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A VISION OF A VISION

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ABSTRACT. ***A Vision of a Vision***. When readers and critics look upon the life and works of William Butler Yeats, they most often (and justifiably) focus on his poetry. Nevertheless, an interesting aspect to look into concerns Yeats' personal philosophy on life and art. It is a perspective that already begins to take shape beginning with his first collection of poetry and which is eventually set to paper in the aptly named *A Vision.* One of the few scholars to analyze this grandiose text is Harold Bloom, who sees it as "a beautiful book, a considerable if flawed major poem" (Bloom 1970, 210). Flawed or not, *A Vision* remains a fascinating illustration of the poet's belief system and the present article explores how this system is constructed.

Keywords: *A Vision, William Butler Yeats, system of belief*

REZUMAT. ***Viziunea din "A Vision"***. Când cititori ori critici îşi îndreaptă atenţia asupra operei lui William Butler Yeats, de cele mai multe ori se axează (justificabil) pe poezia sa. Cu toate acestea, un aspect interesant care merită cercetat ţine de filosofia personală a lui Yeats în ceea ce priveşte viaţa şi arta. Este o perspectivă care începe să capete formă începând cu prima sa colecţie de poezii şi care este în final pusă pe hârtie în opera numită cu iscusinţă *A Vision (O Viziune)*. Printre puţinii cercetători care analizează acest text grandios este Harold Bloom, care îl vede ca fiind „o carte minunată, un poem major considerabil deşi imperfect" (Bloom 1970, 210 *traducerea mea*). Imperfect sau nu, *A Vision* rămâne o ilustrare fascinantă a sistemului de credinţe a poetului, iar prezentul articol explorează modul în care este construit acest sistem.

Cuvinte cheie: *A Vision, William Butler Yeats, sistem de credinţe*

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Introduction

From age 24, when he published his first poems in the collection *Crossways*, William Butler Yeats began to shape his personal philosophy on life and art, a perspective that is eventually set to paper in the aptly named *A Vision.* In his analysis of this grandiose text, Harold Bloom opens by saying that "it is possible to read *A Vision* many times over, becoming more fascinated, and still feel that Yeats went very wrong in it" (Bloom 1970, 210) and goes on to name it "nothing if not literary wisdom, yet it is sometimes unwise" (ibid). To what degree Yeats *went wrong*, or in what way the text is *unwise* is debatable, however it is true that reaction to *A Vision* varied, and there were even those who considered it proof that Yeats' poetic days were over. The most ardent defender of the text was Herman Whitaker, who saw it as "serious and brilliant philosophy of history" (Bloom 1970, 211), although it is perhaps more prudent to see this text as a literary creation – a manifest on Yeats' belief system, but placed nonetheless within a literary text – than a philosophical text in any true sense of the word. In any case, Bloom is correct when he says that *A Vision* is a fascinating book. Filled with images of cones and gyres and circles, with concepts like *primary, antithetical, Body of Fate*, which seem outlandish, to say the least, *A Vision* captures one's curiosity from the get-go. The major draw-back of this text is perhaps a significant lack of clarification regarding many of the ideas, such as the association of "every possible movement of thought" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 78) with the phases of the moon, or the presence of unnamed *Instructors* who apparently tell the author precisely what to write down and how. This in turn leaves the reader at times returning again and again to the same fragment, searching for the idea of what seems to be a puzzle that's missing a few pieces. These impediments do give the text a sense of incompleteness, which in turn decreases the poetic value of *A Vision*, and this is what Bloom is actually referring to in his criticism. He even says as much, when characterising *A Vision* as "a beautiful book, a considerable if flawed major poem" (ibid). None the less, the text still provides a brilliant symbolic illustration of a complex system of belief that is worth exploring, which is what he present paper will endeavor to do.

On A Vision

The journey towards the first Book of *A Vision* is long, the reader having to first go through several texts of varying sorts, grouped up into two sections, followed by a poem, which all seem to have been placed as explanation, justification (or even excuse) for writing this major work. When we finally have

come to Book 1 of *A Vision*, entitled *The Great Wheel*, Yeats wastes no more time in presenting us with concepts that are intriguing, if somewhat hard to swallow. It begins with a geometrical illustration of two gyres, or rather two cones immersed one inside the other, spinning constantly in opposite directions one in relation to the other (see Yeats [1937] 1966, 77).

