenian writer John O’Leary⁴ helped indoctrinate Yeats with political themes to express through his poetry. O’Leary’s Fenianism was formative for much of the imagery in “The Wanderings of Oisín.”

The poet therefore treated mythological subjects in a way consistent with Abrams. Yeats produced mythical symbols such as Oisín to promote Irish independence, while also exalting the beauty of Celtic legend. This method reinterprets “the form of ancient reasoning” and “experiential paradigms and values” in such accounts by abolishing their divine rationale and revealing the secular teleology they provide; that is, instead of “Oisín” and other myths explaining experience in transcendent terms, Yeats conveys contemporary social, cultural, and political issues within a mythological stratum in poems such as “The Wanderings of Oisín” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” For Abrams, Yeats presents these materials through a Romantic lens, promoting their merit in all areas save theological truth. In the paragraphs that follow, I will examine poems where Yeats implements classical myth and how such works posit meaningful observations and interpretations of the modern sphere.

The Wanderings of Oisín

The first poem I would like to discuss is Yeats’s narrative mythological work “The Wanderings of Oisín,” published in 1889. The poem is mediated through the dialogue of Oisín and “St. Patrick,” the

³ In Irish myth, the Fenians were a group of warriors perpetually on guard to protect Ireland from its enemies. In Yeats’s time, the mythical tribe represented fierce nationalism and political freedom from Britain.

⁴ John O’Leary was a prominent Fenian, and a political influence on Yeats.

religious figure widely considered to have brought Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century. Oisín describes his three-hundred-year sojourn with his mistress “Niam” (pronounced “Nee-av”) in the isles of Faerie, land of eternal youth, and other exotic and magical islands they visited. Weary of immortality and still resplendent with youth, Oisín desires to return to Ireland but finds his once pagan homeland converted to Christianity and fellow-Fenians all perished. While in Ireland, Oisín accidentally steps on the mortal soil and loses all his youth and radiance, instantly becoming three hundred years old. St. Patrick urges him to repent and become a Christian, but Oisín vows in his crippled state to return and fight with the Fenians.

As I noted above, Fenian imagery in the poem invokes nationalistic sentiments Irish readers would have understood to represent their political aspirations. In this sense, the legend’s transcendent meaning is translated into a secular symbol of Irish independence, particularly in the figure of Oisín. As the putative Celtic hero, Oisín represents a purely Irish state before the intrusion of domineering conventions, as represented by St. Patrick. In other words, St. Patrick can be seen as a symbol of British and institutional tyranny over the Irish people. This is seen in book II, where after reminiscing about adventure and battle with demons, Oisín laments Ireland and his native people:

In what land do the powerless turn the beak
 Of ravening Sorrow, or the hand of Wrath
 For all your croziers, they have left the path
 And wander in the storms and clinging snows
 Hopeless for ever: ancient Oisín knows
 For he is weak and poor and blind, and lies
 On the anvil of the world. (II. 198-204)

Oisín mourns the loss of Irish traditions at the hands of “all your croziers,” which is an attack on St. Patrick’s influence over his countrymen. St. Patrick offers Oisín little comfort after this address, admonishing him to pray and meekly submit to the Christian God, consequently imposing an external order upon indigenous lore and mysticism. Oisín responds angrily, spouting:

I hear amid the thunder, lightning, and fierce wind
 The Fenian horses; armour torn asunder
 Laughter and cries. The armies clash and shock . . .
 Cease, cease, O mournful, laughing Fenian horn. (ll. 210-213)

Lapsing into the present, Oisín laments the state of his native Ireland. The warrior’s legion of horses and comrades have been “torn asunder” by the loss of familiar modes of Irish identity. All that is left is the derision of a “mournful, laughing Fenian horn.” The intrusion of foreign customs into ancient Ireland thus symbolizes the oppressive antics of the British in the modern era. The characterization of St. Patrick also parallels the patronizing sentiments British imperialists leveled at the Irish populace.

Supporting these claims, Hiroko Ikeda finds the political tensions implied in the dialogue of Oisín and St. Patrick to express the divide between modern Fenians and the Irish Catholic Church. In this light, the ancient Fenianst imagery can indicate secular political causes in modern Ireland. Ikeda notes that “the Fenians had been in conflict with the Catholic Church, which disapproved their radical nationalism. From the Fenian viewpoint, the Church had either seemed too much involved with loyalist politics, or wrong to involve itself with politics at all” (119). This acrimonious relationship extends to the dialogue between Oisín and St. Patrick in the poem, depicting the milieu of Irish politics in Yeats’s time. Ikeda adds that “the conflict between Oisín and St. Patrick is analogous to that between the modern Fenians and the Catholic Church” (119). With this conclusion, the secular teleology of the mythical figures of Oisín and St. Patrick is clear: Oisín and St. Patrick’s legendary quarrel to define Ireland, either as a

country of unique heritage or foreign subservience, symbolizes the modern struggle for a free Irish state; moreover, Oisín's Fenian identity evokes modern calls for Irish nationalism, whose primary inspiration is the hero's ancient tribe. Lastly, St. Patrick's patronizing mission to convert pagan Ireland and impose a new cultural order implies similar motives for the Catholic Church's "loyalist" relationship with Great Britain. David Holdeman notes that "traces of more radical nationalism show up 'Oisín.' When the hero answers the saint by pledging loyalty to the Fenians, he invokes a name that Yeats's readers would have associated not only with Oisín's band of ancient warriors but also with the nineteenth-century forerunners of the Irish Republican Army⁵" (10). As an ancient Fenian hero, *Oisín* metaphorically embodies the cause for a sovereign Irish polity and serves an icon for freedom fighters in Ireland, hence another demystified connection with the modern Irish experience.

The last observation I would like to make about "The Wanderings of Oisín" is how Yeats used the story to quell any discriminatory attitudes posed by western Europeans towards the Irish, although such bigotries usually came from the British. The secular scheme will become apparent here because Yeats displays the beauty and patriotism of the legend as a means to celebrate Irish culture. The poem thus becomes a way readers outside of Ireland can experience Irish tradition, instead of relying on pretensions and prejudices to form their judgments. For biographer R. F. Foster, in "Oisín" "the tone was to be 'Celtic' rather than 'national': in other words, while using Irish modes and themes, it was to appeal to an audience beyond Ireland" (86). Although strains of political invective against nationalist detractors arise in the text, Foster finds it to utilize a distinct Celtic tenor and dialect. Considering our scheme, Yeats may have employed a Celtic idiom, but to renounce the "national" sentiments in the poem undermines its unique message and teleological goals for modern readers. In other words, such stylistic aspects are subsumed into Yeats's greater "national" agenda for the work. These aspects could then purport to an established Irish tradition that any reader could not overlook. In support of this, Holdeman

⁵ Irish Republican military contingent that fought for Irish Independence in 1922-23.

concludes that “‘The Wanderings of Oisín’ and ‘The Madness of King Goll’ exemplify the youthful poet’s emerging commitment to Irish cultural nationalism: they associate Ireland with traditions of heroism and beauty and so contest the demeaning stereotypes sometimes used by the British to justify their rule” (9-10). Through the efforts of a great poet, Ireland’s “traditions of heroism and beauty” can convert outside stereotypes into positive images. Instead of explaining ancestral history, Yeats utilizes Romantic principles to secularize the legend to pose as a testament to cultural dignity. The secular purposes in “Oisín” thus extend to restoring the imaginative grandeur of Irish mythology for readers across Europe and the globe. In true Romantic fashion, the purpose of “Oisín” for modern readers suggests Yeats’s acculturating role as an Irish poet.

Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen

The next poem I would like to examine is “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” Like “Oisín,” Yeats composed the work during a time of political and cultural upheaval in Ireland. There are thus references to modern social issues and events in Ireland juxtaposed with images of ancient Greek culture. This poem expresses Yeats’s view on the relationship between art and history. He posits that the worth of art, and even the creative power of the artist, is abated throughout time and by the advent of new traditions. Yeats resolves this negative correlation between art and history through an ironic comparison of modern and classical aesthetics. The poet refers to modern art with a sense of insincere enthusiasm that is highly ironic compared to his reverence of classical art. It is therefore implied that Yeats perceives the rise of modern art as disingenuous because of its disregard of antiquity. In this sense, the primary teleology for ancient art is not to articulate experience, but to set precedents for all subsequent aesthetic attitudes. Foshay and Forshay summarize the work’s theme, noting that “the six poems . . . are reflections on the problem of time and history . . . The very struggle for stability and permanence in art, whether collective or individual, takes place within time. Time itself eventually asserts itself against

human attempts to create an ordered world by demonstrating the vulnerability of creativity to destruction” (104). Human efforts at perpetuity through art are undermined by the passing of time, and as Yeats suggests, even the most venerable traditions cannot escape temporal negation.

In the first stanza, Yeats evokes this idea where he describes majestic sculptures of the classical artist Phidias alongside modern works that elicit the same reverence from humanity. Yeats laments the widespread disfavor of classical art in lieu of the unfounded splendor of modern aesthetics, observing acidly that:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone
 That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude
There stood
 Amid the ornamental bronze and stone
 An ancient image made of olive wood
 And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories
 And all the golden grasshoppers and bees. (1-8)

The poet provides image after image of the bronze and gilded Greek masterpieces now effaced by modernity. This sentiment of loss is followed by lines evoking pretentious esteem of modern art:

We too had many pretty toys when young
 A law indifferent to blame or praise
 To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong

 Public opinion ripening for so long
 We thought it would outlive all future days. (9-14)

Although Yeats regarded “many pretty toys when young,” modern culture offers only puppets or “pretty toys” compared to the classical age. In other words, modern aesthetics should understand the majestic standards set by classical intellectuals and artists. For Yeats, the secular teleology of mythical images as “golden grasshoppers and bees,” or more tangible “ornamental bronze and stone” represent a foundation for proper aesthetic judgments during the modern epoch. This then sets modern aesthetics in a proper perspective, both chronologically and qualitatively.

