June 1979

Yeats's Romantic Dante

George Bornstein

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 15, no.2, June 1979, p.93-113

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. For more information, please contact mfKelly@colby.edu.
Yeats’s Romantic Dante

by GEORGE BORNSTEIN

When I was fifteen or sixteen my father had told me about Rossetti and Blake and given me their poetry to read; and once at Liverpool on my way to Sligo I had seen Dante’s Dream in the gallery there, a picture painted when Rossetti had lost his dramatic power and today not very pleasing to me, and its colour, its people, its romantic architecture had blotted all other pictures away,” recalled W. B. Yeats in his autobiography. 1 Yeats responded so deeply not to the earlier watercolor at the Tate Gallery but rather to the later oil version of Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice, Rossetti’s largest picture and one of his most important. Chief among its colors were the red and gold which Yeats thought Shelley had imported from Italy for English poetry; chief among its people were the quester poet and his dead beloved, whom henceforth he might apprehend sometimes in vision but could only join permanently in death; and chief among its elements of “romantic architecture” was a winding stair spiraling upward at the extreme right. One sees how the picture blotted out all others for Yeats. Yet his reminiscence indicates more about his lifelong liaison with Dante than simply the correspondence of painterly details with his own art. Yeats consistently saw Dante as a romantic artist, whether associated with strong early romantics like Blake or with their weaker followers like Rossetti.

If Yeats saw himself as the last romantic, he often saw Dante as the first. The tradition in which Yeats placed himself thus stretched from Dante through Blake and Shelley—the two most important of all poets to him—to his own day. Yeats mentioned Dante over ninety times in his published prose, sometimes at length, and adapted Dante’s work for parts of at least ten poems, three plays, and a story. He saw Dante above all as a quest poet, with whom he shared devotion to an unattainable woman, political office in a strife-torn land, exile (voluntary in Yeats’s case), acceptance of an abstruse system of belief, and a host of poetic goals, not least of which was to become a character in his own work. Yet because Dante belonged to another age, did not dominate

1. Autobiographies (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 114–115. Hereafter cited as A. Yeats’s response was not unusual. In Rossetti (London: Duckworth, 1902), p. 38, Ford Maddox Ford took a more guarded view of the important effect of this picture. “The fact remains that, after having seen the picture, this episode of Dante’s life must be visualized by men of our time, in a place and with figures like those of Rossetti’s,” wrote Ford. “And this implies a great deal.”
English poetic tradition, and never inspired his young Irish admirer to discipleship, Yeats could on occasion elevate him beyond even Blake and Shelley, as a rebellious son will substitute a grandfather for a father in family romance. Although he could criticize Dante too, Yeats more often made him into a foil to the high romantics, an heroic predecessor free from their faults, which were usually those of Yeats at the time, and embodying a near-perfect achievement at which Yeats coincidentally aimed. This happened during two principal periods. In the 1890’s Yeats saw Dante as the aesthetic figure of Rossetti’s paintings and translations or Blake’s illustrations (on which Yeats wrote a long essay), marred only by the tinge of moralism which Blake had detected. But Dante atoned for that by incorporating into his art national and folk elements, just as Yeats diligently sought to ground romanticism in his own native soil. His second period of intense interest in Dante spans the decade from composition in 1915 of “Ego Dominus Tuus,” whose title comes from Rossetti’s translation of the Vita Nuova, to publication of the first version of A Vision in 1925, where Dante appears in Yeats’s own phase seventeen. But by then Yeats had grown to prize the dramatic qualities he missed in his 1921 comment on Rossetti’s picture. Now Dante emerged as a poet of successful self-dramatization through mask, in contrast to the hapless Keats of “Ego Dominus Tuus,” and of acceptance of dramatic conflict in the world, in contrast to the belabored Shelley of A Vision. Yeats not only projected onto Dante his own great mature goal of Unity of Being but also traced the related concepts of antithetical completion and a Vision of Evil back to him. His lifelong sympathetic portrayal resulted in a figure of varied and increasing importance. After exploring the romantic origins of Yeats’s interest, this essay analyzes his continual transformations of Dante into a perfected romantic exemplifying his own poetic programs and concludes with his prime poetic adaptations of his predecessor.

