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# DANCE AS RECONCILIATION OF OPPOSITES: A POETIC ILLUSTRATION OF YEATS' SYSTEM OF BELIEFS

W.B. Yeats' prominent position in the history of literature in the English language is unquestionable. The objective of his life-long search was to unite a divided sensibility. He aimed at reconciliation of the spiritual experience with rational judgement. His distrust of contemporary philosophical systems, combined with a strong belief in the reality of human experience, made him seek the truth on his own. He views life in terms of an endless conflict of contrary forces which are irreconcilable in the sphere of abstract intellect yet justified in the realm of creative imagination. Yeats' dialectic finds application in the creative process. As M.L. Rosenthall (1965:38) remarks:

*Yeats begins to use the method of setting interpenetrating opposites against one another as a deliberate way of discovering the character of the human predicament and of explaining the challenge it offers.*

This process leads the poet to the creation of a system whose aim is to bring the whole soul of man into activity. His solution is the image of dance which serves as an illustration of the creative process uniting the opposites in his mind.

In this article I would like to present dance as an image of reconciliation of opposites. Many critics in their interpretation of this metaphor refer to Yeats' system of beliefs presented in *A Vision* and *Mythologies*. An extensive study of dance was carried out by J. Hillis-Miller (1966:90) who relates Yeats' philosophical system to Neoplatonic tradition. My purpose here is to examine dance as a complex metaphor which includes other metaphors and images and thus provides a wide-ranging context for Yeats' poetry.

## The Origin of Yeats' System of Beliefs: Sources

The origin of Yeats' system of beliefs is deeply rooted in the tradition of heterodox mysticism familiar from William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche. Yeats owes to Blake his idea of paired opposites: soul and self, love and hate, 'subjective' and 'objective', chance and choice. All of these are in conflict and yet establish unity in man's life and history. A passage from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Malins 1966:59) states: *Without Contraries is no Progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.*

The dialectical view of history envisaged as an endless struggle of contrary impulses is also found in the Nietzschean concept of Apollonian and Dionysian principles. The Apollonian principle creates forms while the Dionysian transcends forms. When these contrary forces are in perfect equilibrium, they can produce great art as a result of their synthesis. Greek tragedy expresses this struggle most effectively. It forces the onlooker to realise the joy of eternal becoming, which includes the joy of destruction. This emotion is possible because destruction implies new birth. Yeats expresses this doctrine in this way: *We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy.* (Smith 1990:110) Yeats (1971:28) also finds in Nietzsche the basis for his concept of the Mask. Nietzsche's *will to power* incited Yeats' urge for the conquest of the self. The idea of Superman, a hero full of daring initiative, accounts for Yeats' attempt to transform the self in order to become its opposite and thus remake his poetic personality through constant struggle in consciousness.

## Sphere and Gyres: "Under Round Tower"

In the poems contained in the collection “Wild Swans at Coole” (1973:147) the image of dance serves as an illustration to the basic concepts put forward in *A Vision.* Dance is here an attempt to reconcile the contrary forces within the poet’s consciousness. Yeats' mind was preoccupied with the conflict between reality and imagination, the subjective view of an artist and the objective judgement of an intellectual. Thus, the principle of dance as the synthesis of opposites concerns the human condition. As M.L. Rosenthall (1965:30) remarks, to Yeats all things seem: *[...] made of conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other’s life, live each other’s death. That is true of life and death themselves.*

We shall now consider dance in general as the image of the transformation of human consciousness to spherical perfection. Yeats (1966:187) constructs his system upon the belief that: *[...] ultimate reality [...] falls in human consciousness [...] into a series of antinomies.* The symbols of this

transformation are the sphere and a pair of intersecting cones called gyres. According to Richard Ellmann (1968:152–3) the sphere is: *[...] unified reality beyond chaotic appearance or the existence of reality, while the gyres represent: [...] the world of appearance in which consciousness is in conflict*.

