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YEAT'S DISCOVERIES OF SELF IN
THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

By JAMES H. O'BRIEN

Although a relatively small collection, The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) contains a complex presentation of a major theme in Yeats's work—his search for a fusion of the powers of self. From Responsibilities (1914) onwards, Yeats builds his volumes of poems around some crisis of the self. In The Wild Swans at Coole he continues this quest—despite the attrition of age, the death of friends, and the torment of broken memories. Here he binds the poems together with a plan for restoring the maimed powers of self. Frequently The Wild Swans at Coole is singled out for the series of didactic poems at its conclusion, poems that mix occultism with his art. But these concluding poems may be regarded as part of an intricate study of the self: (1) the poet's declaration of the plight of an ageing man with waning imaginative powers, (2) his deliberate withdrawal from the modern confusion, (3) his venture into a bewildering but sporadically ecstatic "reliving of the past," and (4) his revelation of a system encompassing the intensities possible to the self.

Yeats explores the way of the self most fully in his poems, which exceed in depth, extension, and precision anything to be found in his prose, such as Per Amica Silentia Lunae (1918). In prose, Yeats sketches rough psychological landscapes which he perfects in his poems. For him, prose is a means for probing his experience; in a sense, his prose prepares for the intense imaginative fusion of the poems. In A Vision, for instance, Yeats cannot trust his communicators and frustrators; he spends tedious hours separating their misleading from their authentic revelations. But the poems arise from an impulse that is strong and in its urgency and independence irrefutable.

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In The Wild Swans at Coole Yeats reemphasizes the solitude and freedom required for unity of being, a guiding theme in Responsibilities. In the modern era, the poet's first task is to cultivate a cold, austere control so that he does not succumb to the commercial spirit, to sentimentality, or to philosophies that imprison either will or intellect. Even though the poet is confronted with the unwieldy grief of the death of friends or the serrated memories of Maud Gonne, he skillfully guides his emotion and thought into artistic molds. In his newly-purchased Norman Tower in County Galway, cut off from the tumult and bitterness of Dublin, he finds a proper habitation for dramatizing his inclusive system of the self. Equipped with a map of the principal stages of the self, the poet quickly identifies and makes poems out of a variety of eruptions of the self that formerly drifted away as experience unsuitable for verse. In this volume Yeats strenuously prepares to realize some of his first ambitions as poet; in a large sense, the volume, with its poems on Yeats's system, serve as a prelude to the greater poems of The Tower and The Winding Stair.

The poems of The Wild Swans at Coole reflect only obliquely the problems of a dedicated artist, a man in his early fifties, recently married to a young woman with a gift for automatic writing. He seems all but oblivious of unspeakable barbarism of World War I and the brutalities of the guerrilla struggle with the Black and Tans. At this period he closes himself to external controversy, so enmeshed is he with his discoveries of the self, his special province as artist. In the first poem "The Wild Swans at Coole" he speaks with subdued firmness of an autumn that reflects his interior state:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky; (variorum ed., p. 322)

As he recalls the nineteen years that have passed since his first view of the lake, he is vexed by the seeming permanence of the swans and the drastic decline of his own strength: "I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,/And now my heart is sore." The swans defy the flux: "Their hearts have not grown old"; for them passion and conquest remain in the future, but
for him "all's changed." Meditating on the swans, he contends with an emptiness in himself:

Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away? (p. 323)

In his later poems Yeats cries out against the remorseless decline of his physical powers, but in “A Song” of this volume he tries to delay this loss by using dumb-bell and fencing foil. In addition, his increasing mastery of words seems to retard the erosion of time. Yet he had not anticipated an atrophy of feeling:

Though I have many words,
What woman’s satisfied,
I am no longer faint
Because at her side?
O who could have foretold
That the heart grows old? (pp. 334-335)

But even as he laments the passing of youth, passionate desire flares up, exacerbating his grief;

O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams. (p. 329)

Exhausted by the years, irritated by memories, torn by seemingly irreconcilable conflicts, the poet experiments with several methods of restoring intensity. First he studies sculpture, but after a time he admits that “the wick and oil are spent / And frozen are the channels of the blood.” To respond to the passion dormant in statues, he needs the elan of youth:

... O heart, we are old;
The living beauty is for younger men:
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears. (pp. 333-334)

But Yeats mockingly rejects the temptation of literary criticism. In “The Scholars,” he scoffs at bald scholars annotating and commenting upon the poems of a feverish Catullus (p. 337). In age, the poet himself aspires to join the company of Landor and Donne, poets who sustained passion and art into their final years. But to achieve this ambition, he must protect himself
from exposure to the foolish and vulgar. In advising a young artist inclined to Bohemianism, he claims “There is not a fool can call me friend” (p. 336).