Literary history sanctions Yeats’s association of Dante with the romantics, for in England the romantics rediscovered Dante after centuries of neglect. That information surprises most modern readers, conditioned directly or indirectly by Eliot’s influential description of Dante as “anti-romantic.” Yet after Chaucer’s overt allegiance, Dante’s reputation began a long decline in England and reached a nadir in the early eighteenth century. By 1600, Eliot’s admired Donne, for instance, spoke for many of his contemporaries when he “flung away Dant[e] the Italian a man pert enough to bee beloved & to[o] much to beeleeved.”

3. As quoted by F. P. Wilson, “A Supplement to Toynbee’s Dante in English Literature,” in Italian Studies III (1946), 50–64. Wilson’s work supplements Paget Toynbee’s immense Dante in English Literature from Chaucer to Cary (London: Methuen, 1909), 2 vols., which reprints every mention of Dante he could find by an English man of letters. For the convenience of the reader, I have cited Wilson and Toynbee in preference to a variety of separate texts.
In contrast, Milton—who became the great precursor of the romantics and perennial bête noir of Eliot—found few sympathizers for his more favorable view of Dante. By the neoclassic period, Chesterfield provided in this as in so much else an accurate register of public taste in citing Dante as an “obscure and difficult” author who “certainly does not think clearly”: “Though I formerly knew Italian extremely well, I could never understand him; for which reason I had done with him, fully convinced that he was not worth the pains necessary to understand him.” Many Augustans shared Chesterfield’s censures and found Dante not merely difficult but even crabbed and scholastic. Further, Dante ran roughshod over neoclassic rules and refinements. He seemed bizarre and gothic, capable of occasional power but too often lacking design and decorum. Horace Walpole, for example, lambasted Dante with special fervor as part of a general denunciation of all epic poets but Homer: “Dante was extravagant, absurd, disgusting, in short a Methodist parson in Bedlam.” But by the end of the century a counter-movement had already set in. If Dante was often rude and unpolished, he could also be sublime and original. The age found its favorite grotesque episode in the story of Ugolino, of which Joshua Reynolds did a famous painting in 1773, and its favorite tender one in the history of Paolo and Francesca. Blake later illustrated these two famous episodes, Shelley helped translate one of them, and they both attracted Yeats.

The romantic period transformed the perverse but pathetic Dante of the Augustans into a powerful visionary fit to rank with Milton and Shakespeare. He acquired immense prestige both for his own achievement and as an antidote to neoclassic norms. The romantics paid repeated tribute to him: one thinks, for example, of Coleridge’s 1818 lecture on Dante, Wordsworth’s sonnet on Dante’s seat in Florence, Byron’s *Dante’s Prophecy*, Keats’s selection of Dante as sole text for a walking tour, Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*, and the aged Blake learning Italian expressly to read Dante. For Yeats, Blake’s series of illustrations and Shelley’s remarks on Dante in the *Defence* (his favorite critical text) dominated all others. From both he would have learned not just praise but the dynamics of distortion, for Blake’s designs embodied intermittent “correction” of Dante’s legalism and Shelley’s analysis a selective emphasis on Dante as a poet wholly dedicated to love.

As Dante’s reputation grew so did the number of his readers, both in the original and in translation. The first full rendering of *The Divine Comedy* into English appeared only in 1802, while Cary’s more influential one followed in 1814. Coleridge’s praise of Cary’s work in his own 1818 lecture touched off that explosion of public interest which sold a thousand copies at once, led to the first of many new editions, and eventually earned Cary a tomb in Westminster Abbey. All the great

4. Toynbee, I, 255.
5. Toynbee, I, 341.
romantics read Cary's version, as did Yeats after them, and most praised it extravagantly.\textsuperscript{6} By 1887 a critic could observe that "from that time forward no man aiming at literary reputation thought his education complete unless he had read Dante in Cary or the original." Young men aiming at such reputation in 1887 included Yeats, who knew no Italian. He read first Cary and then Charles Lancelot Shadwell for the \textit{Comedy} (at least the two parts of it which Shadwell translated) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti for the \textit{Vita Nuova} and lyrics. "I am no Dante scholar, and I but read him in Shadwell or in Dante Rossetti," announced Yeats in 1917.\textsuperscript{8} To read those and other nineteenth-century translators was not to read Dante, but to read a Dante filtered through a style and diction derived from romantic practice. The romantics shaped Yeats's view of Dante not only through their influential pronouncements but also through their impact upon a century of translation.

