

Colby



Colby Quarterly

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Volume 24  
Issue 1 *March*

Article 6

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March 1988

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 24, no.1, March 1988, p.36-49

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## W. B. Yeats *on Old Age, Death, and Immortality*

by RAYMOND D. PRUITT and VIRGINIA D. PRUITT

*The balance of life and death implies the impossibility of commitment to either, and the tragedy of Yeats's last years lay in the inevitable failure of any commitment. He could not rest content in any achievement, and he was forced to cast serious doubt on the accomplishment of his life. . . . What opened before him had no redeeming solution, and what stretched behind him was irrelevant.*

(Parkinson 178)

THUS Thomas Parkinson, in his excellent study of Yeats's poetry, describes what he perceives to be the bleak tone, the futility and pathos, of these concluding lines in "Under Ben Bulbin": "*Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!*"<sup>1</sup>

The singularity Yeats himself attached to these lines is reflected in his treatment of them. Not only did he revise them repeatedly; he structured an entire poem around them (Henn 319), a poem which he placed in a position of emphasis at the beginning of *Last Poems*. And it was these three lines that he commanded should be set in isolation on his tombstone. Are we not encouraged to surmise that in them Yeats sought to capture an image crucial to the understanding of his poetic vision, a revelation he chose to secrete until he had but one final and unique chance to speak? If so, then what was the nature of that image and the content of that revelation?

Parkinson believes that disclosure was saturated with the products of personal frustration, failure, and tragedy. Donald Torchiana suggests the epitaph is like Swift's in that it expresses "a cool disregard for life as any permanent end in itself" and is a reaction against "a sentimental and commonplace fear of death" (339). The lines do not invite dogmatic interpretation. They are cryptic; they are provocative; and these qualities, one may speculate, their author arrived at deliberately. We shall seek to establish that in his epitaph Yeats's intent was to confront those beguiled by the enigma of man's pilgrimage between the two eternities with his personal resolution of that riddle. In so doing, he engendered a consummate

1. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. 328. Subsequent references to the poems are to this "New Edition" and page numbers will be included in the text of the essay.

challenge in textual interpretation. As a whimsical comparison, Albert Einstein might have wrought a similar provocation had he designed for his own epitaph a similarly cryptic comment or equation so framed as to reflect its potential for effecting congruence between heretofore irreconcilable discrepancies in his unified field theory.<sup>2</sup> Validation of such an audacious analogy depends on assigning to Yeats a status of preeminence as the poet of self and soul that matches Einstein's genius for perceiving laws that govern the material universe.

### *Apostle of the Antinomies*

THAT THE exhortation of Yeats's epitaph addresses the presumed duality of life and death is in keeping with the poet's lifelong addiction to the identification and organization of polar qualities. He was the devoted apostle of the antinomies and he was born to the act. As a youth, Yeats perceived himself as physically frail to a degree approaching invalidism. He responded to that perception with profound admiration for those who possessed talents and capabilities that he lacked. He found that counter image in his vigorous and daring grandfather, William Pollexfen. During adolescence, he was friend and admirer of his athletic and courageous schoolmate, Cecil Veasy. But it was Yeats's relationship as a young man with the beautiful and aggressive Irish nationalist, Maud Gonne, that provided the most striking examples of his search for wholeness through identification with an opposite. His failure to win her proved stimulus sufficient for him to abandon the folly of searching for personal wholeness through identification with another individual whose strengths complemented his own weaknesses. But he was still dissatisfied with his quotidian, his "normal" self. He still needed an opposite. That opposite he supplied through his individualized intellectual achievement, the concept of "the Mask." He says in his autobiography, "My mind began drifting vaguely toward that doctrine of 'the Mask' which has convinced me that every passionate man . . . is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginative, where alone he finds images that raise his energies" (*Autobiographies* 102). He resolved to derive images from that other world, to adapt them within his own mind, and to make them a part of his own nature and spirit. By such a process, Yeats endeavored to find within himself another Yeats: he aspired to be "self-born, born anew" (Yeats, *Poems* 255). He sought, thenceforth, through an act of will to attain that personal unity and wholeness which heretofore had evaded his almost frantic pursuit.<sup>3</sup>

2. Writing of Einstein's nearly forty years in futile search for his unified field theory, C. P. Snow said: "By his bedside, one Sunday night, lay some pages of manuscript. They included more equations leading to the unified field theory, which he had never found. He hoped to be enough out of pain the next day to work on them. Early in the morning the aortic blister broke and he died" [From *Variety of Men* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 122].