It is also conceivable that Yeats finds ancient classical art to exemplify the fruits of true culture. The teleology of ancient tradition here defines what modern aesthetic values should look like within an established and thriving society. Forshay and Foshay comment on this issue, writing that “the poet shared the view with Phidian Athens that culture is miraculous, the progressive revelation of a permanent religious, moral and social perfection” (103). The poet shared values with ancient Greece concerning art and its place in society, while characterizing modern aesthetics as “habits that made old wrong” and not a “progressive revelation” striving for “moral and social perfection.” It is an admonishing metaphor at best, while implying the need for assessment of what cultural values have endured history and remained significant. The images of “Phidias’ famous ivories” that have become “an ancient image made of olive wood” therefore represent the perfection modern art could attain within more predicated and “progressive” customs. The Romantic endeavor to revive ancient culture here presents its “golden” relevance to society, which if adopted into a modern perspective could further cultivate modern virtuosity. These conclusions recall Abrams’s caveat that Romanticism strives to restore ancient myth not only for its own beauty and value, but as an influential paradigm to improve the grandeur of all subsequent art.

The laudatory sentiment toward the “grasshoppers and bees” of antiquity persists throughout the poem. In section three Yeats reaffirms his approbation of Greek mythology:

Some moralist or mythological poet
 Compares the solitary soul to a swan
 I am satisfied with that
 Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it
 Before that brief gleam of its life be gone. (59-63)

Explaining this reference to Greek myth, Harold Bloom notes that “section III opens with an apparent reference to Asia’s song of transfiguration in *Prometheus Unbound*” (359). The “moralist or mythological poet” Yeats refers to is the mythological Oceanid “Asia” from Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s play “Prometheus Unbound.” Asia is a character in Shelley’s play and a recurring figure in Greek mythology, whose “song of transfiguration” compares the “solitary soul to a swan” in “Prometheus Unbound.” The significance of this allusion is not how the figure Asia functions in Shelley’s play, or even what her “song of transfiguration” contextually means in the work; the point is how Yeats seeks inspiration from the “ancient reasoning” that Asia pronounces. Thus, after finding that the Oceanide’s song “compares the solitary soul to a swan,” he expresses approval of her “song of transfiguration.”

Asia’s “song of transfiguration” is subordinated to Yeats’s larger view in the poem about the troublesome relationship of art and history. The soul’s brief life as comparable to a swan’s corresponds to the degeneration of aesthetic appeal and meaning over time. For Yeats, the teleology of Asia’s song does not provide transcendent meaning, but serves as a metaphor for the temporality of all created things. Giorgio Melchiori comments on this allusion to the mythological past, even if it is through Shelley; he notes that “his early enthusiasm for Shelley never flagged: in him Yeats found a repository of those ancient symbols from the world’s Great Memory, which he believed to be the substance of all poetry” (106). History assails “the world’s Great Memory” and all is eventually lost and disregarded; but for Yeats, symbols like Asia’s swan could link the past with the present. Bloom affirms this motif in the

poem, noting “the poet, no more than other men, fears the history that no man can master, and curbs the tendency in himself to hail the superhuman” (362). To temper the effects of history on art and humanity, Yeats tries like other modern thinkers to “curb” the “superhuman” allure and promises of mythological wisdom. Yet Asia’s “song of transfiguration” indeed represents a regard for ancient reasoning. In the modern secular realm, the purpose of Asia’s song is to illuminate the incorrigible forces of time, which eventually render all golden and bronze things as mere artifacts. Invoking Asia’s song is thus another example of Yeats’s Romantic interpretation of ancient myth, as the figure’s immemorial insight about the “solitary soul” is secularized to represent the transience of all aesthetic creation.

Finally in stanza two, an allusion to ancient Greek astrology suggests the corrosive effects of time on traditions of art and morality. Such astrological concepts that seek to explain history eventually fade as new systems of understanding arise. Historical processes of degeneration and rebirth subject all human institutions (i.e., art and morality) to the same futile cycle. For Yeats, this process comes to resemble a dance of ancient and modern culture:

When Loie Fuller’s⁶ Chinese dancers enwound
 A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth
 It seemed that a dragon of air
 Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
 Or hurried them off on its own furious path
 So the Platonic Year⁷
 Whirls out new right and wrong
 Whirls in the old instead. (49-56)

⁶ Loie Fuller was a prominent dancer during Yeats’s era known for her innovative choreographic style and use of theatrical lighting. She is associated with the “Art Nouveau” movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁷ A Platonic Year (also commonly called a Great Year) is the length of time required for one precession of the Earth’s equinoxes (a full rotation of the Earth’s axis around its path). This concept originated in Hellenic astronomy and influenced Greek mythological literature.

For Yeats, Hellenic cosmology and modernity are “whirled” through the dance of history. In this juxtaposition, both the “Platonic Year,” representative of past culture, and the modern dancers are swept up by a “dragon of air.” The classical and modern world unhinge within the “dragon of air,” a repetitive force of creation and destruction that resembles a “dance” of both new and old mores. In other words, history undermines the foundations of both epochs because of their equal capacity to decline. Yeats also implies the futility of moral principles because defined either by ancient or modern standards, they “whirl” in and out of vogue. Foshay and Forshay elucidate this passage further, noting that section two “discusses how art itself, in this case, dance, in attempting to create some order, merely reflects the insubstantial chaos of the world (‘the dragon of air’). What is new is subsumed in what is old and man, rather than achieving order and civilization through art, reflects the world’s disorder by the very impulse and necessity to move and act” (103).

As a “dragon of air” history reveals the equal consequence of Hellenic astrology and modern culture, in view of their ultimate transience. Thus the secular teleology of classical culture here is to represent the effects of history, as the credence of the “Platonic Year” and values of modernity will eventually falter. The reference to the “Platonic Year” also retains the same metaphorical function as the “dragon of air,” in so far as they both suggest cyclical patterns of culture and morality. Also, this passage suggests that because history can antiquate glorious art of the past, the same is true for modern aesthetics. David B. McWhirter summarizes this point, stating “the Platonic vision, like all others must return into the ‘whirling dust’ from which it emerged, for as the poet of *Ecclesiastes* (4:20) tells us ‘all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again’” (50). Greek astrology conveys the poet’s view of the relationship between cultural traditions and history, and therefore retains a secular purpose in the poem. Yeats’s Romantic interpretation of the “Platonic Year” evokes the passing of all cultures and knowledge into significance and out again, thereby redefining the modern era’s relation to the past.

Leda and the Swan

Yeats also identifies with Abrams's scheme in his sonnet "Leda and the Swan." The poem reanimates the Greek mythological account of the rape of Leda, queen of Sparta, by Zeus who appeared to her as a swan. The encounter conceived Helen of Troy, one of the central figures in the Trojan War detailed in Homer's *The Iliad*. Yeats's treatment of the account raises secular questions about understanding rape in society. Thus the teleology of ancient myth here is to scrutinize a pejorative part of the human order. The poem begins with haunting images of Zeus overpowering Leda, but settles into a more subdued tone when she seemingly submits to Zeus's will. If Leda is viewed as subservient to Zeus in the encounter, then such horrific actions could seem indifferently expected in society. After the initial struggle, Leda is taken by surprise:

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast
 How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs
 And how can body, laid in that white rush
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (3-8)

Yeats depicts Leda as slightly acquiescent to Zeus's overreaching, as her "loosening thighs" are "helpless" against him. The description of Leda's "terrible vague" volition lends a sense of ambivalence to her resistance against Zeus, and however odious, supports the premise that she yields to him. Holdeman comments on this issue, writing "feminists have often criticized the poem as an example of a larger cultural tendency to see rape as part of the natural order, objecting in particular to the acquiescence suggested by Leda's 'loosening thighs'" (89). Whether or not he meant to describe Leda's rape as "part of the natural order" is not clearly answered in the sonnet's sestet. Yeats leaves the

encounter ambiguous by giving only provocative images of Leda's helplessness, leaving no "objections to the acquiescence suggested by Leda." W.C. Barnwell provides more insight into what Yeats possibly intended concerning the issue of rape; he writes that "'Leda' is in fact a profound and provocative dramatization of the ambiguities of sexual encounter for Yeats, and questions as well as answers the major premise in his scheme of thought: the idea of a perfect order in the universe that supports, guides, and affirms all of man's endeavors in various ways" (62).

"Leda and the Swan" does present a "dramatization of ambiguities" in the rape of Leda, because she remains terrified while feebly submitting herself to Zeus's will. Barnwell's assertion that "all of man's endeavors," including rape, factor in the "perfect order of the universe" affirms Holdeman's and my assumption that the work takes issue with the meaning of such crimes in a well ordered society. This general observation evokes the myth's purpose for modern readers, which is to question the proper understanding of such events in the temporal world and not those of the supernatural realm. In this light, the mythological rape of Leda directly appertains to the secular order of modern experience, positing that the issue should receive greater inquiry within its moral systems.

Scholars also assert that "Leda and the Swan" symbolically represented Yeats's cyclical theory of history and civilization. In his 1938 work *A Vision*, Yeats sets out his own cosmological system for organizing history, which was heavily influenced by his interests in the occult. *A Vision* explains Yeats's ideas about individual experience and the course of history, both of which he believes to be dictated by cyclical patterns throughout the duration of human existence. Considering this vision, Joan S. Carberg remarks that "Yeats imagines history as inching its way around a giant wheel representing the Great Year of 26,000 years. As it does so, it also goes through smaller cycles: during a lunar month of 2200 years, history completes the cycle of one civilization; during a solar month of the same length, but starting at the midpoint of a lunar month, it completes the cycle of a religious era" (148). Yeats's system

divides the rise and fall of civilizations into segments of about 2,000 years, and fundamental aspects of such cultures (i.e., religion) partake in this cycle of birth and degeneration.

In light of this theory, Yeats considered the sexual union of Leda and Zeus, notwithstanding its brutality, to signify the dawn of Greek civilization. This fact then suggests a significant purpose for the myth, which is to represent the inception of Greek culture. Brian Arkins notes that “for Yeats the sexual union of Leda and Zeus constituted a First Annunciation inaugurating Greek history” (98). Arkins also draws a comparative conclusion between the succeeding age of Greek civilization, the Christian era. Both of these epochs transpire in terms of 2000 years, amounts of time Yeats refers to as “gyres” in *A Vision*. Arkins concludes that “just as the Christian era began with the epiphany of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary and with the news of the impending Incarnation of Christ, so the Greek era began with the epiphany of Zeus the king of the gods to Leda and with the fact of sexual union between them” (98). “Sexual union” for Yeats works beyond the creation of individual life to the grander birthing of whole nations. This is undeniable in reality, but Zeus and Leda were not human beings and could not engender anything but more myth and literary inspiration; but Yeats demystifies the mythological encounter to represent the beginning of an entire subjective tradition, and not just Helen of Troy. Moreover, considering the mythological consummation of Zeus and Leda to symbolically inaugurate the Greek era, Yeats again derives a decisively secular meaning from the account concerning the path of history.

