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Swans, Doubles, Reflections: Hydromancy in Coole Park

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I am certain that the water, the water of the seas and of lakes and of mist and rain, has all but made the Irish after its own image. Images form themselves in our minds perpetually as if they were reflected in some pool. . . . Even today our countrypeople speak with the dead. . . . and even our educated people pass without great difficulty into the condition of quiet that is the condition of vision. We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images.¹

I N THIS essay I focus upon the title poem of Yeats’s 1919 volume, The Wild Swans at Coole,² which I believe may be read as foreshadowing the visionary poetics made explicit in the later poems of this volume—“The Phases of the Moon” and “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,” for example.³ My epigraph suggests the appropriate nexus between still water and the poetic imagination. It is taken from a piece in The Celtic Twilight that identifies unmistakably a spiritualist’s interest in the mists, rivers, and lakes of Ireland. Like looking glasses, still watery surfaces have traditionally been valued for their cognitive properties. Both have been thought to preside mediumistically over the threshold between the this- and the other-worldly; each has represented figuratively the reflexive relations between the two worlds. Read with these liminal and specular conventions in mind and, besides, read in conjunction with “Broken Dreams” (from the same volume), “The Wild Swans at Coole” offers, by way of a lake-side scene, an insight into the structure of the Yeatsian visionary imagination.

In the poem a moment of transcendence, of ontological change, occurs amid a narrative which fails to situate that moment in its own sequence. Nor is this an isolated case.⁴ Such Yeatsian pseudo-narratives of transcendence regularly defer a Moment that is both their end and origin; for they are clearly reflexive in their argument and, themselves poetic, indicate in the pseudo-event of transfiguration

³. This claim presents no insurmountable chronological difficulty. Although “The Wild Swans at Coole” was written in 1916, before Yeats’s marriage to George Hyde-Lees, and, therefore, before the automatic writing that led to A Vision, many of the symbols characteristic of the latter system were already in place before the mediumistic collaboration of the married couple. Per Amica Silentia Lunae (included in Mythologies) is alone sufficient evidence of this; see in particular pp. 340-41 on the symbol of the Wheel and pp. 359, 361 on the relationship between instinct and the daimonic.

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the essential movement of poetic activity.

In “Broken Dreams,” a poem of slightly earlier date that I take as forming a virtual pair with “The Wild Swans at Coole,” immersion in a lake promises to bring about a metamorphosis. Maud Gonne, a remembered image from the poet’s past, faces a mysterious refinement that will leave her, now a perfected image, at home paddling on the lake’s surface:

... I am afraid that you will run
And paddle to the wrist
In that mysterious, always brimming lake
Where those that have obeyed the holy law
Paddle and are perfect.

The trans-figuration from recollected image to swan exceeds the narrative premise supplied by the rest of the poem; it doubles as a representation of the figural workings of the poetic imagination—i.e., as a figure for figuration—and as transcendence induced by the poet’s art.\(^5\)

“The Wild Swans at Coole” reintroduces the paddlers on the lake motif, greatly elaborated, this time amid a generalized autumn landscape. The lake is “brimming” once more, though the epithet “mysterious” is here transferred from the lake to the swans that frequent it. The still water’s surface is now explicitly allowed a reflective function, “mirror[ing] a still sky” and thereby bringing air and water, heavenly image and its double, into a mimetic partnership.\(^6\)

The work of transfiguration presented in “Broken Dreams” might, at some risk of reductiveness, be conceived diagrammatically thus, with the medium of transfiguration—be it water, death of the self, or poetic writing—intervening:

Yeats the individual man memories, loyalties LIFE
\(\text{pre-poetic matter}\)

--- --- --- --- 
the lake/mirror/medium --- --- the ia-between
zone of transfiguration

the poetic Self swans TEXT
\(\text{the perfected image}\)

In this poem the speaker has lingered on the mundane side of the structure; the textual side, that of the transfigured Self (“in the grave”) and of the perfected image, is contemplated only to be deferred.