3. For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see Virginia D. Pruitt, "Yeats, the Mask, and the Poetry of Old Age," *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 15 (no. 1), 99-112.

The struggle to meld with his antithetic self and thereby achieve wholeness never ended. At seventy-four, with the epitaph that forms the concluding lines of "Under Ben Bulben," he gave final testimony to the outcome of this quest that he believed was seminal to his creative activity.

### *Reflections on Old Age, Death, and Immortality*

YEATS was always aware of the fragility of life: "O what is life but a mouthful of air?" queries the attendant in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1935) (Yeats, *Plays* 403), and that rhetorical question assumes declarative form in *At the Hawk's Well* (1916): "I am but a mouthful of sweet air" (*Plays* 144). Predictably, one who broods upon the vulnerability of life is doomed to live always in life's shadow, the imminence of death. For Yeats, the threat of death was intensified by lifelong physical frailty. During his last twelve years, he experienced a series of illnesses, each of which brought him near death. In 1927 and 1928 he was afflicted with lung congestion and endured two attacks of influenza. In 1929 he contracted Malta fever, and was not expected to live. Lung congestion recurred in 1935. In 1936 he reported breathlessness on exertion, a symptom suggestive of congestive heart failure. Three years later, as a result of a "dropsical condition" (*Letters* 755), he was dead.

Yeats regarded old age as an enemy, but death represented a menace of greater proportions. Old age imposed physical disabilities, but death held potential for dissolution total and irrevocable. The poet's response to the intimidation of these human inevitables was predictable. He had spent the better part of a lifetime evolving a psychological device that strove for victory in time of crisis by supplanting weakness resulting from innate personal deficit with strength derived from an antithetical self engendered through exercise of the will and imagination. He was not one to accept annihilation as the fate of that will and imagination, particularly not when he was convinced, as he approached the end of his life, that he was more complete, more his own opposite, than he had ever been before. His responses to the challenges of old age and death were intrinsic to and originated from the concept of the Mask. That, at least we may conjecture, is what he intended their source should be.

From an apostle of the antinomies, from one who was dedicated to pursuit of his temperamental opposite, his antithetic self, a multiplicity of images of death and events for which it may be a prelude might be expected. In his writings, Yeats richly fulfilled this anticipation. In their diversity these images merit review, for out of them will emerge insights pertinent to interpretation of the epitaph.

### *Positive Images of Death*

SIX CATEGORIES of positive images are identified and illustrated by brief

citations from representative poems. From among these, individual images germane to the epitaph will be discussed subsequently.

#### 1. Death and Reincarnation:

Swear by those horsemen, by those women  
Complexion and form prove superhuman,  
That pale, long-visaged company  
That airs an immortality  
Completeness of their passions won.  
"Under Ben Bulben" (1938): 325<sup>4</sup>

#### 2. Death as an Illusion:

Death and life were not  
Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul . . .  
"The Tower" (1925): 198<sup>5</sup>

#### 3. Death as Occasion for an Heroic Gesture:

I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.  
"An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" (1918): 135<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Death as the Antecedent to Life at its Best:

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,  
There all the serpent-tails are bit,  
There all the gyres converge in one,  
There all the planets drop in the Sun.  
"There" (1934 or 1935): 285

#### 5. Death as Transfiguration:

The Miracle that gave them such a death  
Transfigured to pure substance what had once  
Been bone and sinew; when such bodies join  
There is no touching here, nor touching there,  
Nor straining joy, but whole is joined to whole:  
For the intercourse of angels is a light  
Where for its moment both seem lost, consumed.  
"Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn" (1934): 284<sup>7</sup>

#### 6. Death, Defiance, and Apparent Failure:

"The Black Tower" (1939) is an example of these motifs. One's understanding of its relevance is facilitated by awareness of an earlier poem in the same volume (*Last Poems*), which surely Yeats intended to be an echo in the mind as one reads "The Black Tower" (331):

4. A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968). Dates of composition for individual poems were obtained from this source.

