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DUALITY OF THE IMAGE OF GOD IN CALVARY BY W.B. YEATS

William Butler Yeats, a poet who belonged to Irish protestant ascendancy, combines a passion for religious search with a distance to traditional Christianity. His poetic imagination, attempting to unite various paradoxes, is reflected in his attitude to religion, which is a subject of his individual approach. The search for an individual system of belief was justified by the poet as follows:

I am very religious and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expressions, passed on from generations by poets and painters with some help of philosophers and theologians (Yeats 1973a:114–115).

His complex mind found evidence for the dual concept of Divinity in the tradition of heterodox mysticism (Wilson 1958:15). The motif of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which Yeats derives from Heraclitus, can be found in such philosophers as Boehme, Swedenborg, Nietzsche and Jung. Heraclitus' gnomic phrase *God and man die each other's life, live each other's death* is the clue to Yeats's play *Resurrection*. Jakob Boehme employed the motif of an androgyne whose dual nature was compared to crucified Christ (cf. Eliade (1999:121)). He also expounded the dialectic of contraries as the force giving a dynamic quality to our lives (cf. Macrae (1995:35)). Emmanuel Swedenborg acquainted Yeats with the conviction that *the dead dream back, for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life* (cf. Ure (1969:88)). The notion of Christ's *dreaming back* is a predominant theme of *Calvary*. Friedrich Nietzsche influenced Yeats's dualistic vision of history as the struggle of the Dionysiac and the Apollonic principles. The Apollonic principle creates forms while the Dionysiac transcends forms. When these contrary forces are in perfect equilibrium (for Nietzsche in Greece in the 5th c. B.C.; for Yeats in early Byzantium), they can produce great art as a result of their synthesis (cf. Smith (1990:110)). Yeats (1971c:28) also finds in Nietzsche the basis for his concept

of the Mask. Nietzsche's *will to power* gave rise to Yeats's urge for the conquest of the self. The idea of Superman, a hero full of daring initiative, accounts for Yeats's attempt to transform the self in order to become its opposite. The parallel with Carl Gustav Jung is clear when we compare Yeats's notion of *Anima Mundi* with Jung's concept of the collective unconscious as a storage of archetypes: *primordial images from which all religions each draw their universal truth* (Wilson 1958:23). Jung's theory of persona reflects Yeats's concept of the Mask (cf. Kearney (1985:232)). Although philosophy influenced Yeats's views on art to a great extent, he was first of all the practitioner of drama, so in order to find the actual embodiment of those ideas we should examine his stage performance.

The years 1896–1903, when Yeats wrote a collection of essays *Ideas of Good and Evil*, can be considered as the turning point in Yeats's views on art. The purpose of art was to embody spiritual reality. The type of drama that Yeats endorsed was subjective; it represented man's inner feeling, not externality of character (cf. Komesu (1984:109)). He wrote to Fiona Macleod in 1897:

My own theory of poetical or legendary drama is that it should have no realistic, or elaborate, but only a symbolic and decorative setting [...]. The acting should have an equivalent distance to that of the play from common realities. The play might be almost, in some cases, modern mystery plays (Yeats 1971b:280).

The traces of a modern mystery play can be found in Yeats's reference to Nietzsche, whose notions of the Dionysian and the Apollonic are employed by the poet in his concept of art. Yeats's thought develops from the fascination with the Dionysian to the attraction to the Apollonic, which the poet expressed in the letter to John Quinn in 1903:

I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively. I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place (Yeats 1971b:403).

According to the poet the distinction between the Dionysiac and the Apollonic is like transfiguration on the mountain and the incarnation, only the Transfiguration comes before the Incarnation in the natural order (Yeats 1971 b:402). In the creative act the artist gives a human form to the Divine, brings the supernatural into the natural order and thereby reshapes this order (cf. Marcus (1992:67)).

In *Calvary* the dualistic vision of the world is enhanced by the presentation of characters based on antithesis. The form of the play is based on Japanese Noh drama in which the juxtaposition of the protagonist and the antagonist (here: the antagonists) exposes the element of the struggle of opposites. *Calvary* is a static drama in which the central image is the figure of Christ who dreams his passion through in his imagination and is confronted with the images of those he cannot save: Lazarus, Judas and the Three Roman Soldiers.