Geometric forms for Yeats "can have a symbolic relation to reality", that is to say we can use geometry to symbolically illustrate various factors of existence. In this case, what Yeats presents are *the two tinctures – primary* and *antithetical*. As is explained by Bloom, the *antithetical* tincture can be seen as "the thrust towards individuality", while the *primary* is "the counter-movement towards unity" (Bloom 1970, 217). As Yeats himself explains,

> By the *antithetical* cone, which is left unshaded, we express more and more, as it broadens, our inner world of desire and imagination, whereas by the *primary*, the shaded cone, we express more and more, as it broadens, that objectivity of mind which lays stress upon that which is external to the mind. (Yeats [1937] 1966, 73)

Together, the cones form "the troublesome hourglass shape that tends to madden or anyway bore readers" (Bloom 1970, 217). Within this hourglass, *Four Faculties* are placed, as seen in the image accompanying the text, these being *Will, Mask, Creative Mind* and *Body of Fate*. The simplest way to understand this set in general is to think of them as the four base pillars according to which any one man's nature and life are characterised. The notion of *Will* represents who a person is inside, while *Mask* is that which is most different from ourselves and that we wish (or are made to wish) to become. Because these faculties are personal, aesthetic and emotional, they belong to the *antithetical* tincture. The other two faculties are *Body of Fate*, which can best be described as the world around us (past, present and future), and *Creative Mind* makes up the set of knowledge, of wisdom that we are born with and that we acquire in time, which permits us to tackle the world. Because these faculties deal with what is exterior to our inner selves, they belong to the *primary* tincture. How the four faculties function is described in the text: "The stage-manager, or *Daimon*, offers his actor an inherited scenario, the *Body of Fate*, and a *Mask* or role as unlike as possible to his natural ego or *Will*, and leaves him to improvise through *Creative Mind* the dialogue and details of the plot." (Yeats [1937] 1966, 84).

What becomes abundantly clear early in *A Vision* is that the Four Faculties do not appear at random, occupying instead specific positions. *Will* and *Mask* are opposites, so, naturally, they must always appear at opposite sides of the double-cone system and as far apart as possible. *Will* and *Body of Fate* are

also opposites (the inner world and the outer one), so they too must be placed on opposing sides. *Creative Mind* is essentially the way in which an *individual* deals with the world, and as such it is closer to *Will* than to *Body of Fate*.

From here two major ideas arise. The first is that "a particular man is classified according to the place of *Will,* or choice, in the diagram" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 73). This is to say that the position of *Will* determines where the other three Faculties will be placed, thus also establishing what type of person he is (more *antithetical* or more *primary*). The second major idea that presents itself is that the position of *Will* is not unique to all mankind, but that it shifts, and each time it moves closer to complete *primary* or closer to complete *antithetical*, a new type of human being appears. According to Yeats, the precise number of types is 28, coinciding with the 28 days of a lunar month. These types are found on a Great Wheel, envisioned by Yeats as "every completed movement or thought, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 81). The four most important *Phases* are 1, 8, 15 and 22.

Phases 1 and 15 are referred to as "supernatural incarnations", because the text has astutely acknowledged that no such being can be found on Earth. However, if a man of *Phase* 1 did exist, he would be first and foremost described as having "complete objectivity", with "body completely absorbed in its supernatural environment" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 183). Individual thought and expression do not exist; "mind has become indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood, body has become undifferentiated, dough-like" (ibid). Thus we have a sort of blank slate, a being that is in perfect equilibrium, with which one could do anything he chooses, a being characterised ultimately by "complete passivity, complete plasticity" (ibid). *Phase* 15, as the counterpart of *Phase* 1, can best be described as a being in dream state, where anything and everything is possible to him. Unity of Being is achieved, this being a state where the two counterparts – Will and *Mask* – are united. At *Phase* 15 "*Creative Mind* is dissolved in the Will and *Body of Fate* in the *Mask*. Thought and will are indistinguishable, effort and attainment are indistinguishable […] nothing is apparent but dreaming Will and the Image that it dreams" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 135). In other words, that which a person belonging to this *Phase* would seek and be able to obtain (*Mask*) is in fact the world around him (*Body of Fate*). He would also be privy to all knowledge, and for this reason this person can only be a fictional construction, since "a human being who embodied truth would also, presumably, take the form of an image or symbol" (Harper 2006, 144)

Phase 8 is the moment when *antithetical* men appear, when individual consciousness begins to predominate over social and spiritual conformity. As Yeats explains, if "at *Phases* 2, 3 and 4 the man moved within traditional or

seasonable limits" (Yeats [1937] 1965, 115), between *Phases* 5 and 7 there occurs a weakening in the need for restrictions and blind obedience, until finally, at *Phase* 8, self-conscious man appears.