5. See also "Death" (1927), lines 7-12: 234.

6. See also "Vacillation," Part III (1931-1932), stanza 2: 250.

7. See also "All Souls' Night" (1920), stanza 1, lines 6-10: 227.

I sing what was lost and dread what was won,  
 I walk in a battle fought over again,  
 My king a lost king, and lost soldiers my men;  
 Feet to the Rising and Setting may run,  
 They always beat on the same small stone.

“What Was Lost” (1937): 312

### *Images of Death: Escape versus Confrontation*

“SAILING to Byzantium” (1927) and “The Tower” (1925) were artistic and ideologic triumphs. In them, Yeats addressed the phenomena of old age, death, and immortality in relation to his personal status as an aging—he was in his early sixties—poet. Both poems were written in years prior to progression of those chronic diseases that Yeats suffered from during the final decade of his life. Hence, his strength of will and imagination were exercised free of the physical drain of serious illness. Nonetheless, he portrayed in one poem a different reaction to the presentiments of age and death than he adopted in the other (Pruitt, “Return from Byzantium” 149–57). In “Sailing to Byzantium” he voices a plea for escape from old age when he entreats the sages to gather him into the artifice of eternity. In “The Tower,” he responds to that same dread expectation by declaring personal pride like that of the morn, pride that will permit him to confront the ignominies of old age, and, undeterred, sing out his last song. In “Sailing to Byzantium” he depicts passivity of response in an image of immortality wherein the poet will divest himself of bodily form, be molded into a glistening ornament and set on a golden bough to sing out the passing phases of eternity. Contrast this eventuality with the assertiveness of his declaration in “The Tower”:

That, being dead, we rise,  
 Dream, and so create  
 Translunar Paradise. (198)

Yeats never surpassed the splendor of those lines, thrust into the teeth of death by that power of the will and imagination inherent in the dynamics of the Mask. Separated though they were by a decade of sickness and physical decline that left their author alternately enraged and despairing, their confident and proud message, we shall contend, is reasserted in Yeats’s epitaph.

### *The Will and the Erosions of Age: Negative Images of Death*

DURING the final twelve years of his life, Yeats experienced a series of rage-inducing physical losses imposed on him by the advancing years. Through his poetry, we become privileged witnesses to conflicts between the man and the outrages that fortune dealt him. We are such privileged

witnesses because Yeats, as Hoffman has noted (403), was faithful to his own assertion in *Essays and Introductions* that "A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy. . . ."

We are convinced that in each of his responses to these challenges Yeats was offering, albeit in phantasmagoria (Hoffman 403), a truthful account of his perception of reality valid at least for the moment when it was perceived and for the poem that develops this one antinomic attitude.

We have also concluded that the disparities between the several perceptions were not caused by revisions in the fundamentals of Yeats's carefully considered metaphysical construct as presented in *A Vision*. Recall that the revised edition of that volume appeared in 1937, only two years before Yeats's death.

If, then, Yeats remained faithful to the established propositions of his intellect and reason, is it not logical to infer that alterations not in his mind but in his mood dictated his varied responses to old age and death? External environmental forces, to be sure, helped generate such fluctuations in mood. However, Yeats repeatedly emphasized the importance he assigned to the flesh on the creation of mood. He said, "We only believe in those thoughts that have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body" (*Essays* 235). Moreover, in his autobiography he asserted, "We cannot separate mind and body" (*Autobiographies* 221). And finally, in "A Prayer for Old Age" (1934), he implored:

God guard me from the thoughts men think  
In the mind alone;  
He that sings a lasting song  
Thinks in a marrow-bone; (282)

Yeats's belief in respect to this interaction influenced his decision to have, at age sixty-nine, the "Steinach Operation" whereby he sought to replenish the meat of that marrow-bone (Pruitt and Pruitt 104-24). He concluded that he was indeed rejuvenated by this simple surgical procedure (a vasectomy), a judgment replete with irony. The operation subsequently was discredited as a source of any increase in the androgenic hormones of the human body. Yeats's favorable temporary response may be ascribed not to any physical changes but rather to a triumph of will and imagination à la the Mask over his deteriorating body.

For Yeats was undeniably growing old and ill. His anger over that deterioration has, by consensus, been regarded as a primary impetus to the writing of his last years. The impressiveness of that unusual accomplishment is only enhanced by the somber mood that permeated certain of the poems composed during the same period, especially those that dealt specifically with death and immortality, such as "At Algeciras, A Meditation on Death" (1928—see especially the final four lines, 246), "Mad as the Mist and Snow" (1929), "The Apparitions" (1938), and finally, "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad" (1936), where the cynical am-

biguity in the word “mad” (581–82) reflects the poet’s deep-rooted anxiety.