The figure of Christ embodies Yeats's *death-in-life and life-in-death* principle of unity.¹ The condition of a dream, the mid-state between life and death, which means life for the soul while the body is motionless, introduces us into the sphere of inner activity. It points to the soul, wholly abstracted from bodily condition, in which the images of the antagonists: Lazarus, Judas and The Roman Soldiers are brought to life in the sphere of imagination. Ure (1969:114) explores the relationship between the characters in the following way:

1. *God dies man's life, or life-in-death: the dead God is like a live man (Christ)*
2. *God lives man's death, or death-in-life: the eternal God becomes a man, and dies (The Roman Soldiers)*
3. *Man dies God's life, or life-in-death: the dead man is like the living God: he cannot die, or cannot find the death appropriate to man (Lazarus)*
4. *Man lives God's death, or death-in-life: the living man endeavours to live like an immortal, spiritual creature, to 'ascend to Heaven', or to be, like the resurrected Christ 'a phantom with a beating heart'. In this way man diminishes his humanity, and the self no longer claims, 'as by a soldier's right / A charter to commit the crime once more' (Judas)*

Duality of the image of God can be perceived on two levels of communication: one level is that of the lyrics sung by the Musicians, the other level introduces Christ and other characters' encounter on the road to Calvary.² As other Noh-oriented plays by Yeats, in *Calvary* the stage is almost bare. The properties of the fictional reality are described in the Musicians' songs. One can assume that just like the choir in the ancient drama, the Musicians express an objective commentary uninvolved in the action performed on the stage. Here comes the first opposition: between the *dramatis personae* who wear masks and the Musicians whose faces are made up to resemble masks. Similarly, the faces of the Roman Soldiers, who appear on the level of characters, are not masked. This suggests an objective and detached attitude of the Soldiers.

On the level of character-to-character communication one can distinguish the oppositions between:

- a) Christ vs. Lazarus and Judas (iconic vs. naturalistic presentation of characters),
- b) Lazarus and Judas vs. The Roman Soldiers (subjective vs. objective reality),
- c) The Roman Soldiers vs. Martha and three Marys (chance vs. choice).

The clash between the objective and the subjective is the basic conflict in the play and is revealed in the figure of Christ who appears on the stage as a

¹ This principle was expressed by the poet in lines of the poem "Byzantium" (Yeats 1973b:280–82): *I hail the superhuman, / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.*

² For the further examination of various codes of communication in Yeats's drama see Joanna Burzyńska (1995:32). The author views Yeats's poetic drama as a type of the Multi-Semiotic Speech Act.

ghost or phantom. A phantom appears in the mythical situation when historical reality is confronted with the universal circumstances. Morin explains it as follows:

And thus, in the point of an astounding encounter of the extreme subjectivity with the extreme objectivity, in the place where the ultimate process of alienation occurs, when, at the same time, the need for subjectivity is the most perceptible, appears a phantom, i.e. an image, a spectre of man. This image is exteriorised, alienated, objectified to such an extent that it occurs as a being, or an independent spectre, attributed with absolute reality. This absolute reality is, at the same time, absolute unreality. The phantom embodies all human needs, above all, his most subjective and insane need of immortality (quoted after Smużniak 1996:11–12).

The phantom of Christ is an image of man's alienation in the face of ultimate reality. It appears as a result of the clash of the subjectivity of an artist with the objectivity of stage reality. It reaches the audience as an image which is at the same time absolutely real and absolutely unreal in its universality of the message, and stirs the audience's imagination so that they recede to the deeper level of perception. This inner perception, called by Yeats *the deeps of the mind* (Yeats 1971b:224), originates in archetypal situations.

Christ is introduced on the stage by the Musicians' songs. This is how we find that the conflict which torments him has its source in his imagination:

First Musician:

*[...] Good Friday's come,
The day whereon Christ dreams His passion through.
He climbs up hither but as a dreamer climbs.
The cross that but exists because He dreams it
Shortens his breath and wears away His strength.*³

The song suggests that Christ's suffering is remote and unreal. It is a conflict of tormented imagination rather than actual passion. Christ is presented more like a biblical figure than a real man. His speeches are very short. They are rather oracular utterances, majestic and theophanic: *I do my Father's will; My father put all men into my hands*. His presentation points at a remote image of the Saviour rather than a suffering human being. As Ure (1969:117) remarks: *Christ is in the centre of the scene not as a tortured victim but as the Pantocrator, Byzantine and unrealistic, rigid like the figure in an icon*.