At *Phase* 22 we see the second major shift, as man turns from *antithetical* to *primary* once more, and if at *Phase* 8 we saw the discovery of strength, here we witness its breaking (Yeats [1937] 1966, 163). In this state of balance *Will* works to encompass or be encompassed by *Body of Fate*. Personality still exists, but the man of this *Phase* is no longer interested in discovering himself, but seeks to understand the world and to discover his place within this world. He no longer has any wish to change, to create, but seeks only to understand, to discover what is truth, reality, God's *Will*. And because such divine will is far too massive for one to perceive in any concrete form, he is forced (or forces himself) to create an abstract system, a code of science. The man's *Will* itself "has become abstract, and the more it has sought the whole of natural fact, the more abstract it has become" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 158). This act of discovering truth through abstraction is, however, presented somewhat as a fool's errand, for the further man tries to gain knowledge in this manner, the more this act of appropriation becomes its own goal. This is what Yeats means when he places *Mask* and *Creative Mind* together: the interaction with the world and the act of understanding the world, become the very object of desire for the man of *Phase* 22. It is similar to the way in which a person can believe that he is in love with someone, but is in fact in love with the idea of being in love, with the abstract notion of love. The concrete example that Yeats gives of a man akin to *Phase* 22 is Darwin, and in light of the poet's system of belief, this makes sense. For Darwin is nothing if not the symbol of science during Yeats' time, and the kind of man that is described at *Phase* 22 is the scientist.

The Great Wheel presented in *A Vision*, like any well constructed symbol, can be viewed from more than out point of view, applies to several facades of the greater picture, and as such may refer not only to different types of human nature, but to the evolution of a single human being, provided we take into account Yeats' belief in reincarnation, in the repetitive nature of our existence. Thus, we are born and rely completely on our mother for nurturing (*Phase* 1). Slowly we become self-aware and finally we find our personality (*Phase* 8). We develop this personality until it has reached its creative climax (*Phase* 15) and then slowly let it linger. Eventually we come to accept a higher power (*Phase* 22) and then submit to it more and more, until we die and are reborn.

Harold Bloom saw *A Vision* as "a protest against reductiveness, against the homogenising of experience, but its dialects are themselves reductive, and tend to diminish man" (Bloom 1970, 211). Indeed, in regards to the Four Faculties governing man's nature and to the 28 *Phases*, the text seems to greatly

simplify (or even reduce) human existence, however, Yeats would probably call it *simplification through intensity*. We mustn't forget that the Faculties and *Phases* are symbolic representations, and as such, simple as they may be, they are also understood to represent great complexities. Bloom's criticism towards *A Vision* stems from his opinion that Yeats, while drawing heavily from grand works such as those by Shelley or Blake, fails to create a text that lives up to the standards of either.

In *A Vision*, it is obvious that Yeats, while trying to present both *primary* and *antithetical* man objectively, takes the side of the latter, which he saw himself as being a part of. This should come as no surprise, since the former is linked to science. The poet himself was known to have a strong aversion to this field, because "an art based on the 'philosophy' of Victorian science was incapable of creating beauty" (Watson 2006, 37). As far as the *antithetical* man is concerned, his goal is to understand his *Mask*, to bring his *Will* and *Mask* into Unity of Being, so that the interplay between the two can put him into direct and conscious contact with the *Daimon*. However, the success of such a feat is a form of completion, and once made complete, a man cannot exist any longer amongst the living. Thus, it would appear that Yeats saw all life as complicated and corrupt, an impure state that the Gnostic poet must rise above – for "the anima mundi, like the collective unconscious, reveals itself only to the Gnostic poet" (Bloom 1970, 221) – so that he may look upon the *Daimon* with his own eyes.

