September 1985

Yeats and the Quest for Unity: "Among School Children" and Unity of Being

Evan Radcliffe

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 21, no.3, September 1985, p.109-121

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Yeats and the Quest for Unity: “Among School Children” and Unity of Being

by EVAN RADCLIFFE

CRITICS OF Yeats have often sought to unify, or at least to connect, the various aspects of his career. In this endeavor they have been following an example set by Yeats himself, for unifying his life and work was one of his principal projects. It was an ideal he sought for a long time—"Hammer your thoughts into unity" was a sentence that he recalled as coming to him in his early twenties—1 but it was also something he despaired of achieving—"Our own acts are isolated," he wrote in the Autobiography; "We are never a unity . . . to ourselves."2 As a result, during his career Yeats tried out many ways of achieving and thinking about his ideal. None was more important to him than his concept of Unity of Being, which served as the focus for his thinking about unity in the 1920s. Yet although its importance has been noted by Yeats's critics, they have usually given it only perfunctory attention, invoking it frequently but loosely, and chiefly as a slogan whenever Yeats's poetry seems to join or reconcile opposites. Most often, probably, they have used it in accounts of the ending of “Among School Children,” especially its final image: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?”3 These lines do, I think, represent Yeats's ideal. But they and the poem represent it in a more subtle and complex way than is suggested by interpretations which state that the ending seeks “union of body and soul, beauty and suffering, wisdom and labor, tree and fruit, artist and art. . . ."4 Unity of Being, as a close look at Yeats's writings will reveal, involves more than reconciling pairs of opposites. It is an ideal of personality embodied in poetry, and one seeks it by undertaking in poetry an autobiographical quest. In this quest, the poet—typically Dante, in Yeats's accounts—attempts to overcome personal loss by fitting it, through an act of self-interpretation, into a harmonious pattern, thus making his life into a unity. “Among School Children,” I will argue, enacts such a quest. In it, moreover, Yeats seeks not only to exemplify,
but also to examine, his ideal; specifically, he does so by embodying and
describing in the poem the difficulty of harmonizing his present with his past.\(^5\) Thus he both portrays himself and addresses the problem of making one's life into a unity. Brought together, then, "Among School Children" and the concept of Unity of Being can be mutually illuminating, and also show how Yeats's poetry goes beyond, as well as builds upon, his prose.

**II**

Although unity in general had long been an ideal for Yeats,\(^6\) he began using the phrase "Unity of Being" in 1918.\(^7\) Unity of Being received its most detailed elaboration in *A Vision* (1925), but there is a strong resemblance between the relevant portions of that volume and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917). *A Vision* and *Per Amica* show that Unity of Being is to be seen not simply as a static ideal—a view fostered by Yeats's frequent comparison of it to a "perfectly proportioned human body"—but also as a quest.\(^8\) As a consequence, the best descriptions of that aspect of Yeats's ideal occur in his discussions of Dante as a quest poet who achieved Unity of Being.\(^9\)

Yeats's fullest consideration of Dante with reference to Unity of Being is his description in *A Vision* of Phase 17 of his Great Wheel of personality.\(^10\) In Yeats's account, the problem for a man of Phase 17 like Dante is fragmentation, lack of coherence in the self. His "Will"—an unfocused drive described elsewhere as "energy as yet uninfluenced by thought, action, or emotion," or as emotion that needs an object in order to become desire (AV 14–15)—is "incoherent, vague and broken" (AV 19). In order to hide this "separation and disorder" (AV 75), the man seeks an object

---


6. In her recent study, *A New Species of Man: The Poetic Persona of W. B. Yeats* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1982), Gale C. Schricker sees in Yeats a "lifelong study" (p. 43) of Unity of Being, and her goal is "to achieve an intensive and inclusive understanding of how Yeats's concept of 'unity of being' becomes manifest over time in his prose and poetry . . . " (p. 9). To give Unity of Being an importance that spans Yeats's entire career, however, Schricker has to neglect its significance to Yeats at a specific point in his career, and also has to define it so broadly (briefly, as the unification of the "empirical and transcendent selves" [p. 42]) that Yeats's more precise discussions remain unexplored.