All of these earlier poems foreshadowed but dimly the mood that enveloped Yeats as, in the dark night of his soul, he composed “Man and the Echo” (October 1938), which occupies a position near the end of his final volume of poetry. Here he defined explicitly the interdependence of mood and flesh, as he observed:

All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right. (345)

In the second interchange with the Echo, the speaker (“Man”) regrets the loss of his body and its stupidity:

But body gone he sleeps no more,  
And till his intellect grows sure  
That all’s arranged in one clear view,  
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,  
Then stands in judgment on his soul. (346)

In his final appeal to the Rocky voice, the speaker asks, “Shall we in that great night rejoice?” Does death, the next two lines imply, hold anything except oblivion? He receives no answer, for his attention is distracted by an image more anguished than the hell of oblivion: the cry of a rabbit struck and destroyed by a predatory hawk. “Man and the Echo” portrays vividly the thinking of a man who is aged and sick, whose sleep is severely impaired, whose intellect no longer can encompass one clear view, and whose faith in things unseen is shaken. His outburst is resonant with despair, and it conjures only the scream of a dying animal, a victim of “Nature, red in tooth and claw / With ravine” (Tennyson, st. LVI 86).

### *Preludes to “Under Ben Bulben” and the Epitaph*

“MAN AND the Echo” is one of four poems or passages appearing in *Last Poems*, each of which fulfills a distinctive role in relation to the other three.<sup>8</sup> In “Man and the Echo,” we encounter Yeats as he speaks from the nadir of despondency. He ponders the futility and inadvertent destructiveness of his life’s work, merging as it now does into the uncertainties surrounding the adumbrations of death. The gloom is lightened only by two lines already quoted—“And till his intellect grows sure / That all’s arranged in one clear view,”—which foretell the possibility of ultimate union with the more sanguine components of the poet’s metaphysical con-

8. We have considered the time of each poem’s composition particularly relevant to the development of our thesis rather than the poem’s placement within *Last Poems*.



struct. These lines augur the purpose that will be consummated in the other three, "Cuchulain Comforted," "The Black Tower," and the epitaph. Yeats will include in them images that encompass the emotional spectrum between the despair and emaciated faith of "Man and the Echo" on the one hand, and on the other, the provocative assertion of the epitaph, made by one whose vision has penetrated the curtain of death.

"Cuchulain Comforted" was dated January 13, 1939, a time just fifteen days before Yeats died. As he neared death, his thoughts turned once again to the concept of the Mask. He perceived the imperfect outcome of his lifelong struggle to establish and maintain a satisfying balance between the intellectual and the instinctive dimensions of his nature. Out of this reflection, perhaps, emerged "Cuchulain Comforted" and its depiction of a spirit that has confronted the crisis of death and acquired thereby a wholeness and fulfillment unrealizable within the constraints previously imposed by the now-discarded flesh. In the poem, the dead Cuchulain encounters his opposites, "bird-like things" (332), a group of cowards as timid and infamous as Cuchulain is "violent and famous" (332). Cuchulain received his "mortal wounds" in battle; the cowards were ignominiously slain by their own kindred, or driven from home. One of these "shrouds" instructs Cuchulain to

Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;  
Mainly because of what we only know  
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid. (332)

Cuchulain acquiesces; seemingly, he divests himself of his arms, and he begins to sew.

The poem has engendered various readings. John Unterecker remarks that the meaning implicit in Cuchulain's being greeted by the singing cowards appears "obscure" (292). Stanley Sultan shares Unterecker's bewilderment, asking "Why is the company of cowards in the poem?" (36). A popular interpretation is that Cuchulain, in his initial experiences during life after death, has undergone a depletion of his personality, particularly of its heroic attributes.<sup>9</sup>

We would suggest, however, that in the process of relinquishing personality Cuchulain was also paradoxically in the process of fulfilling it, of achieving what Yeats called "Unity of Being," and that his sojourn among the cowards made an essential contribution to this process. In five poems included in an earlier volume within this edition, Yeats had mused upon the incompleteness, usually expressed as a disequilibrium between body and soul, which life presupposes.<sup>10</sup> In the period after death, that period in which we witness Cuchulain's interactions with the cowards, Cuchulain, it is implied, garners fullness of experience by undergoing a