This exploration of the *Daimon's* nature and intentions is taken further in Book 2 of *A Vision*, where W.B. Yeats transfers his ideology from the earthly to the universal (as any doctrine of faith would inevitably do). The title of this Book is *The Completed Symbol* because here Yeats professes to present the Great Wheel, as a symbol of existence, in all its complexity. And because on such a grand scale the Four Faculties are insufficient, they have now been transformed into the Four Principles. Thus *Will* shall from now on be called *Husk*, and not represent simply man's inner self, but the whole of man. *Mask* is here *Passionate Body*, and it represents all that man desires, not just that which is most opposite to his nature. *Body of Fate* is referred to as *Celestial Body*, and is not just our world, but the entire realm of the *Daimon*, which of course includes us within it. Lastly, *Creative Mind*, which deals with *Body of Fate*, is now Spirit, which deals with the *Celestial Body*. This is not to say that the Faculties are no more, but that in regards to the more general view, the Principles are considered the more appropriate points of departure. Book 2 will then continue by explaining the relationship between each Principle, as well as the relationship between the Principles and the Faculties. We should keep in mind that, like in any doctrine of faith, humanity – no matter how small

he may seem in the universe – is still at the center of this spiritual universe, for although it precedes man, without him the very existence of the universe seems meaningless.

In essence, the Faculties and the Principles both deal with man's interaction with himself and with his surroundings, but from different standpoints – one from the point of view of life looking upon death, the other of death looking upon life – and as such, *Phase* 22 of the Wheel of Faculties, when man begins to renounce his will to exterior power, corresponds to *Phase* 1 of the Wheel of Principles. This initial *Phase* is the moment of death, when

> … consciousness passes from *Husk* to Spirit; *Husk* and *Passionate Body* are said to *disappear*, which corresponds to the *enforcing* of *Will* and *Mask* after *Phase* 22, and Spirit turns from *Passionate Body* and clings to *Celestial Body* until they are one and there is only Spirit; pure mind, containing within itself pure truth, that which depends only upon itself: as in the *primary Phases*, *Creative Mind* clings onto *Body of Fate* until mind deprived of its obstacle can create no more and nothing is left but *the spirits at one*. (Yeats [1937] 1966, 189)

Already we are seeing the contours of a belief system that is inherently tragic. Man appears as having been placed on Earth to serve the *Daimon*'s own purposes, and when man dies, eventually only Spirit remains, *which depends only upon itself*, which *creates no more*, which lacks any sort of individual, personal conscience that would allow him to independently interact with the world of the dead. Thus there is a world beyond our existence, it is only our capacity for interaction (*Creative Mind*, now become *Spirit*) that survives death, while both our ability to comprehend the knowledge that would come from this interaction, and the possibility of even exerting our own conscious, independent will upon that of the *Daimon*, vanish. Under these circumstances, Book 2 would potentially confuse the reader who tries to understand why – as expressed in Book 1 – the poet would want to hasten the Apocalypse, to hasten the end, when all that makes up his *antithetical* nature would normally vanish. It seems foolish, unless we choose to perceive this struggle towards the end as one where the poet achieves what should otherwise be impossible to the human condition, which is to pass into the realm of the *Daimon* without losing his independent self. Similar to entering the world of dreams, where everything is possible, without actually going to sleep, the poet would become a self-sustaining entity that knows every bit as much as the *Daimon*; he would become the man described in *Phase* 15 on the Wheel of Faculties.

What is curious about this Book is how often Yeats refers to outside entities, known as *Instructors* when presenting his ideas. Indeed, when he says

that he is "not certain that [he] understands the statement that the *Spirit* is the future" and that he "would have understood had [his] instructors said that *Celestial Body* was the future" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 191), it is as if the author were trying to place the burden of responsibility for his notions on someone else. Equally possible is that these instructors are simply a reiteration of the *Muses* of old, however, without further explanation, this comes off as yet another reason why Book 2 of *A Vision* might leave the reader wanting.

Book 3, called *Soul in Judgment*, is far more fascinating, certainly more poetic and therefore far better than its predecessor. It is dedicated completely to what, in Yeats' belief, happens to a human soul once death has come, presenting a detailed and surprisingly clear step-by-step journey, ending with rebirth. This journey is divided into six stages of transformation, these being *The Vision of the Blood Kindred, Meditation, Shiftings, Beatitude, Purification* and *Foreknowledge*. The first three of these, which contain the notions of *Dreaming Back* and *Return* are in fact reinterpretations of a preexisting notion that when you die you first see your whole life flash before your eyes and then come to terms with everything before moving on. What is interesting here is the notion that these stages are covered at a different pace from one individual to the next and that "where the soul has great intensity and where those consequences affected great numbers, the *Dreaming Back* and the *Return* may last with diminishing pain and joy for centuries" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 228). This remark, presented by Yeats rather offhandedly, suggests that the reason why great figures appear so rarely throughout history is that it takes them centuries to pass through the stages of death and to be reborn.