“Leda and the Swan” therefore carries implications about the poet’s understanding of ancient mythology. Considering Abrams’s scheme, Yeats is secularizing and appropriating the mythological intercourse of Zeus and Leda as an impetus for instituting Greek culture. The myth is also reconfigured to express Yeats’s theory of history and Greek myth is returned to the fore of modern culture. Arkins agrees, noting that “Yeats made one of his great imaginative leaps . . . in designating the union of Leda

and Zeus as the Greek Annunciation from which a series of momentous consequences flowed. Greek myth is here revitalized, as it always has been and always will be" (101). For Yeats, the mythological "consequences" of this sexual union include the birth of Helen of Troy and the ensuing Trojan War, which in a secular viewpoint are cultural continuities of Greek civilization. Hellenic tradition is also "revitalized" in the poem, strengthening the theory that history is arranged in such cycles where the beginning of an epoch renders memorable accounts, which for later generations "always has been" and "always will be."

The last lines of the poem also indicate Yeats's symbolic understanding of the rape of Leda and propose another secularized purpose for the myth. In the final image Yeats implies that new historical epochs, or "gyres" come into existence through means of violent change. This idea certainly applies to the birth of the modern age, where violence and disorder severed society from peaceable traditions of the past. After the encounter, Yeats asks "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop" (14-15). The most conspicuous point here is that Yeats cannot confirm the transposition of Zeus's nature (i.e., "power" and "knowledge") into the mortal Leda, and thus institute the classical Greek age. The lines do not resolve the tension of Leda's intercourse with Zeus, as the image of Leda still bound in the beak suggests. The effects of their consummation are thus dubitable, as this insoluble image does not imply the beginning or end of a new era, but something racked in struggle. The detestable path of rape to bear a new culture could have bothered Yeats by the poem's end, and the imperfect image of Leda in the "indifferent beak" been left to display the haunting means of destruction and creation. If so, this image corroborates the aforementioned historical theory Yeats adopted, whereby civilizations exist through a cycle of brutal inception, proliferation and stability. The last lines question this fact, whether or not it is conscionable that history proceeds in such a fashion or individuals behave in such ways at the outset of a new epoch. In any case, Yeats again imparts a more general meaning from the Greek myth that relates directly to the human experience.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE APOCALYPSE AND THEODICY OF NATURE IN YEATS

Abrams contends that another fundamental part of Romantic theology is the secularized moral interpretation of nature proposed by Wordsworth in his *Prospectus*. As I noted in my introduction, Wordsworth's moral and theological paradigm, or "theodicy" of nature, engages the issues of human evil, suffering, and virtue on the basis of the physical world. This theodicy thus investigates the same essential questions as orthodox religions, such as Christianity, and comprises a system of differing values inspired by the environment; but without Providence governing his moral framework, Wordsworth resorts to the aesthetic attributes of nature for moral revelation. As a result, the apocalypse of nature derives out of tension between good and malicious aesthetic forces in Wordsworth's theodicy. I begin this chapter by explaining Wordsworth's conception in more detail to reacquaint the reader with these ideas mentioned in the introduction. This will serve, as it has in previous chapters, to explicitly inform the reader about which part of Abrams's scheme is being applied to Yeats's work. To link Yeats with Abrams's claims, I analyze poems demonstrative of Wordsworth's theodicy. This connection relies principally upon the notions of beauty, sublimity and the apocalypse in Wordsworth's system. I examine Yeats's renowned work "The Second Coming" from his 1921 collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* and the poems "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Gyres" published in 1938. In these works, Yeats expresses an aesthetically based ethic indicative of the values in Wordsworth's scheme.

The Theodicy of Nature

For Abrams, Wordsworth's theodicy of nature is a moral system assimilated to a secular viewpoint devoid of the transcendent ordinances provided by orthodox traditions. Without the omniscient power of God to prescribe ethical meaning in the universe, Wordsworth upholds the forces of nature as the locus for comprehending human evil, suffering, goodness, and love. Abrams clarifies this unique vision:

Wordsworth adapted the two primary categories—that of the beautiful and that of the sublime—into which earlier eighteenth-century theorists had apportioned the aesthetic qualities of the natural scene. . . . But behind this familiar eighteenth-century aesthetic dichotomy lay centuries of speculation about the natural world—speculation whose concerns were not aesthetic but theological and moral, and which in fact constituted a systematic theodicy of the landscape. (98)

This theodicy rests upon two main aesthetic principles: the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful aspects of nature are antithetical to their sublime counterparts because they symbolize and manifest differing ends of the moral order. Abrams classifies these conflicting aspects, noting that “by and large the beautiful is small in scale, orderly, and tranquil, effects pleasure in the observer, and is associated with love; while the sublime is vast (suggestive of infinity), wild, tumultuous, and awful, is associated with pain, and evokes ambivalent feelings of terror and admiration” (98). Wordsworth’s theodicy associates the beauty of nature (e.g., primroses and quiet brooks) with love and virtue, and the sublime (e.g., lightning, volcanic eruptions) ultimately with evil, pain, and “terror and admiration.” Thus Wordsworth’s theodicy is founded upon moral evaluations of beautiful and sublime qualities of nature, and how they affect the observer in positive or negative ways. Yeats’s poems I examine also imply such an understanding of the beautiful and sublime, attesting to his Romantic ethos.

In Wordsworth’s scheme the moral connotations of nature’s beauty ceaselessly counterbalance those of the sublime (e.g., pain is averse to love), recalling another part of Wordsworth’s theodicy: the “apocalypse of nature.” This concept is highly wrought in Yeats’s work where apocalyptic themes are described in terms of the sublime. In other words, the “apocalypse of nature” in Yeats’s work is consistently presented as terrifying and destructive, but also as a circumstance of unalterable tension. According to Abrams, this aesthetic contradistinction signals an apocalyptic state in nature because the

bipolarity of beauty and sublimity represent the immutability of good and evil. He also suggests that this ethical discord resembles the Biblical apocalypse in the Christian tradition, but reoriented within the aesthetic properties of nature. He notes that “in consonance with Wordsworth’s two-term frame of reference, the Scriptural Apocalypse is assimilated to an apocalypse of nature; its written characters are natural objects . . . and its antithetic qualities of sublimity and beauty are seen as simultaneous expressions on the face of heaven and earth” (107). The divisive “two-term frame of reference,” or dichotomy of beauty and sublimity, define the apocalypse of nature. Wordsworth thus proclaims in his theodicy⁸ “a truth about the darkness and the light, the terror and the peace, the ineluctable contraries that make up our human existence” (107). Abrams concludes that, like the Biblical eschatological account claiming the truth of Christ’s apocalyptic return and redemption of humankind, Wordsworth’s apocalypse claims the antithetical inertia of nature’s moral binary with a possibility for redemption via the imagination. This concept is significant for Yeats because he invokes such momentous themes in “The Second Coming” and “Lapis Lazuli.” Moreover, in these poems Yeats’s treatment of the sublime and beautiful as discrete qualities is comparable to Wordsworth’s apocalyptic tension, further revealing Yeats’s classification as a Romantic poet.

The Second Coming

The moral qualities associated with Wordsworth’s sublime are conveyed in *The Second Coming*. Yeats wrote the poem after the end of World War I and the Russian Revolution, both of which exhibited unspeakable violence and brutality. Holdeman agrees, noting that “Yeats wrote the poem in January 1919, a time when the destructive legacy of World War I was infusing most of Europe with apprehensions of radical change. ‘The Second Coming’ encapsulates the era’s mood of crisis” (77). The

⁸ Henceforth, I will refer to Abrams’s explanations of Wordsworth’s theodicy simply as ‘Wordsworth’s theodicy,’ in an effort to eliminate confusion for the reader with too many authorial names. However, when comparing and linking Yeats’s work with ‘Wordsworth’s theodicy’ it is intended to imply Abrams’s treatment of such ideas.

poem portrays a chaotic world full of anarchy, violence, and bereft of conventional values after such ruinous events. The poem opens vehemently with a rough meter and array of haunting images:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned. (1-6)

Disturbingly frank, Yeats depicts a misguided world where “mere anarchy” prevails. The initial image here is also intensely ambiguous as Yeats does not clarify who or what is “drowned” in the anarchical scene, suggesting only a collage of fear and confusion inherent in the sublime.

Harold Bloom comments on these lines and their ominous implications; he finds “the center is man; he cannot hold the falcon [which represents for Bloom man’s “mastery over nature”] to an imposed discipline, and the widening gyre is therefore one with the loosening of anarchy upon the world. Anarchy is ‘mere’ because the value-systems that could judge it portentous are being overwhelmed” (321). In this light, the tumultuous scene evokes tenets of the sublime. The “terror,” “evil,” and “pain” constituent in the sublime are exemplified in a “blood-dimmed tide” or as the “ceremony of innocence is drowned.” These violent descriptions of the modern world reveal the Romantic sublime, while presenting a scene as aesthetically pernicious as its moral implications. Furthermore, the ethical discrepancies in these images, where “innocence is drowned” while “mere anarchy” prevails, hint to the moral attrition of the apocalypse of nature. The opening scene is thus evocative of the failures of modern individuals to display moral dignity.

Considering the work's formal qualities, the meter is defined by the disastrous ideas it communicates, suggesting the disorder and terror rendered by Wordsworth's sublime. Yeats's mastery of traditional verse forms is illustrated throughout such symbolically disoriented lines. For instance, the opening stanza deviates remarkably from iambic patterns:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

.

The blood dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. (1-8)

The lines are initially propelled by a forceful dactylic rhythm, while later receding into an inconsistent iambic stasis. Specifically, the multisyllabic phrases "ceremony of innocence" and "passionate intensity" disrupt the iambic⁹ rhythm as the meter departs from pentameter in lines 1 and 6. This metrical framework indicates the thematic sentiment of "The Second Coming:" the onset of modern distortions will institute a new age of fragmentation and uncertainty. The "terror" and "pain" of the sublime characterizes the birth of the modern age, as a "turning and turning" maelstrom both for the poem and the modern world. The poem's rough meter thus dramatically reproduces the inception of modernity that homogenous iambs simply cannot contain.

