

Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 11  
Issue 2 *June*

Article 8

---

June 1975

## A Dialogue Between Realism and Idealism in Yeats's "Ego Dominus Tuus"

Stuart Hirschberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 11, no.2, June 1975, pg.129-132

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 editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly 129

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN REALISM AND IDEALISM  
IN YEATS'S "EGO DOMINUS TUUS"

By STUART HIRSCHBERG

"Ego Dominus Tuus" is cast in the form of a dialogue, or debate, between two characters rather mysteriously named Hic and Ille (literally, "this" and "that" in Latin). Hic is presented as a pragmatic and conventional type of man, whereas Ille (who Ezra Pound thought represented Yeats and so should have been called Willie),<sup>1</sup> is an idealist who feels that the present has lost touch with the tradition of the past. In essence, the poem is a debate as to whether literature should be an extension of the artist's life (as Hic believes), or should instead (as Ille holds) be an idealized vision completely separate from the artist's experience.

Within the design of the poem, Hic seems to serve as a foil for Ille's argument; yet, at the outset, Ille is put on the defensive as Hic, the realist, accuses him of having let the best of his life go by in the pursuit of the "unconquerable delusion" of a transcendent opposite or "anti-self." Essentially, the "anti-self" can be understood as a projection of the unconscious mind; as such it is comprised of qualities which are opposite, in nature, to those of the personality, or conscious mind. Ille affirms its importance: "By the help of an image/I call to my own opposite, summon all/That I have handled least, least looked up."<sup>2</sup> These lines suggest that Ille summons a personality who is both his opposite and the sum total of his as yet unlivd potentialities. Hic's contemptuous (and self-assured) reply, "And I would find myself and not an image," provokes Ille to move the poem around to its true purpose: the defense of the theory of an "anti-self" on aesthetic rather than on psychological grounds:

That is our modern hope, and by its light  
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind  
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;  
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,

1. As quoted by Richard Ellman, *The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), 197.

2. William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1956), 157-159.

## 130 Colby Library Quarterly

We are but critics, or but half create,  
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,  
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

Evidently, despite the psychological motivations (thoroughly explored by Richard Ellmann) which impelled Yeats to postulate the existence of a transcendent "double," which Yeats said could permit "the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads,"<sup>3</sup> the idea of an "anti-self" seems ultimately to be based on an aesthetic rationale. Yeats thought modern artists had lost the power to disentangle their art from their personal lives and so had forfeited that "old nonchalance of the hand" or sublime ease of creation which characterized the great artists of the past. As a result, Yeats said, many of his fellow artists of the 1890s were broken by the unsympathetic public reaction to their work; "Johnson and Dowson, friends of my youth, were dissipated men, the one a drunkard, the other a drunkard and mad about women, and yet they had the gravity of men who had found life out and were awakening from the dream."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, paradoxically, (as Ille explains to the skeptical Hic) the greatest artists, like Dante, made their art a celebration of what was least attainable in their lives. In Dante's case:

Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,  
Derided and deriding, driven out  
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,  
He Dante found the unpersuadable justice, he found  
The most exalted lady loved by a man.

Although Yeats believed Dante was tormented by his lustful nature, and had suffered the loss of Beatrice, and cruel political injustice, as well, he also believed Dante transcended the limits of his own personality and envisioned a paradise, governed by divine justice, where he was reunited with Beatrice. Certainly there is reason to believe that Dante's unhappy experience with Beatrice moved Yeats because of his own bitter relationship, through the years, with Maude Gonne. Art, then, can (according to Ille) derive its strength from sources beyond the personal

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (New York, 1959), 335.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

## Colby Library Quarterly 131

life of the artist. In rebuttal to this point of view (which sees the artist's work as an antithesis to his life), Hic brings forward Keats as an example, "And yet/No one denies to Keats love of the world;/Remember his deliberate happiness." Yet Keats's art, says Ille, for all its varied panoply and delighted response of the senses, was but a ghostly compensation for the unattained desires of his life:

For certainly he sank into his grave  
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,  
And made — being poor, ailing and ignorant,  
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,  
The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable-keeper —  
Luxuriant song.

Implicit in this fascinating view of the antagonistic relationship between the artist's life and his work is one of Yeat's most important later themes: the reciprocal antagonism between the world of nature and the world of art (later symbolized by the anti-natural mosaics in "Sailing to Byzantium").<sup>5</sup> At its close, "Ego Dominus Tuus" inexorably circles around to its starting point, but with the crucial difference that Ille now affirms a belief in the "anti-self" with a certainty born of having successfully refuted each of Hic's arguments:

I call to the mysterious one who yet  
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
And prove of all imaginable things  
The most unlike, being my anti-self,  
And standing by these characters, disclose  
All that I seek . . . .

As in the opening scene, Ille is described here standing beside "the edge of the stream," which often in Yeats's poetry (as in "The Fisherman"<sup>6</sup> where Yeats imagines "a man who does not exist,/A man who is but a dream" climbing up "at dawn" to drop his fishing lure in the stream) symbolizes the boundary between natural and supernatural realms. Equally important, it would seem that Ille's defense of the subjective imagination becomes a central organizing theme within "Ego

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Poems*, 191-192.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

## 132 Colby Library Quarterly

Dominus Tuus." In effect, the philosophy of realism (through its spokesman Hic) is defeated by Ille's power to "summon" a contending reality from a supernatural realm (which Yeats would later call the Anima Mundi, or corporate imagination) where all of the archetypes of man's imagination live in eternity.



### INFLUENCE OR COINCIDENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF "THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE" AND "A PAINFUL CASE"

By JOAN ZLOTNICK

In 1903 Henry James published *The Better Sort*, a collection of tales which included "The Beast in the Jungle." The very next year, James Joyce was working on *Dubliners*, which, although completed in 1905, would not be published until 1914. Included in that volume is "A Painful Case," which in plot, theme, characterization, and even in certain technical aspects closely resembles "The Beast in the Jungle." There is no conclusive evidence that Joyce knew this particular story, but we do know from the journals of his brother Stanislaus that the two read and discussed James's works<sup>1</sup>. Even if there were no direct influence, however, the striking similarities between the two stories would warrant our consideration.

Although, according to Stanislaus Joyce, Mr. Duffy is a portrait of what Joyce "imagined" he (Stanislaus) "should become in middle age,"<sup>2</sup> Duffy is, in fact, more similar to the fictional John Marcher than the real Stanislaus Joyce. Both are detached from life, guarded against emotional involvement, inordinately egotistical, and scornful of "common" people. Both are engaged in a similar flight from the present. Marcher, living in the future, waits for the leap of the beast, or that supreme moment when his destiny will be revealed to him. Duffy, on the other hand, lives primarily in the past. He has

1. George H. Healey, ed. *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce* (Ithaca, 1962), 75, 85.

2. Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years*, ed. with Introduction by Richard Ellmann (New York, 1958), 159-160.