Eventually, according to Yeats, a state of balance is achieved, wherein the *Spirit* is within the fourth stage of death, the Beatitude. How long the *Spirit* will remain in this state is completely unknown, but when it is over the *Spirit* enters Purification, where

> … a new *Husk* and *Passionate Body* take the place of the old; made from the old, yet, as it were, pure. All memory has vanished, the *Spirit* no longer knows what its name has been, it is at last free and in relation to *Spirits* free like itself. Though the new *Husk* and *Mask* have been born, they do not *appear*, they are subordinate to the *Celestial Body*. The *Spirit* must substitute the *Celestial Body*, seen as a Whole, its own particular aim. Having substituted this aim it becomes self-shaping, self-moving, plastic to itself, as that self has been shaped by past lives. If its nature is unique it must find circumstances not less unique before rebirth is possible. (Yeats [1937] 1966, 233)

If there ever is a 'Heaven' in Yeats' belief system, this stage would be it. Here the *Spirit* is free, able to mingle with other *Spirits* inhabiting the *Celestial Body* and is able to shape itself as it sees fit, limited only by the possibilities that its past lives have given it. Life in a new body awaits, however the circumstances must be right, and here Yeats was very witty to place the power of rebirth ultimately into the hands of the living. He does so because "only the living create" and so "it may seek the assistance of those living men into whose 'unconsciousness' or incarnate *Daimon*, some affinity of aim permits to enter" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 234). A fascinating idea is hidden within these words: that the poet's source of inspiration may very well be those *Spirits* who enter the unconsciousness of men, helping them create art, so that in turn these men could help set the necessary stage for these *Spirits* to be reborn. This rebirth is not a pleasant one, since the sixth stage of death, Foreknowledge, is one in which "the *Spirit*, now almost united to *Husk* and *Passionate Body*, may know the most violent love and hatred possible, for it can see the remote consequences of the most trivial acts of the living" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 235). Thankfully (and rather conveniently), all such knowledge is lost when the new life is born.

After merely a glance over this period described between death and life, we find that, towards the end of Book 3, Yeats states the obvious when explaining that "Neither the Phantasmagoria nor the Purification, nor any other state between death and birth should be considered as a reward or paradise" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 236). The *Spirit*'s sole purpose seems to be to pass quickly through the six stages, since "the more complete the expiation, or the less the need for it, the more fortunate the succeeding life" (ibid). If, as stated above, great personalities need more time to complete the process, then this last statement makes the entire process all the more tragic, since it effectively suggests that people whose souls have greater intensity (as for example a poet might be) are necessarily condemned to an unsuccessful life.

Interestingly, while in Book 3 one would expect the *Daimon* to appear more often than in any other segment of the book, in fact it is hardly mentioned at all. This absence only works to further remove this fragment from the realm of occult beliefs, which, when made central to the text, only every succeeded in lessening the poetic quality of Yeats' works. Book 3 is then a work that belongs wholly to Yeats, illustrating only his own views upon the afterlife.

Book 4 of *A Vision* is entitled *The Great Year of the Ancients*, where Yeats argues for the first time that the cyclic nature of the Great Wheel can be applied to history. This is, unfortunately, the poorest section in the grand text, and so we will not be spending too much time on it. Yeats starts off from an antiquated observation that the stars in the sky shift in cycles of 26.000 years and presents

an outdated, wholly unoriginal idea of history following a similar course as the celestial bodies. After this, he claims – without any real justification – to present the reader with some prediction as to what will come next. All in all, there is little to take from this Book (nothing really, if the reader has any significant knowledge of ancient culture) and perhaps it serves best only as preparation for Book 5, which, thankfully, is far more poetic and as such far better constructed.

This final segment of *A Vision* is entitled *Dove or Swan*. The title may allude to symbolic representations of time after and before the birth of Christ, since the white dove is a symbol of Christian faith, while the swan is a symbolic figure that precedes Christianity, and also because, as we shall soon see, Book 5 deals very much with eras and their significance.