8. Looking at Unity of Being as a quest brings to prominence certain elements of Yeats's thought while placing others in the background. My account says relatively little, for example, about Yeats's concept of the Daimon, Unity of Being in history, and the relationship between Unity of Being and Unity of Culture.


10. All quotations from *A Vision* refer to the 1925 edition; page references are cited parenthetically, preceded by *AV*. 

http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol21/iss3/3
for his desire or energy, and to do so he relies on his "Creative Mind," which in this phase "were better described as imagination" \( (AV\ 76) \).

Yeats's description of this process of finding an object needs special consideration, because it depends on his notions of the "Mask" and the "Image," which in this phase were better described as imagination. (This obscurity should not be surprising; the manuscript notebooks containing the automatic writing from which \textit{A Vision} was culled show that Yeats had tremendous difficulty interpreting what he was being "told."\textsuperscript{11} In general, the man's Mask is his opposite, which he must seek; but Mask can mean two things: "the image [either] of what we wish to become, or of that to which we give our reverence" \( (AV\ 15) \). A further complication is that "under certain circumstances" the Mask "is called the Image" \( (AV\ 15) \). Yeats needs this new term, I think, because of the difficulty of being concrete about what the Mask is. The Mask specific to Phase 17 is "simplification through intensity" \( (AV\ 76) \), but what does this mean? Mask here cannot mean simply "persona." The point of seeking this Mask may be clear—by intensifying his energy the man attempts to become simple and orderly as opposed to complex and fragmented—but exactly what this Mask is remains obscure, and the concept of the Image seeks to deal with this obscurity. It explains, that is, that the man will achieve intensity by seeking an ideal Image which he may revere. In Dante's case, as manifested in the \textit{Divine Comedy}, the Image he seeks is Beatrice; his Mask is his own "gaunt" figure (which is opposite to his daily self) \( (AV\ 75) \).

But the world—called the "Body of Fate" in Yeats's system—does not cooperate in the quest, and never allows man to achieve the Image; Beatrice dies. The Body of Fate of the man of Phase 17 is "loss" \( (AV\ 75) \), and it "perpetually destroys [his] intensity" \( (AV\ 76) \). Finally he seeks his "synthesis" "in vain, drawing with [his] compass point a line that shall but represent the outline of a bursting pod" \( (AV\ 75) \).

Yeats summarizes the whole process thus: "The being, through the intellect, selects some object of desire for a representation of the Mask as Image, some woman perhaps, and the Body of Fate snatches away the object. Then the intellect (Creative Mind) . . . must substitute some new image of desire; and . . . relate that which is lost, that which has snatched it away, to the new image of desire . . . " \( (AV\ 76) \). Dante exemplifies this scheme: he first finds Beatrice as an Image, then loses her, then re-finds her as an ideal of beauty and justice—a result which justifies his original loss. "Dante suffering injustice and the loss of Beatrice, found divine justice and the heavenly Beatrice . . . " \( (AV\ 78) \). All that he has undergone is explained and justified; his fragments are synthesized; "all things [are] set in order" \( (AV\ 78) \). Thus he achieves Unity of Being.

Yeats's description of Phase 17 may not make clear that such unity is achieved only in poetry. Only in poetry is loss repaired, for what an anti-

\textsuperscript{11} I am indebted for my knowledge of the manuscripts to Phillip L. Marcus.
Theoretical man like the man of Phase 17 does is "impose his personality upon the world" (AV 20), and that imposition is possible only temporarily, in imagination. Consequently, the quest for Unity of Being must be constantly renewed. "He who attains Unity of Being is some man who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest" (AV 28).¹²