In this volume Yeats examines at length the armor the poet needs to protect himself from the current vulgarization of life. Ingeniously and profoundly he elaborates on a feeling described in *The Green Helmet* (1910) as the desire to be “Colder and dumber and deafer than a fish” (p. 267). Although Yeats often writes about this emotional and intellectual complex, critics, with the exception of Ben Reid,\(^1\) have avoided analysis of its implications. At first glance, this state seems a prelude to unity of being, but because of modern man’s ignorance of subjective processes the prelude becomes a state in itself; in fact, it marks the decisive separation of an individual from the objective, external world. In a broken world, even the resolution to unify personality assumes substantial form. In part, Yeats’s withdrawal resembles Keats’s “diligent Indolence,” about which Lionel Trilling remarks: “By being conscious of his surrender to the passive, unconscious life he has affirmed the active principle.”\(^2\) In his way, Yeats cultivates Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness” or what John Stuart Mill calls the “passive susceptibilities.” Nietzsche’s description of a “screen of oblivion” provides a rationale for Yeats’s withdrawal:

> The role of this active oblivion is that of a concierge: to shut temporarily the doors and windows of consciousness; to protect us from the noise and agitation with which our lower organs work for or against one another; to introduce a little quiet into our consciousness so as to make room for the nobler functions and functionaries of our organism which do the governing and planning. This concierge maintains order and etiquette in the household of the psyche; which immediately suggests that there can be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, no present, without oblivion.\(^3\)

At times Yeats uses his screen of oblivion to attack sentimentalis whom he defines as “practical men who believe in money, in position, in a marriage bell, and whose understanding of happiness is to be so busy whether at work or at play, that all is forgotten but the momentary aim.”\(^4\) In “The Collar-Bone

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\(^1\) Ben Reid, *William Butler Yeats: The Lyric of Tragedy* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961), 124.
\(^3\) Frederick Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City, N. Y., 1956), 189.
of a Hare,” the speaker provides himself with a double screen of oblivion to shut out the daily world. First he wishes to fly to a remote pastoral land with “comely trees and the lawn, / The playing upon pipes and the dancing,” and secondly he would then look at the world through the white bone of a hare (Var., p. 330). With these barriers between him and the external world, he would scoff at those marrying in churches, at those whose life is guided only by convention and custom. Similarly in “The Dawn,” the speaker longs for the double detachment of a dawn overlooking an old Celtic queen “measuring a town/ With the pin of a brooch,” or the detachment of a dawn overlooking withered men in pedantic Babylon as they study the stars: “I would be—for no knowledge is worth a straw—/ Ignorant and wanton as the dawn” (p. 344). The poet breaks the cords of sentimentalism and rationalism through his resolution to resemble the dawn.

Yeats’s exemplars of the screen of oblivion range from the Queen of Sheba to a Sligo fisherman. To him the Queen of Sheba is a woman “That gives up all her mind,” and does not quarrel “with a thought / Because it is not her own.” In his next incarnation, he hopes to love this queen rather than the embattled women he has known (pp. 345-346). Similarly in “The Fisherman,” he recalls a youthful vow to sing of wise and simple men. But in the intervening years he turned away from the fisherman “To write for my own race/And the reality.” Frequently he met defeat, but in maturity he admires again the serene coherence of the fisherman, although he realizes the fisherman is “A man who does not exist,/ A man who is but a dream” (pp. 347-348). Yet this dream is needed to liberate the poetic impulse. Somehow the artist must apprehend the wisdom of the fool in “Tom O’Roughley” who claims that “An aimless joy is a pure joy.” Through the discipline of the screen of oblivion Robert Gregory found his proper destiny; in “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” he responds not to humanitarian or patriotic appeals but to “A lonely impulse of delight.” Unless the poet sedulously cultivates freedom and solitude he will never hear the musical stirring that marks the organic fusion of the forces within the self.