The transformation is further defined by J. Hillis-Miller. (1966:90) He presents it in terms of a whirling movement which takes place in two directions, up and round. The vertical movement refers to time and eternity. Eternity can be compared to a mirror which has broken into minute parts, or things of time. Although they are opposites, each in a way complete, they reflect one another in different ways. While in heaven things are perfect and at one, on earth *[...] all things are from antithesis.* (Yeats, 1966:268) Time and eternity mutually negate each other: whatever can be said about one, must be denied of the other. Their relation can be defined in terms of divisions between the One and the many; permanence and change; truth and appearance; and the universal and the particular.

This vertical movement of the dance is accompanied by a horizontal antinomy, symbolised by a pair of interpenetrating gyres: *[...] each living the other's death, dying the other's life* (1966:68), the one expanding while the other contracts. Their relation is based on the principle of the conflict of opposites: the sun and the moon, love and hate, subjectivity and objectivity, man and woman, life and death, body and soul, intellect and emotion, youth and age. All these are contraries, like a pair of lovers; one cannot exist without the other, yet they cannot be one, except at the moment of sexual embrace. Their interdependence is shown in "Under Round Tower" (1973:154–5) in terms of dance:

*Of sun and moon that a good hour*
*Bellowed and pranced in the round tower;*

The dance of sun and moon, the golden king and the silver lady, is an attempt to marry oppositions. It can also stand for the dual principle of the poet's consciousness, balancing subjective and objective elements. According to Richard Ellmann (1979:234) the sun and moon symbolise the opposing gyres and the round tower stands for a sphere. Yeats himself refers to the whirling movement in *A Vision* (1966:290) as representative of the horizontal dance of the cones of history. They also stand for the gyres of sex whose dance Yeats describes in the "Stories of Red Hanrahan" (1971:227–8):

*The sun and moon are the man and the girl, they are my life and your life, they are travelling and ever travelling through the skies as if under the one hood. It was God made them for one another. He made your life and my life before the beginning of the world. He made them that they might go through the world, up and down, like the two best dancers that go on with the dance up and down the long floor of the barn, fresh and laughing, when all the rest are tired out and leaning against the wall.*

J. Hillis-Miller (1966:95) further describes their movement as an endless, ever unsuccessful attempt of lovers to reach a poise which is beyond movement: *They are like sun and moon [...]. As one rises the other sets, and never can they satisfy their longing for completion.* In their spiral movement up and round they climb to the top, where they could reach spherical wholeness. They will be everywhere on the circle at once melted into unity.

## The Mask: "Ego Dominus Tuus"

The image of whirling antinomies dominates Yeats' (1966:71–3) vision of human life. It accounts for his basic conceptions of reality perceived as double cone (or, in other words, a pair of intersecting gyres). It denotes two contrary states within man, subjectivity and objectivity, that are constantly fighting against each other. The subjective cone, called the antithetical tincture, is marked by a tendency: *[...] to separate man from man*, while the objective cone called the primary tincture: *[...] brings us back to the mass where we begin.* They both emerge from the Empedoclean principles of Concord and Discord, as well as the Nietzschean concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. The former is the solar principle, while the latter is lunar. The primary tincture is reasonable and moral, while the antithetical is emotional and aesthetic.

The struggle of the primary and antithetical impulses in human consciousness is symbolised in the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1973:181–3) by the figures of Hic and Ille, two opposite aspects of the poet's personality, arguing with each other. Both Hic and Ille seek for the truth. For Hic, the rational sceptic, the truth is abstract and can be found in a book. The image-seeker, Ille, on the contrary, thinks he can fashion it in the act of poetic creation:

*By the help of an image*
*I call to my own opposite, summon all*
*That I have handled least, least looked upon.*

Hic, in his search for abstraction, would find himself, while Ille, in search for the image, would create his anti-self, the opposite of all that he is, that would contain everything but himself. Ille suggests that this is the creation of the dramatic mask, where the spontaneity of action is not separated from the self, but reaches out from it to another being. Poetry is thus a constant struggle of the self with its anti-self.