We may confirm this view of Yeats's ideal if we look at the roots of Unity of Being and of Yeats's interpretation of Dante in "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1915) and Per Amica. In Per Amica, Yeats asserts that the greatest art arises out of loss, and that it expresses "the poverty or the exasperation that set its maker to the work."¹³ Furthermore, only great loss can yield great art, for "the desire that is satisfied is not a great desire" (M 337); only the poet "who has endured all imaginable pangs" "can create the greatest imaginable beauty" (M 332). But because of the magnitude of his loss, the work of art cannot finally satisfy the poet's desire; instead, it presents "a hollow image of fulfilled desire" (M 329). That is, what art does is to create the illusion that desire has been satisfied. Dante is the model for this process. We see him struggling "in his own heart with his unjust anger and his lust" (M 330); battling himself and the world, he finds "the most pure lady poet ever sung and the Divine Justice" (M 329). As "Ille" in "Ego Dominus Tuus" puts it, Dante "fashioned from his opposite" a "spectral image" which enabled him to achieve an ideal:

Derided and deriding, driven out  
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,  
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found  
The most exalted lady loved by a man.¹⁴

Yet he finds this ideal only in art: "when it is all over Dante can return to his chambering. . . . [He] sought no impossible perfection except when [he] handled paper or parchment" (M 333).

In "Among School Children," I suggest, Yeats follows this Dantean pattern, with Maud Gonne playing the role of Beatrice. But he does not follow Dante's example exactly. The chief difference is that Yeats carries out his quest with his characteristic self-consciousness. Yeats often builds into his poems comments on what he is doing; in "Adam's Curse," for example, he admits that although a line must seem to be "a moment's

¹². The passage goes on to say that such a man also possesses the "Vision of Evil," and the description of Phase 17 repeats the phrase. I have chosen not to employ it, however, to avoid misunderstanding. Many critics have equated possessing the Vision of Evil with being aware of the existence of evil; but what it really means, I think, is that Dante (or anyone possessing the Vision of Evil) is able both to acknowledge loss and to fit it into a providential pattern, thus repairing it.

¹³. W. B. Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in Mythologies (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 329. Further references are cited parenthetically, preceded by M.

¹⁴. It may be worthwhile to note briefly that Yeats repeats this view of Dante in the Autobiography. Dante and Villon, Yeats writes, are brought to "the greatest obstacle [they] may confront without despair"; they show "the suffering of desire." Yet they would not change their luck: "the whole contest is brought into the circle of their beauty." The man recreated in the art consequently seems both "pre-destinate and free" (A 104-65).
thought," it may take hours to write. And in "Ego Dominus Tuus" Yeats explicitly discusses not only Dante's own creation of a self but also his own plan to model himself on Dante. The very existence of a programmatic poem like "Ego Dominus Tuus" implies a difference between Dante and Yeats; although Dante's action may itself have been self-conscious, Yeats's poem adds an extra layer of self-consciousness. Accordingly, "Among School Children" not only embodies a quest, but examines it. Such swerving from Dante's model need not in itself lead to failure; Dante's is not the only way to Unity of Being. 15 But Yeats's constant self-consciousness, I think, will in the end signal the way in which his apparent achievement of his ideal does not ultimately match Dante's. Yeats cannot finally see a unity unself-consciously, cannot join himself to Maud without knowing that he has done so only in imagination.

III

THE PROSE "kernel" of "Among School Children" was Yeats's "old thought" that "life prepares for what never happens." 16 This "old thought" suggests that one aspect of the problem of unifying one's life is the difficulty of harmonizing one's present with one's past. Poets feel the need for this harmony particularly strongly; as Lawrence Lipking has recently argued, poets try to interpret their pasts in a way that will enable them to see what they have done as necessary preparation for their present work. 17 The poet seeks to create a tradition of himself, to define himself and his work so as to link his past to his present. For Yeats, as Lipking has shown, such unity was a particular problem; Yeats repeats the "old thought" in the Autobiography (A 65) (from which critics of autobiography as a genre have quarried it). 18 It apparently spurred him to an attempt to achieve Unity of Being, to write a poem which might provide the sense of an ending that would encompass and make sense of all that he had previously experienced. 19

In Yeats's quest for unity in the first half of "Among School Children," Maud Gonne represents both his ideal and its loss. Yeats remembers the moment of their youth in which their "two natures blent / Into a sphere,"

15. Shelley's quest, for instance, involves "a hidden emotional flying image" and an "intellectual part that follows" (A 208; cf. 150).