Contrary to the unrealistic image of Christ, Lazarus and Judas are pictured in a realistic, even naturalistic way. Their conflict is a conflict of a man who was deprived of his freedom and granted salvation instead, against his will. Unlike Christ, whose physical appearance was not described, Lazarus was visualised as repulsive:

First Musician:

³ All unmarked quotations from Yeats (1972:449–57).

*The crowd shrinks backward from the face that seems
Death-stricken and death-hungry still;*

His speech, in which he justifies that in death he was seeking oblivion which would help him escape Christ's overwhelming love, is supported with an example which is a naturalistic animal-image:

Lazarus:
*You dragged me to the light as boys drag out
A rabbit when they have dug its hole away;*

Unlike Lazarus, who expresses emotional remorse of a man striving for unattainable personal death, Judas is an intellectual figure. He claims his right to equality and partnership. The act of betrayal was a conscious choice of freedom, an urge to break from an all-powerful God and the assertion of his own identity in history. It was prophesied that somebody would betray Christ, so Judas agrees to take this responsibility upon himself.

Judas:
*It was decreed that somebody betray you –
I'd thought of that – but not that I should do it,
[...] I did it,
I, Judas, and no other man, and now
You cannot save me.*

While Lazarus and Judas express subjective rebellion of an individual who has no freedom to escape the right of necessity, The Roman Soldiers represent the triumph of the objective right of chance, which is demonstrated by the act of throwing dice for Jesus' cloak. They neither seek individual fulfilment nor escape from the rights of life and death – they accept these rights, take life as it is and praise it in an act of dance around the cross. To them Christ's death is one more death of a man, they are indifferent to salvation. Thus one can assume that it is chance that governs man's life:

Third Roman Soldier:
*We are the gamblers, and when you are dead
We'll settle who is to have that cloak of yours
By throwing dice.*

In contrast to highly individualised figures of Lazarus and Judas, The Roman Soldiers are impersonal. They can be contrasted with Martha and Marys who are introduced into the play in the Musicians' songs. But while Marta and Marys represent those whose individuality was completely dissolved in the necessity of following God's plan, the individuality of The Roman Soldiers was subjected to the laws of chance. Marta and Marys' lack of personality was emphasised by excluding them from dramatic action. The figures of The Soldiers, although appearing on the performance level, can be

perceived as part of objective reality since, like the Musicians, they do not wear masks.

Integrity which occurs on the symbolic level is expressed by the symbols of the birds, especially the heron, as well as in the final image of dance. It is the level on which the final pair of opposites is united: the opposites of movement and stillness which reflect the *death-in-life and life-in-death* principle. While the heron symbolises the subjective loneliness of an individual who is doomed to death, the dance unites impersonal crowd in an objective image of affirmation of life. In the symbol of the heron both man and God are integrated in still contemplation of his own image. It expresses loneliness of man who cannot be saved by God as well as the alienation of God who is left by his Father on his way to Calvary. A motionless heron completely absorbed in contemplation of his own image in water by the light of the moon is an image of isolation, death and stillness:

First Musician:

*Motionless under the moon-beam,
Up to his feathers in the stream;
Although fish leap, the white heron
Shivers in a dumbfounded dream.*

As Knowland (1983:159) remarks, the heron which looks upon his reflection in water is a symbol of those who are subjectively lonely:

[...] completely absorbed in their own being, who have totally divested themselves of the love of created beings, of all contact with the external world, who have descended into the depths of the self-contained soul in order to reach the heights of absorption in God.

However, that state of mystic self-absorption is not eternally static. The changing phases of the moon remind us of inevitable movement of the cycles of nature, also the right of death. The heron would soon die, and become the diet of fishes. So would man and God. But while man's death is a natural law, God's death brings new life. However, both man and God remain lonely in the moment of death. God's loneliness is reflected in, as Ure (1969:115) remarks: *the powerlessness to save those who can live without salvation*. This powerlessness is expressed in the final question of Christ on the cross: *My Father, why hast Thou forsaken Me?* The loneliness of man who has chosen freedom is revealed in his inability to find rescue in salvation: *God has not died for the white heron*.