9. For example, see Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 263-65.

10. "The Three Bushes" (296-98), "The Lady's First Song" (299), "The Lady's Second Song" (299-300), "The Lady's Third Song" (300), and "The Chambermaid's Second Song" (301).

radical transformation. In the course of this metamorphosis, this "transfiguration," he acquired the gentleness and spirituality which complement the aggressive and sensual portions of his nature. Yeats has, then, delineated the manner in which the spirit, having transcended death and secured immortality, can attain completeness of knowledge and experience, and so achieve personal wholeness. It is a portrayal that centers on the violent and famous Cuchulain, a mythologic character prototypic of the horseman-hero, antitypic of the poet-artist Yeats, as depicted in the concept of the Mask. Joan Towey Mitchell, in "Hero and Poet Reconciled," presents an exquisite analysis of "Cuchulain Comforted," concluding that

Usually these cursed men (the hero and the poet) stand at opposite poles from one another; but in this poem hero and poet, at first contrasted, finally merge and become indistinguishable. No longer excluded through his choice of the heroic life, the hero attains the superhuman. There he shares the poet's life, becomes his song, and so lives eternally. (31)

Mitchell's interpretation affords an interesting parallel between the unity with antithetical self attained by Cuchulain in the aftermath of death and that which we perceive Yeats may be projecting for himself in the epitaph.<sup>11</sup>

"The Black Tower" (January 21, 1939) was the last poem that Yeats wrote, composed a week before he died. When Yeats recognized that his own death was impending he was moved, it would seem, to reassert the dream which he refers to in his prose writings as "Unity of Culture," the dream of an Ireland more heroic than ever it had been in his own lifetime; to share his vision of a day when the king's great horn would sound again and Ireland's dead heroes would rise and usher in an age more congenial to Yeats's own nature; to define thereby his sense of union with that racial consciousness, that fountainhead of vitality older than "the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist, / Above the real."<sup>12</sup> There is no joy here in victory won. Rather, there is indomitable spirit.

In "The Black Tower," then, Yeats testified to his unshaken belief in certain of his oldest and most profound convictions. This he did some seven months after he composed the text of "Under Ben Bulbin" and his

11. Allen remarks that "there is abundant evidence, as well as fairly general agreement among critical authorities that . . . Cuchulain . . . becomes a persona for the poet, especially in the late work" (*Epitaph* 74).

12. Wallace Stevens, "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 501.

Who is my father in this world, in this house,  
At the spirit's base?

My father's father, his father's father, his—  
Shadows like winds

Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,  
At the head of the past.

They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist,  
Above the real . . .

epitaph,<sup>13</sup> and a week before he died. In this poem are intimations that however much his mood may have altered from time to time during the closing months of his life, the tenets of his intellect and reason had weathered the perils of age and illness.

*"The Tower," "Under Ben Bulben," and the Epitaph*

"IT IS time that I wrote my will" (198). With this line Yeats opened Section III of "The Tower." The five stanzas that form the remainder of the poem are consonant with the mission identified in that first line. What were Yeats's proposed benefactions to the "upstanding men" (198), his heirs?

*"Pride like that of the morn, / When the headlong light is loose,"* (198)

*Faith that "Death and life were not / Till man made up the whole,"* (198)

*His memories* [italics ours]: "All those things whereof / Man makes a superhuman / Mirror-resembling dream." (199)

Between the time when he proposed these generous and inspiring benefactions (1928) and the closing months of his life (1938), Yeats had experienced the ravages of illness, age, and their attendant debilitation. His poetry portraying negative images of death was written during this period and expressed thoughts and feelings that abnegated concepts integral to his fundamental convictions. Hence he had a compelling motive to restate some of those firmly held concepts.

Viewed from this perspective, the text of "Under Ben Bulben" became a second will designed to check any mistaken inference that the poet had abandoned or substantially modified his basic ideals. Perhaps he was too concerned; perhaps he protested too much.

In Section I of the poem, the poet establishes the intended authority, the personally imposed legal quality of his verse. Thus he begins with a swearing of oaths, first to the legacy of the occult and then to the superhuman horsemen, the Sidhe, that spectral company which

. . . airs an immortality  
Completeness of their passions won;  
Now they ride the wintry dawn  
Where Ben Bulben sets the scene.