16. See Curtis B. Bradford, Yeats at Work (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), p. 4. In my analysis I have changed the emphasis of the "kernel" as a whole; the "kernel" is actually more prospective than retrospective, looking more to the future than to the past: "no possible life," writes Yeats of the students, "can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher's hope." But my changed emphasis seems justified on the basis of the poem itself, in which Yeats looks not at the children's future but rather at his own past.


19. As my phrasing suggests, I am drawing upon Frank Kermode's The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966). See especially p. 7: "to make sense of their span [men] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems."
but he knows that that moment was fleeting, that he never achieved a lasting union with Maud. Yet just as, in their youth, it had been the memory of a tragedy that had led to that moment of unity, here also it is loss that will “set its maker to the work” (M 329). For the memory of that lost moment is the spur to Yeats's mental action, and what that action seeks at first is to approach Maud. She is an exalted figure—a Ledaean body, or an image fashioned by a Quattrocento finger—in contrast to his own unromantic status as a school-inspector. And she also recalls an ideal unity. In *A Vision*, Yeats had written that “the being . . . selects some object of desire for a representation of the Mask as Image, some woman perhaps” (*AV* 76), and Maud seems to be that object. But why, more precisely, does union with her symbolize the ideal of Unity of Being, as union with Beatrice does for Dante?

*A Vision* provides one explanation. It states that “the relation of man and woman, in so far as it is passionate, reproduces the relation of man and Daimon [the opposite to the man]” (*AV* 27). Yeats's desire for union with Maud thus would be more than simply the desire of love to achieve its object, because passionate union with a woman (especially Maud, whom he considered his opposite) symbolizes Unity of Being. But the poem does not make the quest for Unity of Being hinge on Maud's having some symbolic attribute.

Indeed, “Among School Children” does not really seek union with Maud at all, for an ideal union with her could exist only in a fantasy of the past. What causes his heart to be “driven wild” is not her current image, “hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind,” but his vision of her in her youth. Maud is important in the poem simply because she had been important to Yeats. What he must do in the poem is not to imagine a passionate union with her, but to accept his loss of her and then negate it by understanding and justifying it. It would then take a necessary place in his life, and form part of a harmony. Yeats's specific task, accordingly, is one of autobiographical interpretation: to unify the “sixty-year-old smiling public man” with the one who shared moments with “a Ledaean body.” Was his loss preparing him for something in the same way that the children's classes are preparing them for something? He needs to find what links his past and present selves, to make them coexist as a unity.

The problem Yeats is facing in the poem suggests one reason why the definition of the Mask in *A Vision* is obscure. Although *A Vision* makes finding a Mask easy, since each phase has its designated opposite, in “Among School Children” it turns out that, to find a Mask more concrete than “simplification through intensity” (*AV* 76), one must define oneself. The process, that is, includes self-analysis, the attempt to see oneself as a unity. Rather than being a simple series of steps that the poet takes, following a formula that ends suddenly with the attainment of Unity of

20. See Denis Donoghue, ed., *Memoirs* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 124: “My outer nature was passive . . . but I knew my spiritual nature was passionate, even violent. In her all this was reversed.”
Being, the quest for the ideal depends itself on seeking one's unity. For Yeats in this poem, finding the unity of his personal history is crucial to the process of achieving Unity of Being—just as it is for Dante, whose "verses are at moments a mirror of his history" (M 329).