While the heron is the symbol of death and isolation, the dance around the still figure of Christ on the cross epitomises the final triumph of the objective law of chance over the subjective life of an individual:

Second Roman Soldier:

*Come now; let us dance
The dance of the dice-throwers, for it may be*

He cannot live much longer and has not seen it.

Dance is the central symbol in the drama, around which other elements of the play revolve. It provides the clue to the understanding of the plot as well as the other symbols in the play. It aims at integrating the two levels: the dramatic level and the level of the lyrics, but this integrity which is reached at climax enhances isolation. As Wilson (Knowland 1983:155) points out, the function of dance is [...] *that of all dances in Yeats's drama: to isolate, and to present in a concentrated form, the central emotion of the play.* The lyrics sung by the Musicians have a similar function: they unite the level of dramatic performance with the level of symbols. The symbolic meaning of birds in relation to the characters of the play, which is referred to by Knowland (cf. 1983:155) and Ellis (cf. 1995:292), can be perceived in the following way. Lazarus is related to the imagery of the solitary birds of the first song:

Lazarus:

*Make way for Lazarus that must go search
Among the desert places where there is nothing
But howling wind and solitary birds.*

The Marys, who live but in Christ's love and are gathered round Him, are compared to the feathers of birds of the second song:

First Musician:

*Their love becomes a feather
Of eagle, swan or gull,
Or a drowned heron's feather.*

Judas, self-absorbed and overridden by pride, is referred to the heron bemused by its own reflection in the water:

Judas:

*When I planned it
There was no live thing near me but a heron
So full of itself that it seemed terrified.*

Likewise, the soldiers are related to the notion of solitude. However, unlike Judas, they get no rebellion because they only obey orders themselves and anticipate no less in others. They show compassion for dying Christ:

Third Roman Soldier:

*Die in peace.
There's no-one here but Judas and ourselves.*

The final song integrates all the symbols. The birds are included in the climactic scene of dance, which emphasises their self-sufficiency as well as isolation.

First Musician:

Lonely the sea-bird lies at her rest,

*Blown like a dawn-blenched parcel of spray
Upon the wind, or follows her prey
Under a great wave's hollowing crest.*

Third Musician:

*The ger-eagle has chosen his part
In blue deep of the upper air
Where one-eyed day can meet his stare;
He is content with his savage heart.*

Second Musician:

God has not appeared to the birds.

Calvary, like all Yeats's dance plays, is an attempt at unifying various paradoxes in the poet's mind. The dual nature of Christ is one of such paradoxes which the poet tries to resolve on the level of creative imagination. Unity of the human and the divine expressed in the *death-in-life and life-in-death* principle is revealed in the final dance. It combines all contrasts which Ure (1969:119) considers as the fundamental devices of the play:

These contrasts between the active and fixed, personal and impersonal, suffering which reaches out in gloating and accusation and suffering which is withdrawn and symbolic, are the formal devices fundamental to the play.

Dance is an image which combines the opposites between life and death, stillness and movement, subjectivity and objectivity, the personal and the impersonal, which govern the complex nature of God-in-man image. All these paradoxes are resolved not on the level of external reality, but in the *deeps of the mind*. The conflict is solved on two levels: subjective and objective. The interaction of the stasis of subjectivity (Christ, Lazarus, Judas and solitary birds) with the kinesis of objectivity (The Roman Soldiers, Marta and Marys and the final dance) is the main concern of the play. While on the subjective level, death is one's choice, made by those who seek solitude in eternal stillness, on the objective level all events are subject to chance which brings change and movement. The play also reveals Yeats's attitude to suffering based on the balance between the Dionysiac and the Apollonic principles. Christ's suffering which is symbolic and remote, can be perceived as Apollonic, whereas the suffering of those who reject Christ is Dionysiac. Yet, the final unity which Yeats aims at is achieved at a theatrical rather than dramatic level. Consequently, the play itself would produce a greater impact on the stage than a reading of it would suggest.

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