"The Second Coming" also expresses the apocalypse of nature because Yeats portends the imminence of a new epoch to be realized through apocalyptic means. As I mentioned last chapter, Yeats formulated history into cyclical periods of roughly 2, 000 years in his work *A Vision*; this is a pattern in which a civilization preponderates its unique culture and beliefs (e.g., religious) until another succeeds

⁹ Iambic pentameter in English poetry is defined by a series of 10 individual beats in one line of verse, the stress falling on every second beat.

it. Moreover, given the poem's title "The Second Coming" Yeats alludes to the Biblical apocalyptic prophecy of the return of Christ, but he does not envisage Christ as the revolutionary figure come to save humankind. Rather, the blasphemous image of an Egyptian Sphinx is depicted as returning to instill a new era. Yeats describes this horrendous figure:

A shape with lion body and the head of a man
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun
 Is moving its slow thighs

 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (14-22)

The "rough beast" grotesquely "slouching towards Bethlehem" indicates the kind of apocalypse at hand as a catastrophe of harrowing change. For Yeats this evidenced the demise of Christian cultural principles that dominated Europe up to the early twentieth century. The coming apocalypse is thus not a consummation of Christian prophecies, but rather a fall of Western civilization before the age of modernity. Stan Smith explains that this new cultural order, which rather than fulfilling the redemptive promises of Christ, parodies and scorns the previous age through keen brutality; he finds that "the two thousand years of the Christian era are now reaching their end, to be succeeded, antithetically repeated and reversed, by the coming of the Antichrist predicted in the Revelation of St. John, a monstrous parody of the child born in Bethlehem, who will inaugurate a new and brutal dispensation" (1). The "antichrist" or counteractive dispensation of the new age is symbolized by the "rough beast" advancing towards its birth.

This portrayal of the apocalypse recalls the antithetical properties of the beautiful and sublime in Wordsworth's theodicy. The analogy primarily lies in the divergent values of the incumbent era and

the succeeding one as presented in the poem; the Christian era upholds moral qualities of the beautiful, and the modern age that of the sublime. The eclipse of the former era ushers in the historical apocalypse in the poem, presenting a conflict of value systems also inherent in Wordsworth's theodicy. Jefferson Holdridge comments on the discrepant values of the two epochs, noting that "Yeats is writing of the return of the irrational . . . All subjectivity will thenceforth move towards multiplicity, evil, fiction. It will move towards an antithetical culture that, rather than being based on love and wisdom, is based on knowledge and power" (43). Holdridge makes the dichotomy of the two eras clear: the "love and wisdom" of the Christian tradition is opposed and usurped by the "evil," subjective multiplicities (i.e., disunity of religious faith), and "power" of the modern age. For Yeats, the beauty, "love and wisdom" of the Christian era is succumbing to the sublime terror of the modern apocalypse. Melchiori agrees, noting that poem portrays "the advent of a new historical cycle which is going to completely reverse all the values cherished by the Christian era. It is known that Yeats, though representing this new advent with terrifying images, thought of it as necessary and inescapable" (35). The incessant tension between beauty and sublimity in Wordsworth's theodicy characterize the loss of established values for modern relativism and insecurity. In keeping with Wordsworth, Yeats is again strongly Romantic in "The Second Coming" by articulating dichotomous moral realities at ends in the poem's final images.

Lapis Lazuli

In "Lapis Lazuli" Yeats employs a dual interpretation of the sublime that identifies with Wordsworth's theodicy. This twofold concept of the sublime recalls the dichotomy of beauty and sublimity in Wordsworth's system; however, their conflation in "Lapis Lazuli" does not merit an apocalypse as in "The Second Coming," but rather a synthesized idea of beauty and the sublime occurs in the poem. Although, before I examine such ideas in "Lapis Lazuli," it is necessary to explain this integrated notion of beauty and sublimity and how it relates to Wordsworth. The way Yeats presents the

sublime in “Lapis Lazuli” will then seem more compatible with our definition of Romanticism. Holdridge initially explains that Yeats tries to find the unity “of sublimity and beauty, of antithetical, masculine knowledge and power and primary, feminine wisdom and love” (4). In works like “Lapis Lazuli,” Yeats sought to bring together the values of beauty and sublimity to harmonize and understand modern experience. Therefore in this conception, the attributes of beauty and the sublime cohabit and cohere with Wordsworth’s theodicy. Whether Yeats combines the aesthetic entities or treats them separately, Wordsworth’s ethos can qualitatively relate to their use in “Lapis Lazuli.” Upon this basis lies the bond between Yeats’s and Wordsworth’s aesthetic schemes concerning beauty and the sublime.

Yeats’s two-fold version of the sublime is characterized by both “terror” and “love and wisdom.” Offering an explanation for this construction, Holdridge writes “for Yeats, neither extreme of certainty is sufficient—neither beauty without sublimity nor sublimity without beauty. His aesthetic consists of two constellations: positive sublimity and beauty, and terrible beauty and terrible sublimity” (4). Beauty and sublimity are subdivided into positive and negative categories, but still separate upon the axis of good and evil, “love and wisdom” and “terror.” On the negative side, beauty and sublimity are not separately evaluated, allowing for Yeats to speak of terrible beauty in poems such as “Easter 1916”¹⁰. The antithetical relationship between the subdivisions of beauty and sublimity is thus muddled during such negative aesthetic experience. For Yeats, many things and parts of life usually considered beautiful can also engross and even terrify the observer (e.g., times of religious celebration alongside civil insurrection). On the other hand, the fundamental meanings of beauty and sublimity are not lost, even in such a compounded scheme. Holdridge continues, finding that “beauty and positive sublimity more often exist as opposites of the terrible sublime . . . the more fractious the ideal of beauty becomes the more impossible is any experience of the positive sublime and, consequently, the more powerful is the

¹⁰ Appearing in the 1921 volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, “Easter 1916” is a poem revealing Yeats’s mixed response towards the Easter Rising in Ireland against British authorities on April 24, 1916.

expression of the terrible sublime" (4). Positive beauty and sublimity oppose the "terrible sublime," maintaining the polarity of Wordsworth's paradigm.

The existence of beauty and sublimity also depends on the concentrations of their qualities within aesthetic experience. Thus, Holdridge finds that when Yeats speaks of "'horrible splendour,' 'tragic ecstasy' and 'tragic joy.' It is tragic, horrible, etc. because the positive sublime is so difficult to achieve. The unity of the beautiful that underlies it so rarely exists" (5). The absence of beauty or positive sublimity incurs the "horrible" and tragic side of the aesthetic scheme, notwithstanding that the "rare existence" of beauty permits the notion of "terrible beauty" to emerge. In other words, beauty is always subordinated to sublimity in Yeats's scheme, but still definitive of positive aesthetic experience; there is always beauty even in the most reprehensible circumstances. Holdridge separates beauty and sublimity into four categories, but the aesthetic dichotomy is still visible as positive sublimity and negative sublimity constitute the same qualities of beauty and sublimity in Wordsworth's scheme, while allowing the synthesized idea of tragic joy to arise as characteristic of both aesthetic qualities. For Holdridge, the latter notion is ultimately part of negative sublimity and therefore best defined as a sublime expression, even with the "joy" and "beauty" appended to such an idea.

In the poem, Yeats again expresses his sentiments about what he considers the fall of traditional mores before the modern age. The poem's historical references allude mainly to Benito Mussolini's and Adolf Hitler's chauvinistic regimes rising to power and the Spanish Civil War in the late-1930s. However, the societal dissolution Yeats perceives is not envisioned as apocalyptic or rendered in a suitably elegiac manner. Instead, the first two stanzas suggest that such public and private calamities are means for the emotional restoration of "gaiety" to convert all ill feelings to joy. Thus the two-fold affective nature of the sublime is implied and Wordsworth's theodicy becomes discernable. In a reference to the volatility of late-1930s Europe prior to the spark of war, Yeats writes:

I have heard that hysterical women say
 They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow
 Of poets that are always gay
 For everybody knows or else should know
 That if nothing drastic is done
 Aeroplane and Zeppelin¹¹ will come out

 Until the town lie beaten flat. (1-8)

The tragic threat of violence usually causes “drastic” emotions of terror and pain. However, the public anxiety of “hysterical women” is juxtaposed with “poets that are always gay,” proposing that the destruction of society is not always occasioned with despair; and though the public sphere is plagued with distress, Yeats implies that art in its inherent purpose remains “gay.”

The notion that “poets are always gay” construes a positive image of art even through the misery of bombing “Zeppelins” and “hysterical women.” The best explanation of this fact relies on more evidence from the poem to reveal the twofold version of sublimity. Without losing sight of the current passage, in stanza three Yeats evokes the same view of destruction:

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard
 Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back
 Old civilizations put to the sword
 Then they and their wisdom went to rack. (25-28)

The image of people travelling to found a new civilization on “horse-back” or “mule-back” is resolved in the final lines of stanza three. There Yeats concludes that “All things fall and are built again/ And those

¹¹ The “Zeppelin” was a German airship invented by Ferdinand Graf von Zeppelin. The aircraft was particularly used by Germany in World War I for bombing raids.

that build them again are gay” (35-36). The act of creation is accompanied with gaiety, even though the loss that permits it is antithetically ruinous. Considering stanza one where Yeats writes that “poets are always gay” or of the inappropriately euphonic “palette and fiddle-bow” during times of horror, the act of creation is also rendered with gaiety. The creative act is felicitous, and poets or builders of civilization are happy because they are making things new and distinct from other miserable entities or realities (e.g., warfare, “old civilizations put the sword”). This assumption also makes clear the concurrent presence of gaiety and terror, comparable to Yeats’s idea of tragic joy. Both sentiments are present in experience, and propose for Yeats a sublime duality that exists in a world of “terror” and “love,” destruction and creation.

Holdeman comments on the “hysterical” sentiments Yeats perceived in the public sphere, finding that “Yeats regards such attitudes as hysterical not only because they privilege physical action over artistic creation but also because they fail to recognize the inevitability of violence” (108). The “terror and pain” associated with physical violence is for Yeats unavoidable, but irrelevant for the joy involved with “artistic creation.” The abundance of public despair alongside “poets that are always gay” implies the dual nature of the sublime. Holdridge agrees, noting that “Yeats endeavours to present a mood that can withstand the destructiveness of change, whether personal or public . . . Yeats is endeavouring to move from negative to positive sublimity, from night to joy. The mood must capture the double quality inherent in the sublime” (201). This is apparent in the negative, “hysterical women” that contest the positive gaiety of the arts. Wordsworth’s theodicy is now perceivable. Romantic qualities of beauty and the sublime characterize the conflated notion of sublimity Yeats employs; the “evil” and “pain” of the sublime and the “goodness and virtue” of beauty are qualitatively synonymous with the loss of civilization and the pleasure of creative expression, respectively. The implications in the first stanza of “Lapis Lazuli” therefore display the principally Romantic stratagem Yeats relies on to achieve such effects of the sublime.