If Yeats cannot reconcile his experiences with Maud with a harmonious view of his life, then, the quest fails, and that is what seems to happen in the fourth stanza of the poem. In the midst of considering his own past and possible connection to Maud—"and I though never of Ledaean kind / Had pretty plumage once"—he stops: "enough of that, / Better to smile on all that smile. . . ." Yet the poem and the quest go on past the fourth stanza, where he leaves Maud behind. Why?

One of the threads running through Yeats's discussions of Unity of Being and of the creative process in general is that at certain moments one process abruptly ends and another begins. The quest never leads smoothly to its end; instead, at the moment when it seems to fail, it may either engender a new process or turn into a vision. The poem's change in direction after the fourth stanza seems to correspond to the moment described in A Vision in which the Body of Fate snatches away the object of desire and after which the man must seek a new image of desire (AV 75). This new process is not part of Yeats's description of Dante's quest; neither does the general account of A Vision account for it fully, although it seems to resemble the attempt "to relate that which is lost, that which has snatched it away, to the new image of desire" (AV 76). These lacunae once more suggest that the orderly system of A Vision did not solve once and for all Yeats's problems by showing him exactly what to do.

In any case, the poem makes clear that the limited and personal search for unity through Maud has exhausted itself, and what takes its place is a new inquiry concerning unity more impersonally. Although in the stanzas that follow Yeats's personal concern never disappears (it emerges casually in his allusion to the "shape / With sixty or more winters on its head," which recalls his own age, and in the scarecrow image concluding stanza VI, which recalls his self-characterization at the end of stanza IV), these stanzas consider the problem of connecting the part with the whole in a more impersonal and general way. Unable to achieve any unity with Maud, Yeats has become self-conscious about the mental action he has undertaken, and seeing unity as a broad problem turns to inquire into the general condition of which he happens to be a particular case.

In the fifth stanza, Yeats portrays a mind looking at two isolated stages in a temporal process. The problem he presents seems to be the bodily

21. Yeats's failure to find his own unity with Maud has a parallel in his inability to see Maud herself as a unity. Douglas Archibald points out that "the vivid apprehensions of Maud Gonne—living child, Ledaean body, gaunt old woman—can occur only in fragments, which sets the terms of the quest for unity which the poem undertakes" (Yeats [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1983], p. 53).

22. In his brief discussion of the poem, Paul de Man asserts that it is this possibility of continuity from part to whole that makes synecdoche the most "seductive" of metaphors ("Semiology and Rhetoric," Diacritics, III [Fall 1973], 30). The essay is reprinted in de Man's Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).
decrepitude of the man “with sixty or more winters on his head,” yet the problem stems not simply from that decrepitude but also from the viewpoint of the man’s mother. The situation Yeats proposes is one in which the mother sees both an old man and a baby—but only an old man and a baby. From this perspective, Yeats suggests, she will see no “compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth.” The man's life will seem a failure; the contrast between its stages will seem so great as to require some justification for having passed from one stage to the other, and yet no justification emerges to explain or reconcile the conflict between stages. Yeats implies that only if the mother could manage to see the entire course of the man's life at once, as a seamless whole, would no one stage conflict with any other. (Similarly, if she could see only the old man isolated, she would have no reason to raise the issue of “compensation.”) Unless one can see a process as a unity, in which everything necessarily includes everything else, one will isolate stages which will conflict with each other.

In stanza VI, which portrays Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, Yeats follows up the relationship between creator and creation which was implicit in his example of the mother and child. Each classical figure had created a philosophical system, which (unlike the child) could not change on its own. Yet Yeats does not comment on the systems, the philosophers’ creations, themselves. Nor does he evaluate the results of their contact with a physical reality which they sought to order (Plato, Pythagoras) or to control (Aristotle). Instead, he shows the physical reality which they could not control or order: old age. Whatever the original relation between these men and their creations, what they thought or did turns out to be irrelevant to their old age and thus to their lives; they finally become scarecrows.23 And since Yeats had compared himself to a scarecrow in the fourth stanza, the image of the scarecrow here links the philosophers' fate to Yeats’s own. This link suggests that he sees himself as potentially resembling the philosophers, whose life and work are not a unity.24 The sixth stanza thus shows Yeats's fear that his own creations may not be unified with his life, or may not provide unity for it.