Yeats begins with a notion that is true to his system of belief, that "the Christian Era, like the two thousand years that came before it, is an entire wheel, and each half of it an entire wheel" and that "each half when it comes to its 28th *Phase* reaches the 15th or the 1st *Phase* of the entire era" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 267). Here, then, we see the forming of a system of gyres within gyres, a grandiose, dynamic image that incorporates actual human history. Beginning with Chapter III, Yeats looks at the last four thousand years through the lens of his cyclical belief system, now made complete, and will separate history into three Great Eras.

The era between year 2000 B.C and year 1 A.D. thus begins with the founding of Greek civilisation, *Phase* 1, presented as being comprised of tribes, which "after a first multitudinous revelation […] established an intellectual anarchy" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 269). From a revelation that comes from outside, the consciousness of civilisation thus begins to form, and this can be seen as *Phases* 1 to 7 of the first Great Era. At *Phase* 8 there appears Homer and "civil life, a desire for civil order dependent doubtless on some oracle" and then at *Phase* 12 "personality begins" (ibid). *Phase* 15 is reached with Raphael and Phidias, a period of art in its purest form, and "after Phidias the life of Greece comes rapidly to an end" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 271). Yeats sees the conquest of Alexander the Great as *Phase* 22, when Greek civilisation is lost to Asiatic delight, and dominant belief arises (*Phase* 25). Shortly after that, the belief in God spreads and with this comes the end of the first Great Era.

The period between 2000 B.C. and 1 A.D. is considered by Yeats (who seems to completely ignore the roles that gods played in the eyes of ancient man) to be an inherently *antithetical* era, because there is no actual dominating entity existing outside man, therefore man holds here all the tools of creation and is the maker of his own world. The period after the year 1 A.D. is, however, *primary* in nature, for power now lies outside man, in the hands of God. Because

the first thousand years and the latter thousand make up complete cycles and are inherently different, they make up two separate Great Eras, each containing important periods that coincide with the *phases* of the *Great Wheel* presented in Book 1. Thus, the second Great Era, lasting up to year 1050, "God is conceived of something outside man and man's handiwork, and it follows that it must be idolatry to worship that which Phidias and Scopas made" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 274), for all that has come before the new age would interfere with man's worshiping of God. True to the *primary Phases* of an inherently *primary* cycle, at the beginning "night will fall upon man's wisdom now that man has been taught that he is nothing" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 274). Yeats continues with an intellectually delightful contemplation upon the idea that Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for us, was Love personified, and concludes that it is not *love* that he stood for, but *primary pity*, despite the *antithetical* nature of the Savior. It is the latter because love can only be expressed towards something unique; one who loves "will admit a greater beauty than that of his mistress but not its like" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 275). But Jesus claimed to love common man, and all men alike, and from the standpoint of Yeats's beliefs, his was *primary* love, and not even love in its true form, but pity.

Phases 2 through 7 are marked by the steady decline and eventual fall of the Roman Empire (up to the year 250). During this period, classical Roman architecture reaches its climax and then degrades, while the nobility appears as "an *antithetical* aristocratic civilisation in its completed form" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 277). It is now ripe; every aspect of the noble life has its conduct and modes of behavior and all is mechanical, driven only by the worship of God. And yet, once *Phase* 8 in history is reached and "Constantine puts the cross upon the shields of his soldiers and makes the bit of his war-horse from the nail of the True Cross" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 278), this act is seen as a discovery of individual strength. With this single act Constantine the Great, like a poet who makes his own the words of the Muse, appropriates the power of God, and from here on, though still under the gaze of the Lord, man will begin more and more to shape his belief, rather than letting it be shaped by an exterior force.

Phase 15 is without a doubt early Byzantium, where "maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 279). More precisely, this *Phase* existed during the reign of Justinian, when Byzantine art reaches its most perfect form. After this, history enters *Phases* 16 to 21, a period on which Yeats does not give too much detail, except to say that in some parts of the world there was an ever-increasing turn towards intellectualism, while in others there was a turn from it, and Christianity as a whole became ever more heterogeneous. *Phase* 22 is coincided with the fall of Charlemagne's Empire, after which there follows, during the last *Phases*,

"heterogeneous art; hesitation amid architectural forms, an interest in Greek and Roman literature, much copying and gathering together" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 283). Art thus becomes wholly mechanical and trivial and what made Byzantium once so beautiful and perfect is lost, or at least temporarily forgotten.