In addition to the screen of oblivion, Yeats attempts to restore imaginative intensity through a process that may be called
reliving the past. In this and other volumes of poems, Yeats transforms memory from an inert or abrasive force to a catalyst for unity of being. In a sense, Yeats reverses the new Adam of American literature who wants to blot out the past; instead Yeats carries with him the burden of personal, national, and racial memories. His intent is partially explained in a comment on his memoirs: "I will lay many ghosts or rather I will purify my own imagination by setting the past in order."5 Indeed, in writing his autobiographies, he probes the recesses of the past in order to generate a vigorous, intense secondary personality in the poems. His approach to memory resembles that of one of Rilke's spokesmen:

And still it is not yet enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the immense patience to wait until they come again. For it is the memories themselves that matter. Only when they have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.6

Yeats too becomes a close student of the transmutation of memories.

In The Wild Swans at Coole, he indirectly furnishes a perspective on reliving the past through the dialogue of one of the elegies on Major Robert Gregory, "Shepherd and Goatherd." By speaking of memory in terms of a ghost, Yeats dramatizes the path memory may take. As in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," Yeats uses reincarnation as a metaphor for meditating upon the past, for purifying it, and for bringing its fragments into a radiant unity. In "Shepherd and Goatherd," the goatherd graciously honors Lady Gregory for her kindness and then adapts Swedenborgian terms to describe the movements of Robert Gregory's ghost: "He grows younger every second . . . / Jaunting, journeying / To his own dayspring." The ghost of Gregory unwinds the spool of the past, advancing from the recent past of World War I, in which he was killed, to a pastoral love scene:

He unpacks the loaded pern
Of all 'twas pain or joy to learn,

Of all that he had made.
The outrageous war shall fade;
At some old winding whitethorn root
He'll practise on the shepherd's flute,
Or on the close-cropped grass
Court his shepherd lass,

His ghost gradually regains primal innocence:

Knowledge he shall unwind
Through victories of the mind,
Till, clambering at the cradle-side,
He dreams himself his mother's pride,
All knowledge lost in trance
Of sweeter ignorance. (Var., pp. 342-343)

Whether the ghost of Robert Gregory follows this route or not, Lady Gregory and others may follow the poet in ordering their memories of the Irish airman.

Yeats's much celebrated poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," reveals, among other things, a crucial distinction in reliving the past—the difference between assimilated memories and the aches of new grief. Although this justly famous poem has been discussed from many perspectives, notably by Frank Kermode in Romantic Image, its relation to reliving the past has not been pointed out. The poet begins with memories that have long been purified. First he dwells on Lionel Johnson, a poet and scholar who was also a drunkard; J. M. Synge, the playwright who found passionate expression on the stony Aran Islands; and George Pollexfen, a Sligo relative, a horseman and astrologer who regarded opposition as the law of life. Yet Gregory possessed the qualities of all three of Yeats's older friends: "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he / As 'twere all life's epitome." As artist and man of action, this perfect man, this Sidney, had acquired a unified sensibility, and in this era he was almost doomed to premature, violent death: "Some burn damp faggots, other may consume / The entire combustible world in one small room / As though dried straw . . . " (p. 327). But through the years the poet had become inured to the death of his older friends: "I am accustomed to their lack of breath, / But not that my dear friend's dear son," (p. 325). After presenting Robert Gregory's virtues, the poet hoped to invite other friends to his tower "but a thought / Of that late death
took all my heart for speech” (p. 328). The poet is silenced but
not until he completed his account of Robert Gregory.

In this volume, Yeats tries to cope with his most intransigeant
memories, those centering on Maud Gonne. In several poems,
he develops with rare sensitivity and perception the new know-
ledges arising out of the collision of past and present. Perhaps
Yeats’s *Collected Poems* contain the first sustained treatment of
that interpenetration of past and present which makes up a
major part of consciousness. The first of the poems on his
beloved is appropriately entitled “Memory”:

One had a lovely face,
And two or three had charm,
But charm and face were in vain
Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain. (p. 350)

Yeats indeed retains the form where charm and face had an
impact.

In meditating upon the qualities of his beloved, the poet re-
calls ironically his own follies, a requisite part of the purification
of memory. As Yeats said, one must drive out remorse and
complacency. Once out of a concern for the good life of the
artist, he said that he suffered “The daily spite of this unman-
nery town” and that he surrendered the one prerogative of his
calling, the choice of company and of a place to live. Yet his
beloved, his phoenix, never complained about the people even
when they scorned her. Piqued by his ego-centrism and her
composure, he asserts that his beloved lives in deed, possessing
the purity of a natural force:

But I, whose virtues are the definitions
Of the analytic mind, can neither close
The eye of the mind nor keep my tongue from speech. (p. 353)

Because he had fallen into the error he had condemned, even
after nine years he could only sink his head in shame.