Here's the gist of what they mean. (325)

That gist is initiated in Section II where Yeats associates the Sidhe, the ancient gods of Ireland, with the oracular desiderata in the remainder of the poem. The section is composed of twelve lines which fall into three quatrains. In the first quatrain, Yeats plainly associates rebirth of the individual with rebirth of a culture (see Allen, *Epitaph* 216-21). The message of the second quatrain is simple and forthright:

13. James L. Allen makes a persuasive argument for a date of composition in late June. See *Epitaph* 6-9.

Whether man die in his bed  
Or the rifle knock him dead,  
A brief parting from those dear  
Is the worst man has to fear. (325)

These last two lines not only proclaim immortality but also a continuum of an individual's personal ties into an afterlife of comparative immediacy and personal identity. However, in the final quatrain (lines nine to twelve of Section II) Yeats advances a more novel idea: he speaks of the reincarnation of dead men as archetypes within the minds of the living, seeking thereby to convey to a future generation of Irish artists their duty to inspire the living.

Section III also contains lines relevant to interpretation of the epitaph. They read: ". . . when all words are said / And a man is fighting mad, / Something drops from eyes long blind, / He completes his partial mind" (326). They suggest proximity of that moment desperately yearned for by the speaker in "Man and the Echo," that moment when ". . . his intellect grows sure / That all's arranged in one clear view" (346). Induction of that moment demands crisis, and obviously death, like war and rage, can and sometimes does induce ultimate crisis. Death then may become the catalyst of truth. For Yeats, we would suggest, completion of his partial mind will be realized at the instant of death, when the poet-artist finds union with his antithetical self, the horseman-hero.

In Section IV, Yeats addresses the poets and artists of Ireland, and in Section V his words are directed even more specifically to the poets. They are words of command, creating the regal and exalted aura of a Sinaitic pronouncement, too regal, too exalted, and too Sinaitic in the judgment of some critics. They find his assessments bellicose, his observations boastful, and his self-perceptions marred by elitism and eccentricity. For instance, Harold Bloom remarks that "Under Ben Bulben" is "for the most part a poor poem, with some remarkable passages but much bluster as well" (460). Denis Donoghue perceives a similar weakness: "The bragging is felt in the insistent rhymes and generally in the blatancy of rhythm that disfigures several late poems" (139). Douglas Archibald calls the poem "a parody of late Yeats, not 'an old man's eagle mind,' but an old man's self-indulgent rant, WBY as Cecil B. DeMille" (153), and decries the "old fashioned snobbery" in the poem (164). Finally, David Lynch says that "Under Ben Bulben" is saved from "long-winded eccentricity" (81) only by its concluding lines. Certainly major components of the poem lack that equilibrium and beneficent spirit which pervades the final section of "The Tower." We agree with these criticisms in regard to Sections IV and V. Moreover, the three quatrains of Section II include concepts so seemingly unrelated that they appear contradictory. Section III we would exempt from criticism because it presents a postulate with which we agree. For some people, crisis does appear necessary to completion of a partial mind. Sections I and VI, each exhibits of verbal parsimony, surely fulfill

the author's purpose, in Section I, evocation of the supernatural, in Section VI, creation of a veil of impenetrable obscurity. What lies between these two sections may merit the derogation implied by the words "senile bluster," but does it really matter? For some individuals of advanced years, the choice may be restricted to bluster or oblivion, such being the lethal threat age poses to the brain and heart of the aged. Is all not well if the result of this concentrated passion includes, as do the first and last sections of "Under Ben Bulben," lines laden with such mysticism and mystery that henceforth they may surge unbidden from the wash of our memories?

### *Section VI and the Epitaph*

THE FINAL stanzas of "Under Ben Bulben" focus on one particular Irish poet: William Butler Yeats. The lines bristle with reminders of the civilization of which Yeats considered himself to be an exponent. The movement of the verse is spare and direct, and its objective is the three lines that comprise the epitaph; and the epitaph, rightly enough, addresses the subject of life and death. In Allen's interpretation as in ours, the cold eye cast on life, on death, connotes an indifferent, a disdainful eye. The imperative of line three, "Horseman, pass by!" invites in Allen's judgment many meanings and he has provided what must be a nearly exhaustive description of these (*Epitaph* 49-164). Furthermore, he observes elsewhere that this plethora "might ultimately have so many levels of implication that to grasp and express them all in paraphrase may verge on the impossible" ("Puzzle" 91).