In “The Wild Swans at Coole” the swans are present from the beginning; the images have been perfected and the pre-poetic matter refined away. No place is allowed for recollections of Maud Gonne or for any experiences unrelated to the speaker’s observations of this particular lake. The referential scope of the later poem also appears to be reduced in that there is no explicit promise of a

5. Compare Per Amica Sientia Lunae, Mythologies, p. 346. This passage analyses the imagining process in terms of the Four Elements, reserving that of water for the reflecting medium, along whose surface images (belonging to the element of air) are transmitted to us from Anima Mundi. The lake’s surface appears to perform a similar mediatic function in both “Broken Dreams” and “The Wild Swans at Coole.”

transfiguration of the poetic self beyond the grave here as in “Broken Dreams.” Specialized, then, to fit “The Wild Swans at Coole,” the above diagram would look like this:

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Yeats the individual man LIFE
- - - - - - - - - the lake/mirror/medium - - - - - - - - -
swans TEXT
   (the perfected image)
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This modified diagram indicates a worldly speaker strictly counterposed to the otherworldly perfection of the swans, a Yeatsian persona encountering as other the poetic images he would aspire to.

Yeats’s deployment of verb tenses in “The Wild Swans at Coole” suggests a further parallel between the two poems. In “Broken Dreams” images from the past infiltrate the present while the present seems rather the past of a still deferred poiesis: “Vague memories, nothing but memories./ But in the grave all, all shall be renewed”—i.e., in a process of poetic refinement of the image that is imagined as at once a death and a rebirth as “an incorruptible self.” By such means a pseudo-narrative is set up to imply continuity between the past, present memories, and a promised metamorphosis—a natural history of the image, in fact. “The Wild Swans at Coole,” on the other hand, is an ode and, as such, less tolerant of narrative continuity. While its speaker does assert ontological change, the chronology of that change is telescoped. In the poem’s second and third stanzas recollections of a similar scene nineteen years earlier are superimposed upon the speaker’s current perception of the lake to a degree that challenges the reader’s ability to establish a clear sequence of perceptual events:

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The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.
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A possible series of nineteen visits is reported, at least the first and last of which have involved a count of the swans. The presence of the swans has been, for the speaker, continuous, while he has come and gone—a mobility which may have inspired the counting and its attestation of the swans’ unaltered continuity. We are not told whether each visit was accompanied by a count, though such is, I feel

sure, the implication. Be that as it may, the visits themselves, being arithmetically totalled, represent the passage from past to present in terms of a sequence of equal increments. Inevitably, in such a cumulative chronology the claim that “all’s changed” is unlocatable, baffling, disruptive. Qualitative difference contests quantitative identity.

I have pointed out similar cross-purposes between narrative sequence and essential change at work in “Broken Dreams.” In each poem chronology and the rationalist epistemology it assumes is transgressed by that “change upon the instant” which constitutes poetic difference. In each, too, intersecting pasts, perfects, and futures cede place to an indeterminate transfiguring future; however, this circumvention of narrative in “The Wild Swans at Coole” I reserve until later for fuller discussion. In particular, my reading of the mysterious future contemplated in the poem’s final stanza will depend upon a preliminary account of the equally problematic “All’s changed” in the third stanza.

It will probably have been remarked that this critic has plunged into a symbolic (in the Yeatsian sense) reading of “The Wild Swans at Coole” without even a glance at its obvious qualifications as a reflective landscape poem of the Romantic type. Clearly, to approach “The Wild Swans at Coole” by way of “Broken Dreams” and to insist on the structural parallels between the two has been to build an implicit case for the symbolic as against the literal reading. In brief, my position is that, for all the scene painting of the first stanza, the impetus of “The Wild Swans at Coole” is supernatural rather than naturalistic, and less reflective than reflexive.

To consider the poem as a Wordsworthian landscape piece is to read it unilaterally, that is, without the mediation of other, contemporaneous Yeatsian texts. The moment one considers “The Wild Swans at Coole” in and with its immediate poetic context(s), its participation becomes possible in the larger, “centric” myth that dominates much of the volume for which it provides the title; such kinship with the overtly visionary poems only enriches its resonance. To me the more insular reading strategy, while it produces a satisfying tone poem, is methodologically constricting in the face of as protean a mythopoeia as one finds at large in The Wild Swans at Coole. “We are,” after all, “among the shape-changers.”