In the seventh stanza, Yeats connects the problem of achieving unity to the difficulty of constructing adequate images. Can a part or a stage represent a whole or a process? Can the present self represent the entire past self? Can a creation represent a creator? Yeats has already examined mothers' images, which mirror a son as he exists at any one point; these

23. Yeats's concern with the connection between the philosophers' lives and their ideas recalls the definition of truth he had once given. In “Reveries over Childhood and Youth” he recalls, “I was soon to vex my father by defining truth as ‘the dramatically appropriate utterance of the highest man’ ” (A 55). In this view what matters in a statement is its relation to the life of its speaker.

24. The link between Yeats and the philosophers may be especially strong if David Lynch is right in suggesting that each of them represents an aspect of Yeats. Lynch proposes that Plato recalls Yeats as speculative philosopher in A Vision, Aristotle recalls him as practical philosopher in the Irish Senate, and Pythagoras recalls him as philosopher-poet, winner of the Nobel Prize (Yeats: The Poetics of the Self [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 99).
images fail because they change as a son does, and thus do not encompass his past as well as present. By contrast, nuns' images — religious icons — do not change. Yet "they too break hearts," because they suggest a realm of perfection which man cannot reach; they imply, but do not supply, a connection between man and his ideals.

This seventh stanza shows greater urgency than did the previous two, as evidenced by the quick turns of Yeats's thought: from the similarity between the situations of nuns and mothers, to the distinction between them ("but those the candles light are not as those / That animate a mother's reveries"), but then back to their similarity ("and yet they too break hearts"). This urgency, I would argue, appears because here Yeats is approaching a consideration of the crucial relationship in Unity of Being — between the poet and his image. And seeing the ideal as well as its impossibility is what generates the break in the seventh stanza and the concluding vision of the poem.

Like the first attempt to achieve unity, this second attempt — more self-conscious than Dante's — seems to end in failure. Unity of Being seems to have no connection to man. Yeats's realization of this lack of connection is what informs his sudden address to the "Presences" in stanza VII. Somehow, these Presences can symbolize "heavenly glory." But though we may know that they exist, they are "self-born": man cannot create them himself, cannot connect them to his own life. And it is because their totality, the fullness of their reference, cannot be matched by human beings that they "mock man's enterprise." They hold out an ideal that cannot finally be achieved.

But again the poem goes on. This resumption of mental activity seems to resemble moments described in Per Amica and the Autobiography. Yeats writes in Per Amica that if the discouragement resulting from unsatisfied desires is purified, as is not usually the case in mere dreams, these desires may yet yield fruit: "the passions, when we know that they cannot find fulfilment, become vision" (M 341). In the Autobiography Yeats describes a parallel process: "art come[s] when a nature, that never ceases to judge itself, exhausts personal emotion in action or desire so completely that something impersonal, something that has nothing to do with action or desire, suddenly starts into its place, something which is as unforeseen, as completely organized, even as unique, as the images that pass before the mind between sleeping and waking" (A 200).

Thus in the final stanza Yeats is able to construct a vision of his ideal. What exactly is Yeats's vision a vision of? In terms of the concern with seeing oneself as a unity, it imagines a lack of conflict between creator and creation, between a temporal stretch and any stage in it, between one...

25. In this case, the actual composition of the poem may match the process of thought it represents. In W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1964), Thomas Parkinson argues that Yeats wrote the final stanza almost as an afterthought; originally, he says, the poem was meant to end with a "sorrowful and disillusioned conclusion" (p. 104).
aspect of something and another. Pleasuring the soul does not require bruising the body, beauty does not require despair, wisdom does not require bleary eyes. There is no need to explain loss or to justify a cost, because no loss or cost exists.