We concluded that the identity of the "Horseman" in the epitaph bore at least a generic relationship to the Sidhe of Section I, in that both aired an immortality of completed passions. The individual horseman of the epitaph was, we speculated, the synthesis of the Yeatsian horseman-hero, "the man in the golden breastplate / Under the old stone cross" ("The Old Stone Cross" 317),<sup>14</sup> and the poet-artist Yeats, who would be buried near "an ancient cross." What was during life only a symbiotic connection between the two identities would become, with the crisis imposed by the artist's death, an assimilation of one into the other, the consummation of the poet's enduring but, in life, unrealized dream of completing his mind through union with his antithetical self, the horseman-hero.<sup>15</sup>

14. See Virginia Pruitt, "Yeats, Old Age, and Death: The Dynamic of the Mask," Diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1974.

15. Allen, in *Yeats's Epitaph*, has made these among other comments on the synthesis of the horseman-hero and the poet-artist: The suggestion has already been made that Yeats identified himself with the horseman of the epitaph and that the imperative in that inscription is addressed primarily to himself (74) . . . here and subsequently, the fact becomes increasingly apparent that while Yeats was literally neither horseman nor man-at-arms, he imaginatively and symbolically associated the two with each other and with himself (75). . . . Finally in the figure as an image of guidance or control, man's spirit in heroic and artistic self-discipline having virtually "saddled and bitted reality," the horse and rider icon comes to represent all experience from both eternities focused in a single image-idea, human Unity of Being achieved at last (235).

And what might be the latitudes and constraints upon a mind that has become whole? No longer need it pursue posthaste the search for completeness by way of an epic journey through incarnation after incarnation (see Allen, "Puzzle," 91), a journey of such immensity that the way station of death would be rendered inconsequential. Perhaps the implications of the initial line deleted by Yeats from one of the original versions of the epitaph, "Draw rein, draw breath," might assume a variant and less constrictive meaning. May one not wonder whether, during those dark hours of depression portrayed in "The Man and the Echo" and its companion poems, the agonizing soul of the poet had longed for the transfiguration in death he had predicted in the lines of "The Tower" — "That, being dead, we rise, / Dream and so create / Translunar Paradise" (198) — for a death as antecedent to life at its best, for a fading line of separation between the life that is visible and palpable and the existence which transpires thereafter, for a line that may fade completely with time and the event of death? The images in these preceding lines are Yeats's own, derived not from poems written in moods of depression and despair. They were conceived by a powerful and creative mind functioning at its best.

Yeats, during his lifetime, had rejoiced in that anomaly within the natural world, the human mind, that miracle infused with an energy, intensity, and complexity never to be measured on the scales of the mundane. He had hoped, had believed, that that miracle, through the power of its will, would prevail over the foulest destiny that the forces of the ponderable world could impose upon it. But those last years also had confirmed what he had surmised, that the foulest element in that destiny was time, time and its destructive correlates, decrepitude of age and a death that just might equate with oblivion. Yet herein lay the pervasive irony. Time has brought him to the grave, where through death his mind, by integration with its antithesis, the horseman-hero, will attain the wholeness that his creed had exalted. From within that Unity of Being he confirms that the putative absolutes of time and death are what he had heretofore declared them to be: man-made illusions — the warped perceptions wrought by that all too prevalent and prevailing human attribute, timidities of thought.<sup>16</sup> For that deduction had he not already prescribed a personal remedy?

Now shall I *make* my soul,  
*Compelling* it to study [italics ours]  
 In a learned school  
 Till the wreck of body,  
 Slow decay of blood,  
 Testy delirium  
 Or dull decrepitude  
 . . . . .

16. With acknowledgments to Eugene O'Neill, whose character, Lazarus, in Act IV, scene i of *Lazarus Laughed* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), speaks to Tiberius not of age and death but of age and time: "I know that age and time are but timidities of thought" (149).

Seem but the clouds of the sky  
 When the horizon fades,  
 Or a bird's sleepy cry  
 Among the deepening shades. ("The Tower," 199-200)

The poet records his epitaph.

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