In the second stanza, Yeats moves from the public to the individual and conversely to the tragedies in artistic creation. The poet reaffirms the need for gaiety by representing tragic Shakespearean characters through his dual vision of the sublime. The proverbial woes of Hamlet and King Lear are presented as “gay,” and Wordsworth’s theodicy is again fundamental within Yeats’s aesthetic scheme. Expressing his version of the sublime, Yeats writes:

All perform their tragic play
 There struts Hamlet, there is Lear
 That’s Ophelia, that Cordelia
 Yet they, should the last scene be there

 Do not break up their lines to weep
 They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay
 Gaiety transfiguring all that dread. (9-17)

The “tragic play” recalls the terrible beauty and tragic joy¹² Yeats evokes elsewhere in his corpus. Yet the implications in this passage are that Yeats again sees the individual as separated from art, even the actors themselves who perform their tragic parts. Holdeman adds that “the would-be Hamlets and Ophelias of the present are merely strutting actors performing history’s cyclical melodrama. And yet, if they could master themselves – if they could unite their ordinary selves with such tragic masks as those imagined by Shakespeare – they would attain a state of completion, of ‘Gaiety transfiguring all that dread’” (108). The personal gaiety of the performers does not permeate into the dispositions of Hamlet or Lear, even though Yeats suggests that if such “tragic masks” could be authenticated in oneself, gaiety would “transfigure all that dread.” Yeats’s view of the sublime substantiates this emotive difference because the negative, tragic qualities of Hamlet and Lear are averse to the positive gaiety of the

¹² Yeats uses the phrase “tragic joy” in his poem “The Gyres,” which I will examine shortly.

performers. Wordsworth's theodicy thus applies to the divergent attitudes implied between art and the individual; gaiety and beauty oppose the "tragic masks" of the negative sublime in concord with the premises of Wordsworth's aesthetic conception. In turn, Yeats is essentially Romantic through this linkage with Wordsworth's system.

In the final stanza, Yeats imaginatively describes the carving of lapis lazuli he received from a friend¹³ and which provided the namesake for the poem. According to Yeats, the piece was of "Two Chinamen, behind them a third" and "The third, doubtless a serving man/ Carries a musical instrument" (37-42). After detailing the sculpture, he imagines a scene of the "two Chinamen" ascending a mountainside and gazing on the crumbling culture before them. Albeit, they view the "tragic scene" with their own "gay eyes," thereby implicating Yeats's vision of the sublime within the imaginative setting.

Wordsworth's theodicy resonates through the lines:

There, on the mountain and the sky
 On all the tragic scene they stare
 One asks for mournful melodies
 Accomplished fingers begin to play
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes
 Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay. (51-56)

In a scene reminiscent of the violence of stanza one, the Chinamen perceive the devastation from the mountain face. The "tragic scene" is also beheld with their "ancient, glittering eyes" that are "gay," implying that Yeats interprets the scene through the mode of positive and negative sublimity. For Holdeman, this image is central to how tragic joy manifests in the last stanza. Holdeman asserts that he "presents himself in the act of becoming one of those who build things again imaginatively and are

¹³ Harry Clifton, a friend of Yeats.

thereby redeemed by tragic joy. His concluding vision makes clear that those who achieve this state do not blithely turn from the suffering of the world to enter an escapist reverie. . . . Instead, they stare on 'the tragic scene,' allowing art's 'mournful melodies' to enlarge their perceptions" (109). The "suffering world" the personae stare upon is perceived through their "gay eyes" because the negative sublime produces tragic joy, precipitated here by creative imagination and art's "mournful melodies."

Wordsworth's attributes of "terror" and "pain" coincide with the destruction the Chinamen perceive, while their "gay eyes" and "tragic joy" uphold the pleasurable qualities of beauty and the positive sublime. In this instance, "tragic joy" is consigned to be positive as part of the Chinamen's enlargement of understanding even though it is inspired by the calamitous scene, hence the transfiguration of dread to gaiety via the Romantic sublime. However Yeats uses the sublime in "Lapis Lazuli," whether through imaginative art or the individual and society, the duality of negative and positive sublimity is sustained and Wordsworth's theodicy remains relevant.

The Gyres

"The Gyres" also addresses the social climate of Yeats's era. The two-term conception of the sublime will again link Yeats's work with Wordsworth's theodicy, specifically upon the congruence of their dichotomies about beauty and the sublime. "The Gyres" will also demonstrate Yeats's use of the term "tragic joy," which serves as the primary focal point for the poem's connection with Wordsworth. The title alludes to Yeats's imaginative system of history explained in his aforementioned cosmological work *A Vision*, wherein a "gyre" encompassed the cyclical period of roughly 2,000 years he believed civilizations to exist and degenerate. Beginning with a series of baleful images, the poet illustrates the wasting violence and ignoble character definitive of the modern age:

The gyres! the gyres! Old Rocky Face look forth

Things thought too long can be no longer thought

For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth
 And ancient lineaments are blotted out
 Irrational streams of blood are staining earth
 Empedocles¹⁴ has thrown all things about
 Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy
 We that look on but laugh in tragic joy. (1-8)

The particular "gyre" Yeats depicts is full of "irrational streams of blood" fouling society and disintegrating a culture of "ancient lineaments." Such language recalls the apocalyptic tenor of "The Second Coming," but here Yeats expresses the absurdity and "tragic joy" of such events. Jonathan Allison notes that "In 'The Gyres,' Yeats embraces the prophesied violence of the next epoch with discomfiting boldness. . . . The poem expresses a belief in the inevitable transformation of society, in the principles of eternal recurrence and conflict, and demonstrates Yeats's notion of tragic joy" (200). Yeats's use of the term "tragic joy" implies the dichotomous aspects of Wordsworth's theodicy because both beautiful and sublime qualities are posited. In other words, the speaker observes the horrifying "streams of blood" and that "beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth," but concludes that to "laugh" is a suitable response. Wordsworth's aesthetic conception is therefore expressed in images of bloody carnage and jubilation, coalescing into a terrible beauty or feeling of tragic joy. This conclusion again indicates Yeats's Romantic basis for propounding such an aesthetic notion, while preserving distinct elements of beauty and the sublime.

Wordsworth's theodicy is also implicated in the perilous scene of the last stanza, particularly that of the sublime. The modern "gyre" is portrayed as finally overcoming the previous age, introducing an order of broken morality and irreverence. Yeats again bemoans the "ancient lineaments" he perceives to be overrun and lost:

¹⁴ Greek philosopher and scientist active during the fifth century b.c.

Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul

What matter! Those that Rocky Face holds dear

Lovers of horses and of women

.

Or any rich, dark nothing disinter

The workman, noble and saint, and all things run

On that unfashionable gyre again. (17-24)

For Yeats, the imminent “gyre” will corrode the “conduct and work” of “noble” and saintly traditions seemingly characterized by pre-modern, nineteenth-century customs. Pointedly, Wordsworth’s evaluation of beauty emerges as the “workman, noble and saint” with which the poet juxtaposes images of the disinterring destruction of modernity. The “work” and “soul” of the “noble and saint” are being overcome by the violent, “unfashionable gyre” Yeats envisions. The love and goodness definitive of beauty are corroborated by the honor and worth the “noble and saint” represent as figures of the past. These conflicting images thus imply the aesthetic and moral tension provided by Wordsworth’s theodicy. Furthermore, line 18 is a haunting example of Yeats’s ironic resignation to the succeeding era, as he cries “what matter” in the face of modern desecration. The “lovers of horses and of women” represent such “irrational” sentiments taking hold of the populace in light of increasing violence and instability. Demonstrative of the modern era’s contemptible character, this image depicts the “terror” and “pain” constituent in the Romantic sublime, which in this case is not associated with beauty at all.

CHAPTER FIVE: YEATS'S REDEMPTIVE IMAGINATION

In keeping with his definition of Romanticism as a secularized theology, Abrams again draws from Wordsworth's *Prospectus* to include the imagination as part Wordsworth's theodicy. As I explained in previous chapters, this scheme is primarily inspired by the Christian tradition, but in a demystified and individualized form. The potential for divine deliverance by Christ is reorganized in the human intellect, giving the imagination the same capacity as Christ in the Biblical tradition. The imagination thus serves as a means of redeeming the Romantic self from all temporal pain and suffering. For Yeats, the imagination assumed a similar role in some of his most beloved work. In poems such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats expresses his desire for unreachable places and culture, using his imagination to fulfill his longings. He also suggests that through imaginative treatment of places such as pastoral Ireland and ancient Byzantium, he can relieve the agonies of modern experience. In this sense, Yeats's method for self-redemption coincides with Abrams's definition of the Romantic imagination. Both writers view the faculty as a means for self-salvation while offering a paradise solely construed by the mind. Through examining the poems above and the late work "Among School Children," I posit that Yeats understands the imagination in a way that is definably Romantic. To begin, it is necessary to explain the specific aspects of the Romantic imagination and how it works to vindicate the secular self.

The Romantic Imagination

Abrams describes the Romantic imagination as the agent responsible for redemption in Wordsworth's theodicy; noting that "in Wordsworth's sustained myth of mind in its interchange with nature, the imagination plays a role equivalent to that of the Redeemer in Milton's providential plot. For in Milton's theodicy it is the birth, death, and return of the risen Christ to save mankind and to restore a lost paradise" (119). The capacity of Christ is translated to an individualized mental process. The

imagination redeems the self in a mode comparable to the Biblical account, justifying evil and suffering for the individual, but acting to “restore a lost paradise” within one’s secular experience, not in an Edenic afterlife. The context and process of redemption are transferred from the eternal realm to the intellect’s material existence. The imagination is therefore seen as another imperative part of Wordsworth’s “sustained myth of mind” wherein beauty and sublimity evoke moral answers while the imagination redeems all.