The concept of the inner struggle of consciousness was founded upon the doctrine of the Mask, originally put forward in Yeats' prose essay entitled "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (1971:325) and later developed in *A Vision.* According to Richard Ellmann (1979:74–5) the idea originated in Yeats' mind from his sense of self-division, and revealed his tendency to pose before the world as something

different from what he was, to hide his secret self. It reflected an aesthetic conception of the artistic personality, which was divided into two men: an insignificant man who was overdetermined, whether by God, society or birth; and a significant one who was created by the first. Such a division accounted for Yeats' distinction between personality and character, the former being the conscious product of the latter, following the motto: *[...] create yourself, be yourself your poem.* The poet seeks his mask as a creative principle. As Yeats (1971:331–6) claims, the basis of all creation is struggle in the sphere of consciousness: *We make, out of the quarrel with others, rhetorics, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.*

Putting on the mask of a person most unlike oneself seems to be a solution to that endless mental conflict. Only creative men, those who can test thoughts with passions, are able to undergo self-transformation and attain spherical wholeness through an act of self-dramatisation: *The other self, the anti-self, or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those, who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality.* Putting on a mask is an imaginative act, the deliberate creation of an individual pattern instead of a repetition of the code:

> *If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from a passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of the mask.*

The anti-self is called Daimon, man's archetypal self through which one seeks to attain eternal completion: *The Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts.* It is our destiny, both loathed and adored; loathed, because it is least natural to man; adored, because it is that which man needs to escape the torment of his limitation. The relation between man and Daimon is that of: *[...] sexual love which is founded on spiritual hate*.

### Self-Transformation: "The Phases of the Moon"

Each man is a mixture of subjectivity and objectivity, primary and antithetical qualities. Yet, by means of a dance-like transformation, he can attain spherical wholeness. The transformation of the self in the search for its opposite is the subject of the poem “The Phases of the Moon”.(1973:183–8) Here, the quest for identity is brought into the sphere of the ideal. We meet Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, characters from Yeats' stories, who are often pointed to as ideal projections of the poet’s personality. They are also referred to in *A Vision.*(1966:35) Robartes is a visionary who *[...] sees what is*

*going to happen, between sleeping and waking* and Aherne is *[...] a pious Catholic, thinks it pagan [...] and hates it, but he has to do what Robartes tells him.* In the sphere of imagination Robartes supports Ille in his visionary quest, while Aherne is an interpreter, and follows Hic in his tendency towards abstraction and moralisation. Both meet on the bridge over the stream. The bridge suggests the reconciliation of contraries in the sphere of the ideal. They seem to embody an antithesis to the poet: Hic-Ille, whose search for the truth seemed insufficient on the levels of both imaginary and rational. Ille's visionary quest has turned out to be an illusion:

*He has found after the manner of his kind*
*Mere images [...]*

That is why the poet has returned to the tower, turning to Hic for help. However, Hic's search seems hopeless as well:

*[...] he seeks in book or manuscript*
*What he shall never find.*

The poet must spend his whole life searching for the truth and still he will not even know a small part of it. The wisdom he desires is possessed by Michael Robartes, who explains it in terms of the transformation of the soul on the Great Wheel of 28 incarnations:

*Twenty and eight the phases of the moon,*
*The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,*
*Twenty and eight, and yet but six and twenty*
*The cradles that a man must needs be reached in:*
*For there's no human life at the full or the dark.*