But the final stanza does more than simply portray this unity; it also emphasizes in the concluding images of the chestnut-tree and the dancer that the desire to know cannot break up this unity. Most critics have not seen that the end of the poem shows the relationship to unity of the questing consciousness. “Know,” in the final line, seems to me a crucial and precise word. Not only does it bring the poet and his quest back into the poem, but it also returns explicitly to the problem with which the poet began: the problem of knowing the ultimate connections between things, of knowing the way in which each necessarily involves the other. One of Yeats’s last letters provides a gloss on this problem. “Man can embody truth,” he wrote, “but he cannot know it.”26 That is, a man may be a unity, but he cannot know that he is; moreover, seeking to find and understand unity destroys it. Consciousness and unity are opposed; the quest for personal unity necessarily fails. But the form of the rhetorical question makes of Yeats’s weakness a strength.27 The question for him is real and unsolved; yet by making it rhetorical he can both state it and make it appear not to matter.28

Other approaches to the final stanza show parallel ways in which its apparent affirmation depends on, but may be contradicted by, the rest of the poem. For example, since “the desire that is satisfied is not a great desire” (M 337), only by insisting on the greatness of his loss and the impossibility of his quest can Yeats make its object seem great. Consequently, insofar as the poem seems to embody a kind of transcendence, it does so not simply by creating a great image of unity, but by yoking together an image of unity with a knowledge of disunity.

Moreover, if the final image is to be ideal, it must seem self-sufficient, independent of any cost; and indeed the dancer is one of the “proud and lonely things” (A 105) that Yeats loves. But if it is to be truly self-sufficient it can have no relationship to anything outside it; and although the last stanza does seem to be separate from the rest of the poem, yet finally it is part of the poem. Thus the poem as a whole does not fulfill the conditions that the last stanza sets up. For in “Among School Children” the loss lying behind the creation of its final image is visible; only if the final image could stand completely alone would it be truly ideal. Yeats’s enunciated

27. Yeats thus accomplishes what he saw Synge as accomplishing. When Synge was dying, Yeats wrote in Per Amicu, he “hated to die”; yet he was able to give to his character Deirdre the opposite emotion: “in the last speeches of Deirdre and in the middle act he accepted death and dismissed life with a gracious gesture. He gave to Deirdre the emotion that seemed to him most desirable, most difficult, most fitting, and maybe saw in those delighted seven years, now dwindling from her, the fulfilment of his own life” (M 326).
28. Parkinson’s comment on this ending is apposite; the question, he says, “is neither answerable nor rhetorical but denotative of a desire, a fulfillment, and the impossibility of that fulfillment” (p. 108).
ideal may be fulfilled to the extent that consciousness can momentarily forget the earlier parts of the poem; but such a denial of consciousness can be only temporary. As Yeats says in *Per Amica* of visionary moments, as soon as we "become interested in ourselves, in our own lives, we pass out of the vision" (*M* 341). Self-consciousness eventually destroys the moment it helped create.

Unity of Being, however, is less an ideal of life than an ideal of art; and the end of "Among School Children" is what *Per Amica* asserts art should be, "a hollow image of fulfilled desire" (*M* 329). "Among School Children" thus seems to follow Yeats's account of the heroic quest of the man of Phase 17. That man, faced with fragmentation, seeks to hide from himself and from others his disunity; but his attempt is "in vain," drawing "a line that shall but represent the outline of a bursting pod" (*AV* 75). In "Among School Children" Yeats both reveals and hides his disunity. And in this way he also appears to duplicate the paradoxical achievement of Dante, who seems both to accept loss and to struggle against it; he and Villon "seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens," being "both predestinate and free" (*AV* 75). Yeats thus apparently succeeds, at least momentarily, in "imposing his desire upon the world" (*AV* 20).