Abrams also describes another aspect in Wordsworth’s redemptive “myth of mind.” In Wordsworth’s view, the imagination is contingent upon what Abrams terms “intellectual love,” a mental faculty in which the mind seeks “love” through experience to prevail over malevolent forces. Drawing from the text of the *Prospectus*, Abrams finds that “the faculty of imagination is born, then goes underground, but only to rise ‘once more/ With strength’; it is distinct from, yet ‘each and each’ with, the intellectual love which is the ‘first and chief’ and in which we ‘begin and end’” (119). Seemingly, the faculty of “intellectual love” is the original basis from which the imagination grows and eventuates the secular self’s redemption. In other words, the imagination must arise from a state of mind in which experience interacts with “intellectual love,” the “first and chief” of all mental attributes, to stimulate the imagination. For Francis Christensen, Wordsworth “wanted to find a solution to the moral problem posed by the human drive for power; he wanted a way to attach power and energy to moral purpose. This is the theme of intellectual love” (70). The faculty of intellectual love concentrates the mind for sound moral purposes. For Wordsworth, the imagination is facilitated not through base desires and thoughts, but through “the taming of the daring, the turbulent, the violent, the willful in his nature and the recognition of the grandeur of love” (70). “Love” in this sense is comparable to secular moral excellence that interfuses with the intellect to create the faculty of intellectual love. To mediate the imagination for its uttermost redemptive power, the poet must have a basis of intellectual love composed of moral eminence. Intellectual love disposes the imagination to discern what is necessary for

the self's transcendence; that is, the "evil" and "pain" the imagination redeems must be conceivable in experience, and requires an "intellectual love" to distinguish right and wrong. Thus the preliminary "attainment of intellectual love was a moral victory" (70) that for Wordsworth facilitated the redemptive imagination.

The faculty of "intellectual love" also helps the imagination construe a form of paradise for the poetic self. Abrams concludes that this faculty "is also the indispensable mediator by which love manifests that it abounds over pain and apparent evil, by saving the poet from a 'universe of death' and opening the way to an earthly paradise" (119). As the "indispensable mediator" through which the imagination arises, "intellectual love" guides the imagination ultimately towards transcendence. The imagination saves the individual mind, but "intellectual love" as the "first and chief" mediator of experience ultimately "manifests that it [the mind] abounds over pain and apparent evil" through its purpose as a moral agent, thus paving the way for an honest "earthly paradise." Without intercession from Christ, the intellect can redeem the self through proper use of the imagination and provide a paradise strictly conjectured by the mind. This two-term basis of the imagination is the Romantic version of secular self-redemption in the temporal domain.

Sailing to Byzantium

"Sailing to Byzantium," from the 1928 collection *The Tower*, embodies the idea of the redemptive imagination. In the work, Yeats scorns modern values and their ignorant perversion of classical moral and aesthetic standards. To redeem himself from modern disgrace, Yeats vows to revive "golden" cultural principles of the ancient Roman city Byzantium by imaginatively journeying there in the poem, thus immersing himself in the splendor of classical society. This particular use of the imagination embraces Romantic theology and demonstrates Abrams's notion; moreover, Yeats's distinct

treatment of the modern and Byzantine ages further indicates his desire to redeem the horrors of modernity. In the first stanza, Yeats observes without remorse:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 -- Those dying generations—at their song

 What is begotten, born, and dies
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unaging intellect. (1-8)

Modern individuals are presented as sensual, inane beings without reverence for traditions of the past, thus marginalizing “old men” like himself. The lines are disdainful towards those who disregard the “monuments of unaging intellect” of the classical age to surfeit their modern perceptions; those modern and “dying generations” do not value the precedents of classical art or ethics in which subsequent generations should find inspiration. Such vulgarities represent what Yeats seeks to redeem. The “evil and suffering” vindicated by the imagination in Abrams’s account necessarily corresponds to these initial observations concerning modern individuals.

The poet desists from his bitter reflections after the first stanza, declaring in the next to “have sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium” (15-16). This imaginative journey to Byzantium produces a change of tone and sentiment in the work. Abrams’s concept is then exemplified in stanza three, where Yeats’s figurative arrival in Byzantium simultaneously saves him and confers to the poet a sense of immortality through the grandeur of Byzantine art. However, this view of immortality is experienced in the temporal sense only via the timelessness of creative imagination, in which the poet spends eternity rendered in art and not embodied in a heavenly realm (i.e., as in an afterlife provided

through a savior, such as Christ). Stanza three substantiates the above declaration, where Yeats writes “O sages standing in God’s holy fire . . . Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre/ And be the singing masters of my soul” (17-20). The poet reveres the “sages” and “gold mosaics” of ancient Byzantium, proclaiming his desire for them to “be the singing masters of my soul.” The lines are expressed in a venerable tone because Yeats seeks not only redemption, but a new self to immortalize his place as part of classical tradition. The concluding lines in stanza three corroborate this point, where Yeats professes “Consume my heart away; sick with desire/ . . . It knows not what it is, and gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity” (21-24). Yeats’s imaginative journey to Byzantium encompasses him “into the artifice of eternity” in which he will be forever severed from the modern ignominies he perceives. The poet thus demonstrates the redemption articulated in Abrams’s theory, which in this case utilizes principles of ancient Byzantium to save and reorient the secular self within an imaginative paradise of classical culture.

In the final stanza, Yeats elaborates on the immortality obtainable through art and the imagination. Abrams’s theory is again evident in Yeats’s interpretation of Byzantine art within the poem’s imaginative setting. In one of the work’s most enduring images, Yeats envisions himself as a golden artifact of antiquity, reiterating that art gives perennial expression to the individual intellect. He substantiates this endeavor with a bold claim for the imagination:

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling. (25-28)

Artistic creation supersedes the limitations of ephemeral experience and age for Yeats, rather than “any natural thing.” This notion is extended in the poem’s final image where he takes the form of a golden

bird, seemingly as one that “Grecian goldsmiths make.” Yeats concludes he will then “set upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come” (30-32). The “golden bird” symbolizes the perpetuity of the self rendered in art that sings “of what is past, or passing, or to come.” By imaginatively transforming into a golden bird, Yeats becomes a symbol that grants transcendence throughout history, especially during the modern era. Michael Steinman agrees, writing that “Spatial and temporal limitations-prisons of whatever kind-do not make it impossible to create beauty. Singing joyously as the golden bird . . . the singing soul, creating the ‘artifice of eternity,’ could escape the aging body’s prison” (93). Yeats’s imagination allows him to “escape the aging body’s prison” and transfigure into a golden bird and represent the permanence made possible through art. Steinman concludes that “whether one escaped imprisonment by becoming a singing bird or sang . . . art transformed by love was the most powerful human defense against evil and mortality” (93). As a golden bird, Yeats can transcend the modern values he deplores and suspend the effects of time by vicarious representation in Byzantine art. Yeats’s approach identifies here with the methodology of the redemptive imagination outlined by Abrams.

For Robert Ryf, “Sailing to Byzantium” also presents a way to overcome the contraries, or “antinomies” (Yeats’s term), of experience through art and the imagination. The Romantic tenor in this scheme is extensive, as the imagination again redeems Yeats from malevolent realities of modernity. He also seems partial to the Byzantine side of such experiential dichotomies, suggesting he considers true aesthetic expression commensurate with classical culture. Ryf comments that “in this poem, the antinomies are clearly laid out in initial opposition to each other. Youth versus age, the realm of mortal sensuous experience versus the realm of intellect, time versus eternity, art versus life” (613). For our purposes, the antinomies are the intellectual and aesthetic values of the modern age that qualitatively oppose those of ancient Byzantium. Modern vices of indulgence, wasting violence, and materialism coexist with the grandeur of Byzantine culture, which for Yeats posited a greater view of experience. In

the poem, these discrepancies manifest as either a flawed modern consciousness that produces a “sensual music all neglect” or as classical “sages standing in God’s holy fire” who welcome Yeats into the golden “artifice of eternity.” Thus the poem is a “hopeful attempt to escape the mortal coil and find eternal sanctuary in Byzantium, standing as it does for the timeless world of imagination and art” (613). As I noted, considering the modern age as vapid and artless necessarily posits that classical ideals produce true art and esteem for traditional values. Yeats therefore does not resolve the experiential antinomies he laments in the beginning of the poem, but does achieve redemption from the modern world and its denigrating conventions. He is redeemed from modern improprieties in a secular way through his imagination, and gathered into the paradisiacal transcendence of classical aesthetic expression. The Romantic imagination is here posed as a means to redeem the self from aesthetic and moral contradictions plaguing the temporal realm.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” provides an imaginative retreat from worldly experience. Published in 1890, the poem appears as part of Yeats’s early collection *The Rose*. The poem manifests Abrams’s theory because Yeats expresses his desire to imaginatively escape to pastoral Ireland from London, his home at the time. Innisfree, the work’s utopian setting, is an actual island in Lough Gill, a freshwater lake in Yeats’s native County Sligo, Ireland. The overall theme is simple: to be saved from the urban squalor of London, Yeats imagines the glimmering “purple glow” and “bee-loud” glades of Innisfree. Succeeding images paint a tranquil and harmonious scene in which Yeats is fully removed from modern society. However, to achieve such a redemptive journey the poet again must use his imagination. Yeats did not actually “arise . . . and go to Innisfree/ And a small cabin build there of clay and wattles made” (1-2), but imagined himself doing so. He is redeemed from London life by imagining a place more amenable to fruitful experience and his poetic sensibility. The Romantic inclinations in “Innisfree” are

thus evident from the poem's main declaration for redemption from city life via the imagination and subsequent admission into an earthly paradise.

The poem also has a distinct meter and rhyme scheme, which gives the work a delightful sound compatible with the theme of redemption. Yeats's imaginative treatment of the island is articulated in colorful euphonic lines that present Innisfree as a serene and lovely place. In true Romantic form, Yeats's imagination instills redemption and unity in his subject before the final two lines return him to reality in London, where the streets are "grey." The middle stanza exemplifies this pleasurable congruence of structure and content:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow
 Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings
 There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow
 And evening full of the linnet's wings. (5-8)

Lines five and seven both retain a caesura and have perfect end-stopped rhymes, "slow" pairs with "glow." Lines six and eight are uninterrupted by pause breaks but also have perfect end-stopped rhymes. Stanzas one and three also implement this pleasing schema of meter and sound. The poem's structure is thus visually and aurally harmonious, which corresponds to the poet's sentiment toward his subject. Yeats's imaginative portrayal of Innisfree as a place where "peace comes dropping slow" through the "veils of the morning" is represented in the poem's construction, coordinating form and content to celebrate the redemptive splendor of Innisfree.