Frequently Yeats makes poems out of still roiling memories
of his beloved. In “Broken Dreams,” he is distressed that time
alters living beauty: “Your beauty can but leave among us / Vague memories, nothing but memories.” In despair, he longs
for a new life after death: “Vague memories, nothing but
memories, / But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.” After spending an entire day wrestling with a refractory dream and poem, he exclaims:

   All day in the one chair
   From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged
   In rambling talk with an image of air:
   Vague memories, nothing but memories. (pp. 355-357)

Occasionally his struggle with memories is rewarded with a vision of his beloved’s majesty and beauty: “I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day” (p. 353). Likewise, in “A Thought from Propertius,” he composes a double image of her loveliness in which she might:

   Have walked to the altar
   Through the holy images
   At Pallas Athene’s side,
   Or been fit spoil for a centaur
   Drunk with the unmixed wine. (p. 355)

In “A Deep-sworn Vow” he testifies to the resilience of the image of a loved one, in this case Mrs. Shakespeare rather than Maud Gonne. Although the poet had other lovers, at critical moments her image flashes before him:

   Yet always when I look death in the face,
   When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
   Or when I grow excited with wine,
   Suddenly I meet your face. (p. 357)

In “Presences,” however, women from the past harass him. When images of three women appear—a harlot, an innocent girl, and one like a queen, he is astonished “As if the hair stood up on my head.” In his reverie, women climb the stair of the tower and stand at the door and between the lectern and fire; all seem driven by an incurable affliction: “They had read / All I had rhymed of that monstrous thing / Returned and yet unrequited love” (p. 358). The presences venture so close that he “could hear their hearts beating” as they reproach him for singing of the incompleteness of love. In later volumes Yeats examines with increasing complexity and intensity the images of his personal, national, and racial past. In his unrelenting search for his most complete personality, Yeats pursues the past with a thoroughness that finally leads him to recognize the necessity of
beginning with "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (p. 630).

In the final poems of The Wild Swans at Coole, Yeats unfurls a comprehensive system describing the principal intensities of the self. Never again does his system intrude so patently into his verse. In a well-known passage Yeats half-apologizes for retaining these poems in his collected works: "They take their place in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavour to explain my philosophy of life and death. To some extent I wrote these poems as a text for exposition" (p. 821). The poems are set in or near Yeats's Norman Tower, Thoor Ballylee, his new center for poetic meditation. But the tower itself has limited powers, and the poet pronounces "A Prayer on going into my House." In this poem, he promises to spend a part of each year in his tower, guided by two principles:

... [God] — grant
That I myself for portions of the year
May handle nothing and set eyes on nothing
But what the great and passionate have used
Throughout so many varying centuries
We take it for the norm; yet should I dream
Sinbad the sailor's brought a painted chest,
Or image, from beyond the Loadstone Mountain.
That dream is a norm; (pp. 371-372)

With the norms of tradition and dream, Yeats makes his tower fact and unmistakable symbol of the artist's isolation, freedom, and integrity. As early as 1906 Yeats's mind ran to the towers as the local habitation of the independent artist. While in Italy, he stood before a distant but actual tower, and in his mind's eye he saw "an old man, erect and a little gaunt, standing in the door of the tower, while about him broke a windy light." The old man was a poet with Yeatsian virtues: he kept his integrity, sought perfection of form, and possessed a lofty severe quality.7

The system of meditation described by Ille in "Ego Dominus Tuus" fulfills many of Yeats's seemingly erratic efforts to extricate esthetic and psychological wisdom from occultism. In effect, Yeats announces that the artist may restore subjective harmony and intensity through an arduous discipline. But the mature Yeats has no facile approach to bridge body and spirit, reason and imagination; instead he seeks to identify and, through

7 W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), 291.
meditation, to control the two basic forces of consciousness; the subjective and objective powers. In “Ego Dominus Tuus,” the two speakers, *Ille*, the subjective voice, and *Hic*, the objective voice, present their opposing plans for man’s development. *Hic*, as objective voice, merely passes on the commonplaces of the era—the objective side of man fulfills itself in the external activities of life. *Ille*, however, modifies the long subjective tradition of occultists to revitalize dormant imaginative energies. In *Ille*’s view, modern man or artist must create, as it were, a secondary personality; he must discover his anti-self, a self the opposite of his daily self, a self generally discoverable only after an exhausting search. *Ille* locates some historical examples of the successful search for an anti-self: a lecherous Dante wrote his great poem out of pursuit of a chaste Beatrice, or an impoverished Keats meditated upon luxuries to create the rich excess in his poems. In pressing his case, *Ille* rejects the notion that style emerges from imitating old masters; for him the origin of art lies in an image, not in a book. Hopefully *Ille* will discover the wellsprings of morality and art in his anti-self. Periodically *Ille* is overwhelmed by brilliant but fragile moments of unified sensibility. In essence, the search for the anti-self plunges the artist into the interior of the self so that he may exploit poetically arcane forces that might otherwise paralyze or destroy him.