My understanding of immersion in the lake’s water in “Broken Dreams” is that it represents a refining of the image in the speaker’s memory, a freeing of it of personal attachments. Given this account, “The Wild Swans at Coole” might be regarded as offering a sequel. The work of refinement has taken place. The speaker’s fears expressed in the earlier poem have proved justified; Maud Gonne, along with the personal background in general, has indeed been “exor-

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8. Autobiographies, p. 326. In this passage Yeats denies any “meeting of spirit and sense”; he allows only the sudden jolt of difference at which “passion creates its most violent sensation.”

cized” from the swan-images, and these have become unreachable, sufficient unto themselves. Refined images, “those brilliant creatures” would in terms of Yeats’s imminent system belong to the inhuman Phase 15 on the Great Wheel. According to the mythopoeia prevalent in The Wild Swans at Coole, the perfection of their beauty places them in that state of simplicity which characterizes “the condition of fire,” the aesthetic and cognitive absolute of the “Anima Mundi” section of Per Amica Silentia Lunae.

The preceding remarks have advanced my discussion to a plane well removed from that of the representational. I have been suggesting a dichotomy or antithesis between two worlds, the mundane one of the speaker on dry land, who is clearly intended as a version of the poet’s daily self, and that of the “mysterious, beautiful” swans drifting on a watery medium. Yet the discourse of the poem is articulated largely in terms of natural scenes, and any reading must take full account of these.

What then of that opening landscape? Does it not suggest the Romantic interpenetration of subject and object formula, with a Wordsworthian speaker finding in the landscape the sympathetic expression of his own state of soul?

Let us look more closely. An October scene at, presumably, evening twilight (this is indicated in early drafts) serves as correlative for the speaker’s sense of his own mutability; this is set against the sensuous fullness and continuity of nature. My account will fasten on the antithesis lurking in that “against,” though it will also alter its second term. The swans on the “brimming water” should not, in my opinion, be mistaken for an image of merely sensuous fullness; after all, the continuity they represent is of an ideal kind that defies natural aging. The fourth stanza shows the same swans thoroughly anthropomorphized yet still the speaker’s antithesis:

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;

Here the fifth stanza associates that “brimming water” with a plenitude more kindred to aesthetic vision than to nature’s plenty. We must remember that for Yeats “art is art because it is not nature.”

10. This self-sufficiency born of refinement is applied equally by Yeats to the image and to the soul between lives, where perhaps “purgation” would be the better way of expressing the process. One thinks of “A Prayer for My Daughter” in the following volume of poems in which “The soul recovers radical innocence/And learns at last that it is self-delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting,/And that its own sweet will is Heaven’s will” (Variorum Poems, p. 405).
Certainly, the speaker is projecting his feelings and thoughts onto natural objects; this is the point of the opening stanza, as the rest of the poem with its reflective "I" makes clear. But the personal vision itself divides into characteristically Yeatsian poles, the natural confronting the supernatural, the mundane the visionary. Throughout the poem this polarity is sustained in the speaker's reflections upon his relationship to the swans, his others. If they are "unwearied still" and impervious to time's action, the opposite, by implication, is true of him who, after his kind, keeps track of time by measurement.

Edward Engelberg is right to discuss "The Wild Swans at Coole" in terms of the antinomy "absence and presence," but I think his strategy might be pressed a little further. To put the matter plainly, the presence of the swans signifies absence for the speaker. On the one hand, as signs for a permanence and a purpose that he lacks, they stand, like all signs, in place of an absent presence. "Unwearied still, lover by lover/... in.../Companionable streams," they point to the love and companionship he does not enjoy. When we read "their hearts have not grown old," we understand the implication that his has. With the more inclusive "passion or conquest," the feelings foisted upon the swans—true offspring of Leda in their adherence to both Venus and Mars—are generalized beyond the merely intimate to encompass the full range of human commitment; and we sense the extent of his emotional depletion. On the other hand, the swans are also absent to the speaker in that they can offer him no companionship, so emancipated are they now from any vestiges of the Maud Gonne of memory, nor any consolation. Even his advancing tread is liable to send them off into flight.

It seems that the mystery of the swans is in direct proportion to their inaccessibility. For four stanzas an aging Yeats in everyday costume articulates a mounting estrangement from images of transcendent beauty which, in the sheer fullness of their presence, might more reasonably occasion a spirit of celebration in him. Instead, by its very absence the "renewed" Yeatsian Self, anticipated in "Broken Dreams" and structurally correlative to the transfigured images on the lake, further emphasizes the abyss separating speaker and swans. Finally, having become a "Dejection Ode" by its fourth stanza, "The Wild Swans at Coole" allows at least a half-occluded promise of renewal in its enigmatic closing lines.