Abrams's concept is also conceivable when the poem's final two lines are considered. The imaginative treatment of Innisfree desists once Yeats describes London, suggesting he seeks redemption from what he presents in the work's final image. Returning to the dull experience of London after dreaming of Innisfree, Yeats writes "While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey/ I hear it in

the deep heart's core" (11-12). Although the lines conform to the work's verse-structure overall, their cadence and imagery are distinct from the rest of the poem. The penultimate verse contains the only incidence of internal rhyme at the caesura and end-stopped rhyme, between "roadway" and "grey." This diversion from the poem's governing pattern conveys Yeats's indifferent attitude toward London. City life is not as gratifying as living on a secluded isle in Lough Gill. This fact thus distinguishes the rhyme scheme in the final stanza, implying the poet's aversion to his reality. The imagery in the final lines is similarly discordant with the rest of the poem. Yeats only stands in "grey" idleness upon a sidewalk, where he broods of Innisfree not through *his* "deep heart's core," but *the* "deep heart's core." The highly personalized journey to Innisfree is relegated in this movement from Yeats's self to the abstract, implying the unimaginative and insouciant nature of life in London. Like his journey to Byzantium above, Yeats escapes to Innisfree through his imagination which also generates wonderful images and sounds in the poem. In accordance with Abrams, his redemptive journey provides a temporary paradise in lieu of London's grey and mundane surroundings.

"The Lake of Innisfree" also conveys anti-materialistic sentiments toward modern violations upon nature and the creative intellect. Modern Europe, especially London, was notorious for displaying the effects of industrialization and overpopulation. During the time of the poem's writing in 1888 Yeats lived in London, far away from the peaceful "veils of the morning" or afternoons "with a purple glow" at Innisfree. Such images of pastoral beauty greatly exclude the impermanent allure of industrial surroundings, while the ABAB rhyme scheme, equal placement of caesura and use of alliteration (e.g., I hear /ake water /apping with /ow sounds) give the work a meditative tone which is disrupted in the final lines. This disruption comes about as Yeats describes the unnatural milieu of the city and establishes the "classic romantic tension between the city and the countryside" (Hopper 2), giving more license and attention to the changeless aspects of nature. Thus through highly ornate and mellifluous lines, Yeats preserves the lasting beauty of the natural scene uncorrupted by brief pleasures of modernity. Hopper

adds that the poem's appropriation in contemporary Irish society undermines its message against materialism. He notes that "despite the anti-materialistic sentiments implicit in Yeats's poem, businesses seem particularly attracted to 'Innisfree' as a free-floating signifier for innovation and entrepreneurship" (4). Yeats's critique of London life is betrayed by modern businesses who commercialize the poem's legacy against mass culture and improvidence. The poet's imaginative plight to redeem materialistic values is thus thwarted by his own country. Nevertheless, "Innisfree" remains a statement against modern encroachments upon the Irish landscape.

Among School Children

"Among School Children" from the 1928 collection *The Tower* utilizes the imagination as a way to reconcile the "antinomies" of objectivity and subjectivity, or the body and the soul over time. Unlike in "Sailing to Byzantium" where Yeats asserts the differing customs of antique and modern culture, here he confronts the dichotomous temporality of the body and soul, and how the imagination can redeem physical inconsistencies that conflict with subjective abilities late in life. Yeats also presents the imagination as way to create paradisiacal experience, no matter one's age or bodily condition. Notwithstanding the work's initial observations about the body, Ryf finds that the poem "is directly confronting the whole problem of time and its relationship to consciousness" (617). Yeats suggests two conceptions about the self's development in the poem. The first, the passage of time upon the body, is communicated through the early stanzas where Yeats describes his undeviating struggle with age and corporeal decline. Thus the body is futilely inclined to disrepair over time. The second position investigates the soul, in which time seems unable to deteriorate the subjective self unlike the body. In this view, Yeats can transcend the material reality of time by turning to the timelessness of the soul. By turning to his imagination for transcendence, or redemption from corporeal time, Yeats can remove temporality from his subjective experiences. This movement places the soul out of time and circumvents

its degeneration, redeeming Yeats from the dissolution of his palpable self. In a way consistent with Abrams, Yeats strives to be redeemed from “evil” and “pain,” which for the poem is the imminence of old age and subsequent loss of youthful identity. Finally, the imaginative paradise Yeats envisions is seemingly his ability to forge whatever kind of subjective experience he desires, unrelated to the state of his body or immaterial consciousness.

In the first stanza, Yeats presents of an image of himself literally among young children at a school. Such visits were requisite as a member of the first Irish Senate¹⁵, and as the opening passage suggests, inclined him to consider his place as an aged man among the young. Yeats first observes his alienation from young children, strictly in terms of corporeal time:

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies
 The children
 In momentary wonder stare upon
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man. (1-8)

As a “sixty-year-old smiling public man,” Yeats is relegated strictly in terms of material capacity and possibility when compared with children. The state of his body here represents the transience of the physical self and its blatant manifestation of one’s age. However, the poet’s imagination leads him in the second stanza to a more imaginative conclusion:

I dream of a Ledaean¹⁶ body, bent
 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
 Told of a harsh reproof.

¹⁵ Yeats was selected to be part of the first Irish Senate in 1922, following the Irish revolution and establishment of national autonomy.

¹⁶ In Greek myth, Leda was the queen of Sparta and mother of Helen of Troy by Zeus.

Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
 Into a sphere of youthful sympathy. (9-14)

Here the poet navigates the timeless realm of conscious imagination, which enables him to “dream of a Ledaean body” with “youthful sympathy” in spite of the objective effects of time and age. The “Ledaean body” Yeats imagines also produces an image of immemorial beauty construed by the imagination. Considering the age of his subjective self (i.e., the age of his consciousness or soul), this mental action places the poet’s subjectivity out of time, restoring a “youthful sympathy” to his consciousness. The second image refers to Maud Gonne, whom Yeats often shared such supernatural “tales above a sinking fire” with as a young man. The imagined exchange with Gonne again dislodges Yeats’s subjectivity from the passing of time and fills him with dreams of the past. He therefore uses the imagination to recall youthful memories and everlasting legends, which as mental objects do not lose their splendor over time. Romantic theology explains the way Yeats’s imagination functions in these early stanzas, redeeming him from corporeal denigration while also providing a secular paradise in the form of memories and mythological images.

Yeats’s imagination also alters his experience in stanza three, liberating him from the temporality of romantic love. Returning to the scene of stanza one, Yeats examines the features of the children before him, and is suddenly awestruck at the possibility of Maud Gonne’s visage as a child, where he states:

I look upon one child or t’other there
 And wonder if she stood so at that age

 And had that colour upon cheek or hair
 And thereupon my heart is driven wild

She stands before me as a living child. (18-24)

The power of the poet's imagination transfigures a child's face into Donne's youthful form before him, thereby rebuffing the strains of time on love. At any moment, Donne's imagination permits his heart to be "driven wild" and to transcend the age of his desire, both physical and mental. The imagination here explicates the tension "between the exterior—a sixty-year-old smiling public man, one of benign countenance, a figure in and out of time—and the flaming roving consciousness within—moving freely through points in time and thus transcending temporality" (Ryf 619). Although Donne is "a sixty-year-old smiling public man," his imagination stimulates his "flaming roving consciousness" to immortalize his love for Donne through the likeness of other children. Donne thus overcomes the limits of time by using his imagination to preserve his love for Donne, allowing his "flaming roving consciousness" to redeem his affections from fading and construe a paradise through remembering Donne's youthful radiance.

In stanza seven the poet reiterates the unequal development of the body and soul. The imagination again works to displace the subjective self out of time, redeeming the poet from the degenerative effects of old age. To express this discrepant development throughout life, Donne compares the visible image of a child to the intangibility of religious imagery:

Both nuns and mothers worship images
 But those the candles light are not as those
 That animate a mother's reveries.
 And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
 That passion, piety or affection knows
 And that all heavenly glory symbolize
 O self-born mockers of man's enterprise. (49-56)

The nuns' religious ideals and the physical image of children both evoke "passion, piety or affection" in the observer. However, the abstract and material, or objective and subjective qualities of both figures are subject to deterioration. The nuns' holy images will never be objectively realized, while the children will suffer corporeal decline. The abstract image or one's subjectivity proliferates throughout time as the objective self falters. Both "presences" are also "self-born mockers of man's enterprise," as human attempts at permanence through the body and soul ultimately fail. The nuns and mothers are "disappointed in their quest, both these failures coming as a result of the failure to understand the necessary reconciliation of the abstract and the body" (Raines 19). These "presences" must transcend temporality to succeed in their "quest" for permanence. Moreover, the subjective and objective self must come to terms with the ineluctability of time.

In the next stanza, Yeats proposes a way to resolve this tension. The imagination can unify the abstract and physical into more cooperative faculties in oneself, and redeem their submission to time. Yeats expresses this union as a lyrical symbiosis:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil. (57-60)

The cooperation of the body and soul merits a "blossoming" and "dancing" creation of beauty not "born out of its own despair." Experience is more fruitful through the reconciliation of the objective and subjective self via the imagination. Yeats also refutes the vitality of the body in these lines, as beauty is not born and "bruised" to satisfy one's subjectivity, nor is wisdom gained through "blear-eyed" endeavors. He concludes with a final image of this unity:

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. (61-64)

The chestnut tree is neither material nor ideal, as the “leaf, the blossom” and the “bole” are imaginatively integrated as one “great rooted blossomer.” The chestnut tree “represents unity of abstract ‘presences,’ or the soul, with the physical, or the body. The organic make-up of the tree points to the necessity of regarding each of the parts as equally important and to the idea that heterogeneity, and, therefore, failure result from separation of these parts. Permanence, then, cannot be a matter of objective viewpoint” (Raines 19). The unity of the physical and abstract cannot be objective. The “body swayed to music” and “brightening glance” of the dancer show what emanates from the confluence of the body and soul: an indistinguishable figure of harmonious objective and subjective qualities. The dancer embodies this imaginative reconciliation of the declining body and the immaterial consciousness of the soul, denying any way to “know the dancer from the dance.” This movement is outside the temporal realm because the body and soul defer to the imagination, bringing time and timelessness together in an image of consolidated beauty. The synthesis of the abstract and physical is complete, and brought about by the imagination’s intercession in the dancer’s dance, or the chestnut tree’s “blossom” or “bole.” Hence the paradisiacal and “final state of permanence is conceived of as pure imagination” (19) and Yeats is thereby redeemed from the detracting nature of time.