Special attention is paid to phases 1 and 15. In *A Vision* (1966:80) they are treated as contrary aspects of the same nature which impose their antithetical character upon creation. They are not human incarnations because there is no struggle in these phases. They recall the image of the whirling antinomies of the sun and the moon. In phase 1, the phase of complete objectivity, called *Moon in Sun*, man is submissive and plastic, while in phase 15, the phase of complete subjectivity, called *Sun in Moon*, man's will perceives itself as beauty. Hazard Adams (1989:127) points to both phases as lifeless because they are perfect of their kind, phase 1 is dominated by thought, while phase 15 is dominated by imagistic beauty. They reveal the distinction between thought and image:

*Thought in its perfection is pure abstraction, complete bodily annihilation, soul dominating fully. Image in its perfection is complete union of body and soul, to the extent that body as body and soul as soul are "cast away beyond the visible world" and only the beautiful image as image remains. [...]. At each extreme there is no life, only the ideal. At*

*one extreme is the ideal of perfect nothingness, which is also perfect submission to God. At the other extreme is the ideal of perfect image, the perfect somethingness.*

In his song Robartes goes through all the phases of human life. The journey of the soul through all 28 incarnations reveals the relation between the soul and the body. The domination of the soul prevails in the early and late lunar phases, which are childhood and old age. In the phases near the full moon, however, the body overshadows the soul. Phase 15 is the most important stage in the soul's journey, the period of the Unity of Being. In that phase thought is absorbed in image and soul is dressed in bodily beauty:

*All thought becomes an image and the soul*
*Becomes a body.*

Yeats refers to this state in *A Vision* (1966:138*)*:

*All that the being has experienced as thought is visible to its eyes as a whole, and in this way it perceives, not as they are to others, but according to its own perception all orders of existence.*

Phase 15 is also the moment of the confrontation of the self with his anti-self. The contemplation of bodily beauty gives man momentary access to the complementary, unknown part of himself. He then goes through a state of mind in which:

*All dreams of the soul*
*End in a beautiful man's or woman's body.*

Imagination creates reality in a moment of great, individual power:

*Thought and will, effort and attainment, become indistinguishable; contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has bodily form, and every bodily form is loved.*

In this condition the perceiver and the perceived are no longer subject and object, but are, though separate, fully involved with one another. They maintain their identities, while remaining identical. Their relation, founded upon contemplation and empathy is thus opposed to the abstracting, distancing, and self-destroying thought of phase 1. Lovers meet in a moment of greatest physical beauty. Such beauty, possible only to subjective natures, is the result of emotional toil and suffering. But it is doomed and must soon vanish as the wheel turns.

Through successive incarnations man slowly approaches the last phases of Hunchback, Saint, and Fool. These phases are dark and as such they are *[...] cast beyond the verge.* No description of them is possible except complete plasticity. The creatures born then are:

*Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,*

*Insipid as the dough before it is baked,*
*They change their bodies at a word.*

The Hunchback is marked by the deformity of the body, the Fool by the deformity of the mind. The Saint, who is:

*[...] drawn betwixt*
*Deformity of body and of mind*

unites the extremes and thus is released from the wheel.

In order to know the truth one must go through all the stages of transformation. Yet it is impossible for the poet to recognise the last three stages. That is why Aherne is sceptical of the poet's wisdom. He knows that the poet's search is an endless going round in circles. Hence, he sums up his aimless pursuit:

*[...] He'd crack his wits*
*Day after day, yet never find the meaning.*

The meaning can only be revealed to the poet in the act of visionary illumination. He will not find it separately from the form. That is why he turns to art, which reconciles the oppositions in the unity of bodily form in the image of the dancer.