It is true that the image Yeats creates in "Among School Children" surpasses the images of nuns or mothers or philosophers; since the poem includes Yeats's self-portrayal, it bears a closer relationship to his life than their creations do. Yet what he achieves does not quite duplicate what he saw Dante as achieving. For the poem's final images do not include Maud directly; although Yeats can fit Maud into his life by implying that her loss is the spur to his poetry, he cannot find the unity with Maud that Dante found with Beatrice. The final stanza's image of the dancer cannot stand for Yeats; he cannot portray a harmonized self in which no past bruises exist. Yeats has not become what he would like to be, but rather created an image of what he would like to be. Yeats is finally too self-conscious about what he has and has not achieved; "Among School Children" might best be described as "a hollow image of a hollow image of fulfilled desire."

Accordingly, the affirmation at the poem's end can be only momentary. The poet continues living; the process of bringing himself to unity never ends. Even if he could at some moment achieve that unity, new moments bring new disappointments or new events in whose light the past must be reassessed. As the *Autobiography* puts it, for subjective man—and for the poet in particular—"victory is an intellectual daily recreation of all that exterior fate snatches away" (*A* 116).

"Among School Children," then, is a poem which only seems to achieve an ideal, but in which only seeming represents the highest possible achievement. What it and Yeats accomplish is encapsulated by Nietzsche, one of Yeats's philosophical masters, in a passage from *The Gay Science* entitled "The Attraction of Imperfection":

---

Evan Radcliffe: Yeats and the Quest for Unity: "Among School Children" and Unity

Published by Digital Commons @ Colby, 1985
Here I see a poet who, like many a human being, is more attractive by virtue of his imperfections than he is by all the things that grow to completion and perfection under his hands. Indeed, he owes his advantages and fame much more to his ultimate incapacity than to his ample strength. His works never wholly express what he would like to express and what he would like to have seen: it seems as if he had had the foretaste of a vision and never the vision itself; but a tremendous lust for this vision remains in his soul, and it is from this that he derives his equally tremendous eloquence of desire and craving. By virtue of this lust he lifts his listeners above his work and all mere "works" and lends them wings to soar as high as listeners had never soared. Then, having themselves been transformed into poets and seers, they lavish admiration upon the creator of their happiness, as if he had led them immediately to the vision of what was for him the holiest and ultimate—as if he had attained his goal and had really seen and communicated his vision. His fame benefits from the fact that he never reached his goal.29

IV

Yeats's failure to achieve Unity of Being did not cause him to repudiate his whole visionary system. A Vision predicts, or explains, his failure. It classifies history into phases, and asserts that in Phase 22, the phase of history which Yeats inhabits, Unity of Being is probably impossible. As Yeats shows throughout The Tower, the volume in which "Among School Children" was published, during Phase 22 the world is fragmented; and Yeats's portrait in A Vision of Shelley, who lived in Phase 21, reflects Yeats's view of his own position: "the age in which Shelley lived was in itself so broken that true Unity of Being was almost impossible..." (AV 78).

Unity of Being thus remained an ideal Yeats could believe in. But it lost much of its importance for him. Although it still has its place in Yeats's thinking of the 1930s, Yeats's emphasis lies elsewhere—on the Nietzschean eternal recurrence, for example. Nevertheless, Yeats continues to try to link new thoughts to old, partly by generalizing what was once specific. In "A General Introduction to My Work" (1937), he writes of his beliefs: "I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ... is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake's 'Imagination,' what the Upanishads have named 'Self.'... Subconscious preoccupation with this theme brought me A Vision, its harsh geometry an incomplete interpretation."30

Although Yeats calls A Vision "incomplete," he asserts that Unity of Being still included an underlying truth. Yet he does so only by assimilating it to other ideas and thus emptying it of much of its original content. Yeats is trying to make his career into a unity, but—as he does at the end of "Among School Children"—he can do so only by denying part of what has come before. In his last writings about Unity of Being, then,

Yeats again seeks to reinterpret his past and to make his career into a unity. Thus, he re-enacts the struggle to achieve unity we have seen in "Among School Children." And finally the concept of unity itself becomes part of the problem of unity.

University of Idaho
Moscow