CONCLUSION

William Butler Yeats was unique to the modern age. During a time of fragmented belief, violence, and revolution Yeats tried to confront the dwindling human values of what seemed an unredeemable epoch. Consequently, much of his poetry differs in technique and themes from the work of his modern contemporaries. When compared to T. S. Eliot's archetypal modernist piece "The Wasteland," Yeats's poetry still preserved identifiably Romantic ways of expression. The secularization of ancient myth, emphasis on the imagination, beauty, and the sublime Yeats employed demarcate his poetry from Eliot and other modernists. This is not to say Yeats did not confront modern experience, however. Many of the poems here treated, such as "Nineteen-Hundred and Nineteen," "Sailing to Byzantium," and "The Second Coming" address modern themes but disseminate them through a Romantic lens. Yeats thus produced work that resonated with readers of the time, but made no efforts to poeticize and celebrate modern culture. He rather remained true to his Romantic inclinations, which often sought transcendence from not only modern distortions, but ephemeral existence altogether.

Whether he rages against old age in "The Tower" or comments on portentous societal changes in "The Gyres," Yeats invokes Wordsworth's secularized theology. Abrams's four principal ideas are manifested in Yeats's aesthetic: the nature of providence, secularization of classical myth, the theodicy and apocalypse of nature, and the redemptive imagination. Each aspect of this scheme relates to Yeats's expression of modern experience. The disunity of religious faith and moral values in the modern sphere corresponds to Yeats's Romantic interpretation of traditional value systems, such as Christianity. The poet also maintained an internalized and immanent understanding of Providence to counteract widespread disbelief, including his own, without losing the transcendence made possible by the individual spirit rendered through poetry. Violence in the modern social climate led Yeats to explore the moral meaning posed by the vicissitudes of nature, and not the provision of an omniscient deity. Poems

such as "The Second Coming" thus examine historical shifts without the guidance of God to intercede, while a work such as "Lapis Lazuli" reveals the disparities between art and the individual, or personal and public tragedies. The mythological bases of "The Wanderings of Oisín" and "Leda and the Swan" were accommodated to the poet's contemporary concerns and secularized to reexamine themes of Irish pride and culture, the Greek Annunciation or the process of history.

Yeats also implemented Romantic interpretations of beauty and the sublime, and transcendence in the temporal realm. These aesthetic methods allowed the poet to reconcile his values with the denigrating norms of modern art. For example, "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Gyres" display his use of the Romantic sublime to expose the depravity of the modern ethos. The poems also affirm the beauty of artistic creation or the feeling of "tragic joy" when confronting irrevocable change. "The Second Coming" conveys the sublime at its worst, as the poem manifests the terror and "blood-dimmed" barbarism of the modern apocalypse. Yeats also explored the self's transcendence through art in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," both of which turn to the imagination to redeem worldly experience and bring one as close to a tangible paradise as possible. The poet's secularized and highly imaginative reinterpretation of the redemptive process reveals a conceptual identification with Abrams's position concerning the imagination. The aesthetic and moral values of Wordsworth's secularized theology saturate Yeats's work, and signify the perennial influence of Romanticism in English literature. These conclusions display Yeats's substantial link with Abrams throughout much of his corpus, as the poet seemingly transcended the traditional age of Romanticism to become one of its most original voices.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York:

W.W. Norton & Company, 1971 Print.

Allen, James L. Jr. "Yeats's Bird-Soul Symbolism." *Twentieth Century Literature* 6.3 (1960): 117-122.

JSTOR. Web. 13 April 2011.

Allison, Jonathan. "Yeats and politics." *The Cambridge Companion to: W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Marjorie Howes

and John Kelly. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 199-200. Print.

Allt, Peter. "Yeats, Religion, and History." *The Sewanee Review* 60.4 (1952): 624-658. *JSTOR*. Web. 13

April 2011.

Antal, Friedrich. "Reflections on Classicism and Romanticism-II." *The Burlington Magazine for*

Connoisseurs 68.396 (1936): 130-133+136-139+141. *JSTOR*. Web. 03 April 2011.

Arkins, Brian. *Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats*. Maryland: Barnes & Noble Books,

1990. Print.

Auden, W.H. "Yeats as an Example." *The Kenyon Review* 10.2 (1948): 187-195. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 April

2011.

Barnwell, W.C. "The Rapist in 'Leda and the Swan.'" *South Atlantic Bulletin* 42.1 (1977): 62-68. *JSTOR*.

Web. 16 July 2011.

Bloom, Harold. *Yeats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. Print.

Burgum, Edwin B. "Romanticism." *The Kenyon Review* 3.4 (1941): 479-490. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 April 2011.

Burkill, T.A. "Romanticism, Existentialism, and Religion." *Philosophy* 30.115 (1955): 318-332. *JSTOR*.

Web. 13 April 2011.

Carberg, Joan S. "'A Vision' by William Butler Yeats." *Daedalus* 103.1 (1974): 141-156. *JSTOR*. Web. 18

July 2011.

Christensen, Francis. "Intellectual Love: The Second Theme of the Prelude." *PMLA* 80.1 (1965): 69-75.

JSTOR. Web. 09 October 2011.

Cory, Herbert E. "The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Good." *International Journal of Ethics* 37.2 (1927):

159-172. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

Eagleton, Terry. "The Irish Sublime." *Religion & Literature* 28.2/3 (1996): 25-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 09 April

2011.

Ellman, Richard. *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 1967. Print.

Empson, William. "Yeats and Byzantium." *Grand Street* 1.4 (1982): 67-95. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 April 2011.

Ferguson, Francis. "Romantic Memory." *Studies in Romanticism* 35.4 (1996): 509-533. *JSTOR*. Web. 10

April 2011.

Finneran, Richard J., ed. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume I, The Poems*. New York: Scribner,

1997. Print.

Foshay, Toby A. and Toby A. Forshay. "Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen': Chronology,

Chronography and Chronic Misreading." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 13.2 (1983): 100-

108. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 July 2011.

Foster, R.F. *W.B. Yeats: A Life. The Apprentice Mage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

Haydn, Hiram. "The Last of the Romantics: An Introduction to the Symbolism of William Butler Yeats."

The Sewanee Review 55.2 (1947): 297-323. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

Hirschberg, Stuart. "Yeats' a Dialogue of Self and Soul." *The Explicator* 37.2 (1979): 23. *Academic Search*

Complete. Web. 04 July 2011.

Holdeman, David. *The Cambridge Introduction to W.B. Yeats*. New York: Cambridge University Press,

2006. Print.

Ikeda, Hiroko. "Churchman and Fenian in 'The Wanderings of Oisín.'" *Journal of Irish Studies* 16 (2001):

119-125. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 July 2011.

Jeffares, Norman A. "Notes on Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli.'" *Modern Language Notes* 65.7 (1950): 488-491.

JSTOR. Web. 16 Aug. 2011.

Kuhns, Richard. "The Beautiful and the Sublime." *New Literary History* 13.2 (1982): 287-307. *JSTOR*.

Web. 10 April 2011.

Masson, David I. "Word and Sound in Yeats' 'Byzantium.'" *ELH* 20.2 (1953): 136-160. *JSTOR*. Web. 10

April 2011.

McGann, Jerome. "Rethinking Romanticism." *ELH* 59.3 (1992): 735-754. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 April 2011.

McGann, Jerome. "Romanticism and Its Ideologies." *Studies in Romanticism* 21.4 (1982): 573-599.

JSTOR. Web. 10 April 2011.

McWhirter, David B. "The Rhythm of the Body in Yeats' 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.'" *College*

Literature 13.1 (1986): 44-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 July 2011.

Melchiori, Giorgio. *The whole mystery of art: Pattern into Poetry in the work of W.B. Yeats*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1960. Print.

Merritt, H.C. "Shelley's Influence on Yeats." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 1 (1971): 174-184. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 April 2011.

Murdoch, Iris. "The Sublime and the Good." *Chicago Review* 13.3 (1959): 42-55. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

Perkins, David. "Sympathy with Nature: Our Romantic Dilemma." *Harvard Review* No. 9 (1995): 69-82. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Yeats and Goethe." *Comparative Literature* 23.2 (1971): 125-140. *JSTOR*. Web. 08 April 2011.

Pruitt, Virginia. "Return from Byzantium: W.B. Yeats and 'The Tower.'" *ELH* 47.1 (1980): 149-157. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 June 2011.

Raines, Charles A. "'Yeats' Metaphors of Permanence." *Twentieth Century Literature* 5.1 (1959): 12-20. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Oct 2011.

Ramazani, Jahan R. "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime." *PMLA* 104.2 (1989): 163-177. *JSTOR*. Web. 08 April 2011.

Reid, B.L. "William Butler Yeats." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 332: Nobel Prize Laureates in Literature Part 4: Quasimodo-Yeats* 332 (2007): 507-538. *Gale Literary Databases*. Web. 03 July 2011.

Ross, David A. *Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats: a Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: New York Facts on File, Inc. 2009. Print.

Ruoff, Gene W. "Religious Implications of Wordsworth's Imagination." *Studies in Romanticism* 12.3 (1973): 670-692. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 April 2011.

Ryf, Robert S. "Yeats's Major Metaphysical Poems." *Journal of Modern Literature* 4.3 (1975): 610-625. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 September 2011.

Smith, Stan. "The Second Coming: Overview." *Reference Guide to English Literature*. Ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2nd ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 11 Aug. 2011.

Spitzer, Leo. "On Yeats's Poem 'Leda and the Swan'." *Modern Philology* 51.4 (1954): 271-276. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

Steinman, Michael. "Yeats's Sailing to Byzantium." *Explicator* 52.2 (1994): 93-94 *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 September 2011.

Stewart, Herbert L. "Theology and Romanticism." *The Harvard Theological Review* 13.4 (1920): 362-389. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 April 2011.

Surette, Leon. *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 1993. Print.

Swiggett, Glen L. "What is Romanticism?" *The Sewanee Review* 11.2 (1903): 144-160. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 April 2011.

Swingle, L.J. "Romantic Unity and English Romantic Poetry." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 74.3 (1975): 361-374. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.

W.B. Yeats: Selected Poems. New York: Gramercy Books, 2001. Print.

Wellek, René. "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History. I. The Term "Romantic" and Its Derivatives." *Comparative Literature* 1.1 (1949): 1-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 April 2011.

"William Butler Yeats - Biography." Nobelprize.org. 15 Apr 2011

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/yeats-bio.html

Yeats, W.B. "Sailing to Byzantium." *Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry and Drama*. Ed. Robert DiYanni. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. 875-876. Print.