To state that the presence of the Coole Park swans signifies absence to the observer is to identify their figural role in the poem. Introduced initially as if natural objects, they are enlisted as vehicles for the great absences oppressing the speaker—passion, fortitude, and permanence. Thus speaker and swans form the antithetical pair basic to the Yeatsian poetics of the time, man and Mask, with the swans "express[ing]... all that the man most lacks" and playing spiritual counterpart, suggestive perhaps of the disdainful Muse, to his heterogeneous daily self.

In this fourth stanza Yeats develops the swans most fully as figures. So placed in the poem, they invite association with the comprehensive change left unex-

plained in the previous stanza: “All’s changed.” Given the literal centrality in the poem of this phrase, one suspects the change of being the central event of the poem: and, therefore, the figural relationship of man and Mask of being the poem’s essential topic. This being the case, a logical course would be to examine the rendering of the change for the light it sheds on the workings of figure. As I have suggested, however, the precise nature of the change is left undefined; even its timing is problematical.

A portion of the uncertainty may be attributed to the effacement of any middle stages to the presumable series of annual visits. The change is, after all, located somewhere within the collapsed narrative of the second and third stanzas. Whether or not the reader assumes a continuous sequence of visits and swan counts, a regimen of continuity by measurement is established therein, only to be disrupted by “All’s changed.” Where does the change belong in those nineteen years? What happened in between the first and the current count to disturb the continuity?

The perfect tenses, while clarifying nothing, help at least to pinpoint the obscurity; equivalent at first glance but really of two differing allegiances, they articulate the intersection of two histories, that of identity and that of difference. “The nineteenth autumn has come” and “I have looked” differ only in that the former tells the time in years, while the latter reports an event in the immediate past; essentially, they both apply to a single event nineteen years after its prototype. On the other hand, “All’s changed since . . . the first time” reports a qualitative discontinuity whose discovery is simultaneous with that event, but whose location is retroactive, traceable to some point during the preceding nineteen years. This perfect tense signals a failure, or even an unwillingness, to locate precisely the origin of the speaker’s changed awareness within the narrative structure of the poem.

Mysterious in its resistance to chronology as well as in its generality, “All’s changed” registers a defeat for knowledge by measurement and by sheer familiarity, for the epistemology of the mundane world. I submit that it tells rather of that poetic change of the Romantic tradition whereby “the film of familiarity” is stripped from the objects of daily perception. The poem testifies to its speaker’s immediate realization that a perceptual field he had been seeking to monitor by regular measurement had already changed before his eyes.

For a parallel one might consider “Easter 1916,” written in the summer of 1916, which, having recounted the banalities of repeated social encounter, presents abruptly “All changed, changed utterly:/A terrible beauty is born.” Acquaintances, participants in “the casual comedy,” have been transfigured by martyrdom, assimilated to Yeats’s tragic vision of history. And the poem inscribes reflexively the transfiguration it celebrates; once individuals of a common political persuasion, Pearse, Macbride, and company have, beyond the grave, become mythic, figures of a beauty peculiar to Yeats’s understanding of political change in his time.

A far cry from the ahistorical setting of “The Wild Swans at Coole,” it would seem. But consider the displacement worked between that poem’s first and
fourth stanzas. A natural scene, in which a sense of the literal (time, place, number) is cultivated, yields place to a symbolic interpretation of the same swans, now full-fledged Yeatsian Masks. The contingent and the circumstantial—what Yeats has called “the gaming-table of nature”—are transfigured into the typifications of the fourth stanza. No natural scene but, rather, a symbolic interpretation is represented there. Having undergone the change introduced in the intervening stanzas, the swans are now representative rather than representational, as the two inclusive “or[s]” attest; these identify the swans as figures. In this case composites of the two alternate pictures of swans already introduced in the poem: either drifting on the still water or mounting to the heavens. Thus generalized, they represent the full signifying power of the swans within the Yeatsian mythopoeia on display in this poem and, for that matter, in the volume.

At the sudden flight of the swans the observer’s initial count is disturbed, and a heavenly geometry succeeds his earthbound arithmetic; instinctual pattern succeeds contiguity as a result of a tumultuous interruption. Or is such a visionary reading of Stanza Two really justified within the context of the poem? The disturbance of the swans, it seems to me, is assigned a prominence out of proportion to its significance as an event in nature. Any significance it has must be for its observer, who records his unmistakable awe in the dramatic language of these lines. Given this, it would surely be perverse not to associate their sudden switch in behavior with the perceptual change announced in the very next stanza. The swans’ flight would thus represent an initial perceptual breakthrough whose significance would only become apparent years later.