The last (or most recent) Great Era, from the year 1050 to the author's present day, begins when suddenly "the tide changed and faith no longer sufficed" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 285). This millennium will see the rise and dominance of secular law, the appearance and growth of secular science, and the foreboding signs of the fall of Christianity. It is still a whole *primary* gyre; it cannot be *antithetical* because secular law still exerts power in all aspects of our lives from an exterior force (that of the King or of the courts), while science does not look into the human soul, but into the mechanics of nature and of physical existence.

Phases 1 through 7 are marked by the appearance of the Arthurian legends and of Gothic architecture, during which time the Church has become itself more secular so that it may combat secular law, like fighting fire with fire. During this time, "nobles and ladies join the crowds that drag the Cathedral stones" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 288), thus experiencing *primary* joy. The moment, however, when strength is discovered (*Phase* 8) is when, in the 13th century, Dante Alighieri "mourns for solitude, lost through poverty, and writes the first sentence of modern auto-biography, and in the *Divina Commedia* imposes his own personality upon a system and a phantasmagoria hitherto impersonal" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 289). The period of Da Vinci and Botticelli mark *Phase* 15 of the new era, and it is a time of intense creativity, as would be expected during the height of *antithetical* expression (even within a *primary* gyre). It is followed by a moment of elevated and extremely refined intellectual thought – the writings of Shakespeare – and then a steady decline in art, as science and all things practical begin to take over. By the time we reach the 19th century, we are already past *Phase* 22 and this is a time of "social movements and applied science", purely abstract thought, from which there will "result the elimination of intellect" (Yeats [1937] 1966, 299) in the years that will come after Yeats.

In conjunction with the other four books of *A Vision*, what we have here is "the specific expressions of Yeats' system which follow after and balance against the sections that deal in abstractions" (Matthew 2012, 136). *Dove and Swan* is therefore a concretisation of how the mechanics of Yeats' system of belief play out in real time throughout history. It shouldn't be surprising then that Harold Bloom openly praises this last part of Yeats' text, saying that "when the student of Yeats passes on to Book V of *A Vision*, he can be grateful that the poet has taken over completely from his astral instructors" (Bloom 1970, 280). Indeed, in *Dove or Swan* the illusive instructors hardly appear and are largely irrelevant, thus making this section a wholly original construct and not a text

that relies heavily on its own influences, as was the case of the preceding two books. In this fifth *Book* Yeats identifies three full moons in art throughout human civilisation, and "has the confidence to fix their dates, and the dialectical cunning to remind us that these eras of *Phase* 15 are also times of *Phase* 8 or 22 in larger cycles, and so times of trouble as well as of achievement" (Bloom 1970, 282). More than a philosophy of history, Bloom sees *Dove or Swan* as a reverie on such a philosophy, without however denying the well grounded interplay that Yeats creates here between philosophical contemplation and historical fact. Indeed, one of the merits (among many others) of the way history is presented in Book V is precisely the fact that it touches so often upon real historical facts and illustrates so effectively certain cyclical trends of the past that cannot be denied, that even a person who expresses disbelief in Yeats' system of belief would have to at least consider parts of it, if he keeps an open mind. It is similar to the way an open-minded Christian must find merit in Hinduism, or the other way around.

Conclusion

Ultimately, William Butler Yeats ends up creating in *A Vision* an apocalyptic system of belief. There is wisdom and knowledge out there of infinite proportions, but these are not found among the living. Instead, they reside with the *Daimon* and the spirit realm. The tragedy for mankind seems to be, however, that even in death we cannot comprehend the knowledge that the *Daimon* holds, since consciousness disappears along with *Husk.* Hope, however, lies with the poet, who, by meditating upon his *Mask*, is able to peer through the veil that separates this world and the next, and thus gain glimpses of the *Daimon's* world while maintaining his own sense of awareness.

One question that remains is how seriously we should take Yeats' philosophy. To date, there is no such thing as *Yeatsianism*, and that is perhaps for the best. Notions of gyres and *Great Wheels* and *Daimons* that govern our actions are amusing notions to contemplate upon, but it would probably be difficult to find any authentic way in which we might identify the elements of our personal lives with much of anything that is described in this text. Perhaps the best way to view *A Vision* then is less as a universal philosophical doctrine, and more as Yeats' personal system of belief, which helped guide him throughout his literary career. Taking this perspective into account, an interesting practice then becomes that of first reading and understanding *A Vision* (as best one can) and then going back to read or reread the author's earlier works and seeing how the reader's interpretation of them might change.

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