## Unity: "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes"

The visionary embodiment of dance is the final step in the process of transformation in the search for self-awareness. It takes place in the poem "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (1973:192–4),which reconciles the extreme stages of self-development on the level of art. The poem narrows down the theme undertaken by Michael Robartes in "The Phases of the Moon" (1973:183) to the detailed description of the two opposite phases of 1 and 15. According to Richard Ellmann (1968:255) the contrasting visions of the first and the fifteenth phases symbolise *[...] the two extremes of the poet's nature and human nature in general, the utmost development of the self on the one hand, and its obliteration on the other.*

The first vision arises in complete darkness. The *cold spirits* are born:

*When the old moon is vanished from the sky*
*And the new still hides her horn.*

The dark moon symbolises the blotting out of the self. In this stage there is no will, as Yeats points out in A Vision (1966:183): *Thought and inclination, fact and object of desire, are indistinguishable [...]. There is complete passivity, complete plasticity.* The blank indifferent eyes of the creator watch its own restless fingers pounding the particulars till they become men. They are:

*Constrained, arraigned, baffled, bent and unbent [...]*
*Obedient to some hidden magical breath*

Creation seems to be the struggle of a self which is too weak to break through the control of its creator. The automatic act of will is determined and limited by its own incapability to manifest itself.

The second vision, in contrast to the first, shows the self developed to its utmost capability. It is born in the full of the moon as opposed to the darkness of phase 1. In contrast to the previous image, which is chaotic and full of confusion, the image of part two is clear and perfect in its appeal. The vision consists of three images, symbolising the three powers of the self at its full development: The Sphinx, the Buddha, and the dancer. In his comment on *A Vision* (Jeffares,1973:216) Yeats says that the Sphinx is *[...] the introspective knowledge of the mind's self-begotten unity*. The Buddha is *[...] the outward looking mind.* These two figures stand *[...] like heraldic supporters guarding the mystery of the 15th phase, and between them the dancer combines intellect and emotion for a moment*. Ellmann (1968:255) comments on this passage as follows:

*The Sphinx is the intellect, gazing on both known and unknown things; the Buddha is the heart gazing on both loved and unloved things; the dancing girl, most important of all, is primarily an image of art. She dances between them because art is neither intellectual nor emotional but a balance of these qualities.*

The whole image strikes us with definiteness and internal harmony. It consists of three images combined as one, yet independent of one another, three aspects of the same nature. The Sphinx is a hybrid with a woman's face and a lion's body. It reconciles beauty and mystery with rule and power. Its eyes:

*[...] lit by the moon*
*Gazed upon all things known, all things unknown*
*In triumph of intellect*
*With motionless head erect.*

His head is the symbol of intellectual judgement. The Buddha, on the other hand, symbolises the spiritual power of the loving heart. His:

*[...] hand at rest,*
*Hand lifted up that blest;*

is a symbol of the execution of power. The eyes of both are lit by the moon, which enlightens them with eternal wisdom. They are fixed on the moon, changeless and still in their permanence.

The contrary faculties of the human soul are reconciled by the dancer. In contrast to the Sphinx and the Buddha, who are timeless and almost eternally still, the girl is seen *at play*, a creature of time who in the past:

*[...] had danced her life away*

*[...] had outdanced thought*

and now:

*[...] being dead it seemed*
*That she of dancing dreamed.*

The contrast between the present and the past adds dynamism to her movement. She is, at the same time, dead and full of life, dancing and dreaming of dance, her perfect body rising above thought and action, inspiring the mind and the heart. She is the energy that unites thought and love, death and life, and subjects them to endless transformations.

The three aspects of the self are independent entities, each self-absorbed, all comprising a unity. They appeal to *[...] eye and ear which silence the mind* at the *spinning top* of the mind's activity, and thus have the power to transform the moment into eternity. The image which is *[...] wrought upon the moment* is, at the same time, permanent and full of change: *[...] dead yet flesh and bone.*

The poem marks the climax in the process of the dance-like transformation of self-consciousness. It reconciles the extremes of phases 1 and 15; total diffusion on the one hand, and ultimate unity on the other. It also unites the contraries of intellect and emotion, and subjects them to phase 15. In the final image of the dancer Yeats combines both horizontal and vertical movements of the dance. A complex process is thus embodied in its product: the dancing girl whose appearance crowns the transformation of the self through whirling antinomies with their final reconciliation.

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