Certainly, much has been made by critics of the phrasing devoted to the formation of the swans in flight. I find myself in accord with such as Unterecker and Engelberg, who have taken “wheeling in great broken rings” as adumbrating the wheels and gyres of Yeats’s mature system and would adduce as evidence the considerable attention paid in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and in *Autobiographies* to the operation of instinct in the behavior of both birds and men. Instinct Yeats attributes to the universal patterns inherited by wild creatures and humankind alike from the great spiritual collective, *Anima Mundi*. For the poet instinct is the key to transfiguration of the self and brings access to vision:

I know now that revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest; and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind.

I would suggest that that first vision of the climbing swans, so disturbing to the earthbound observer’s count, may be taken as heralding the onset of ideas central to the awaited symbolic system. In “The Stirring of the Bones” (1922) Coole Park is appropriated for Yeats’s personal mythopoeia. As he admits, *Autobiographies* was written teleologically, with the maturing apparatus of A

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Vision organizing the account of his artistic evolution. Within this tendentious narrative structure Coole Park serves as locus for the advent of the key ideas of his “lunar parable”:

It was at Coole that the first few simple thoughts that now, grown complex through their contact with other thoughts, explain the world, came to me from beyond my own mind.16

Yeats goes on to give instances of dream visions dating from his first visits to Coole Park and claims to have derived “the thought of the Mask” from one such experience. My point is that at the time of the writing and revising of “The Wild Swans at Coole” Yeats was coming to see his first acquaintance with Coole Park as a turning point in his visionary fortunes. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, I would further point out that the same title also presides over the 1919 collection of poems. The Wild Swans at Coole, it will be remembered, concludes conspicuously with a group of poems that offer the first detailed anticipations of A Vision to appear in Yeats’s poetry. This being the case, then, one has in the volume’s title, with its visionary swans and its auspicious location, a rubric to match its contents.

If the swans are figural, being the speaker’s Masks, and besides offer faint adumbrations of a visionary symbolic system, what of the final stanza in which they are imagined migrating to become the objects, natural this time, of other men’s perceptions? The stanza rehearses once more the twin modes of behavior of the swans—on the lake and in flight—and once again the passage from one to the other coincides with a transfiguration; but now it is in reverse, the supernatural yielding to the natural. At first, the swans are at their most ethereal, the mystery of their beauty evoking perhaps a certain Platonizing promise, especially in relation to the “still waters,” which, one recalls from the first stanza, “mirror a still sky.” The promise seems, though, in its very mysteriousness to remain out of the range of the observer’s limited understanding. Then the swans are imagined in flight, migrating literally beyond his perceptual range. As a result the personal contemplative tradition recorded in the first four stanzas is interrupted and the figural significance of the swans for the speaker is suspended. Hitherto they have been presented as emblems of permanence while their observer has hinted at his own impermanence as an autumn visitor whose “heart” has fallen victim to the passing of the years. Conversely, the swans will be the migrants while the observer’s new permanence—for once, he is still there to notice their absence—will coincide with an awakening of undefined significance. A further shift of perspective is here implied: it seems that the time of day proper to his new awareness will be the inverse of that specified for those encounters with the swans set in the poem’s present and past; the evening twilight of the speaker’s reflective moods is to be succeeded by the dawn of his imagined awakening.

The dominant relationship of the first four stanzas of “The Wild Swans at Coole,” wherein the swans were revealed as transfigured into the speaker’s

antithesis, his Mask, has modulated into its own mirror image. The speaker’s vision of himself transfigured, waking to his daimonic Self, balances that of the swans returning to their contingent state of nature. Accident and figure, natural and supernatural remain in antithesis while the reciprocity in their relationship is played upon, thrown into relief. In a late semiotic flourish the poetic text signals the figural structure at work in its own fabric.

And with this flourish Yeats may be said to raise the theme of figurality to the level of the poetic text in general; more specifically, to the poetic text entitled “The Wild Swans at Coole” and, further, to the volume that shares its title. For, according to his visionary poetics, the poet attains to his “buried self” in writing—is “trans-figured”—and is assimilated to his own text; the Mask is the self as figure, the written self, and at the same time the other of the self. The poet’s relationship to “The Wild Swans at Coole” and to the volume will, therefore, recapitulate that of the speaker to the swans in the poem, a relationship of self to Mask.