Once the general principle for unifying the self has been clarified, Yeats concentrates in “The Phases of the Moon” on the paradigm of intensified images possible to the self. Because this poem has been discussed at length by Richard Ellmann, T. R. Henn, Morton Seiden, and others, it suffices here to emphasize Yeats’s inclusiveness in describing the gamut of poetic images. Upon invitation of Owen Aherne, Yeats’s voice of the objective side of man, Michael Robartes, the occultist and champion of the subjective tradition, describes these stages of intensity as the artist moves towards or away from the supreme artistic image in phase fifteen:

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All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world. (p. 374)
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Michael Robartes justifiably rejoices in an adaptation of ancient wisdom that includes such diverse states of mind as Nietzsche’s hero, fool, hunchback, and saint. Although Yeats himself does not employ in his poems all the spokesmen or personae described in the phases of the moon, he utilizes in the last poems of the volume fools, hunchbacks, and saints as evidence of his greatly enlarged repertory of personae.

In the concluding poem “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,” Robartes returns to stress the extremities of his system, its victory and its limits. In the ruins of a medieval fortress and cathedral on the Rock of Cashel in central Ireland, Michael Robartes shudders and rejoices at the new powers of self he has released. First he perceives the grotesque helplessness of the self during the dark of the moon. At this stage the particulars of experience must be pounded together until man is ready for a new incarnation; here the individual has been shattered by forces within and without; he is unable to organize his inner powers:

Constrained, arraigned, baffled, bent and unbent
By these wire-jointed jaws and limbs of wood,
Themselves obedient,
Knowing not evil and good; (p. 382)

Fortunately Robartes receives the complementary vision during the full of the moon. Here the figures in “the mind’s eye” are vivid: “There can be nothing solider till I die.” Between the sphinx of intellect and the Buddha of will, a solitary girl dances. Through her dance, expressing the organic unity of artist and art, contemplation and action, she reconciles the strength of the sphinx and the Buddha (pp. 383-384). Through the dancing girl Robartes recognizes in himself that unified intensity in which “All thought becomes an image and the soul / Becomes a body” (p. 374). Robartes may have limitations as a spokesman, but he has set out in his two visions the boundaries of the self. Guided by the wisdom in “Ego Dominus Tuus” and “The Phases of the Moon,” Yeats is no longer a victim of sentimentalists, rationalists, or rhetoricians; he can do more than imitate the masters, for he has rescued from a rapidly fading past the essential subjective wisdom.

In The Wild Swans at Coole, Yeats emerges as a map-maker of the self; he restores to modern man a discipline for reviving
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the powers of the self. Fortunately this volume serves as a prelude rather than the conclusion to his poetry. Aware now of a range of intensified moments, he tries to steer memories and desires; he guards himself against the intrusion of violent and trivial men. Frequently he subdues restive memories, transforming them into poetic images. Most promising for his remaining years, he has penetrated the mystery of the opposing forces of consciousness and can capitalize on his understanding of the warfare of subjective and objective forces. It is no small achievement to hear the Ile and Hic within speaking their full wisdom, and he may turn off his light, as the poet in his tower does in “The Phases of the Moon” if he grows tired of the strained exposition of his occult spokesman. In large measure, this volume makes it possible for the poet in his middle fifties to construct in his later poems the most comprehensive, searching, and complete secondary personality in contemporary letters.

THE RURAL EXODUS IN AMERICA: UNPUBLISHED NOTES BY “A. E.”

By Henry Summerfield

Although George W. Russell, better known as the poet “A. E.”, is most often remembered as a writer of the Irish Literary Renaissance, the major part of his life was devoted to the service of Ireland in other fields and especially to the betterment of its backward and impoverished farmers. After eight years of practical experience as an organizer of agricultural co-operative societies, he served from 1905 to 1923 as editor of The Irish Homestead, a weekly paper which existed to support the farmers' co-operative movement. During these years Russell became one of the best known men in Ireland.

The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society had been founded near the end of the nineteenth century by Sir Horace Plunkett, who was able to draw on the experience of the already existing continental societies. The I.A.O.S. became in its turn a center