Nineteenth-century self-consciousness about its recovery of Dante and an increasing tendency to aestheticize him came together in an essay that Yeats read near the start of his career, Walter Pater's 1892 introduction to Shadwell's \textit{Purgatory}. Here again, as in his better-known pronouncements on intensity and the ecstatic moment in \textit{The Renaissance} (which he dedicated to Shadwell), Pater anticipates Yeats's early position. He began by citing Voltaire's hostility as reflecting "the general unfitness of the last century in regard to the Middle Age, of whose spirit Dante is the central embodiment."\textsuperscript{9} But Pater detected more than a mere taste for medievalism in his own generation's interest. Dante to them articulated the chief concerns of the nineteenth century itself. In particular, Dante displayed the "minuteness" of observation and fine shades of expression necessary to render not merely the external world but, more importantly, the mental phenomena which Pater calls "subjectivities." Ever since Hallam's essay on Tennyson, of course, Victorian critics had found their favorite "subjective" poets in Keats and Shelley, whose impact they rightly saw first on early Tennyson and Browning and then


\textsuperscript{7} E. H. Plumptre, ed., \textit{Works of Dante} (London, 1887), II, 440, as quoted by Doughty, p. 138. Plumptre was Dean of Wells and himself a translator of Dante.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Mythologies} (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 329. Hereafter cited as M. Yeats knew other translations as well. All quotations from Dante in the present essay come from versions known to Yeats or, where certain identification is lacking, at least from those accessible to him.

on Rossetti and others. To that tradition Pater tried to graft religious enthusiasm and relevance to "life": "A minute sense of the external world and its beauties, a minute sense of the phenomena of the mind, of what is beautiful and of interest there, a demand for wide and cheering outlooks in religion, for a largeness of spirit in its application to life:—these are the special points of contact between Dante and the genius of our own century." Yeats, like many of his cohorts in the Rhymer’s Club of the 1890’s, tended to splinter Pater’s subjectivity from his social sanctions. For most of the decade Yeats lauded a perceptually sensitive Dante and lamented the religious orthodoxy and engagement with practical life which seemed to stain his subjectivity.

Inspired by Rossetti’s famous painting of Dante’s Dream, Yeats early assimilated the Vita Nuova to fin-de-siècle etiolations of romanticism, but until Pater’s essay he thought of the Divine Comedy—when he bothered to think of it at all—as a remote, imposing structure showing by contrast the smallness and yet the subtlety of modern poetry. "Modern writers, the great no less than the small among them, have been heavily handicapped by being born in a lyric age, and thereby compelled for the most part to break up their inspiration into many glints and glimmers, instead of letting it burn in one steady flame," he wrote in obvious recollection of the conclusion to The Renaissance. "It is true that they have their compensations, for the glints and glimmers find their way into many a corner and cranny that never could be reached by the great light of a Divine Comedy or an Iliad...." 10 Such thinking led to a hole and corner aestheticism, in which the modern poet refined his sensibility sheltered from the glare of his great predecessors. Yeats could not long hold that stance. Pater revealed to him that Dante, too, ranked with subjective artists, albeit marked by more rigorous religion and more direct involvement with life than the fin-de-siècle norm. Yeats for the rest of his life would puzzle over the relation between Dante’s public system and his personal subjectivity. He at first thought that Dante’s vast structures limited imagination and only later came to consider that they liberated it.

Yeats’s early and derivative wave of interest in Dante crested in his essays on "William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy" (1896) and "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897), now paired in Ideas of Good and Evil. Like Yeats’s other major statements on Dante, these first ones contrast him with a leading romantic poet. The essay on illustrations treats Blake more sympathetically than Dante, while the later one more typically makes Dante into an ideal romantic poet. The present text of Ideas of Good and Evil obscures this chronological progression both by reversing the order of the essays and by dating each of

them 1897; in fact, "William Blake and his Illustrations" appeared a year earlier, in *The Savoy* for July, August, and September of 1896. The essay has three parts: an opening section, "His Opinions on Art," explains Blake's admiration for definite outline, minute particulars, and exuberant energy; "His Opinions on Dante" contrasts the systems of the two visionaries; and the final "The Illustrators of Dante" berates Stradanus, Genelli, Schuler, Flaxman, Signorelli, and Gustave Doré ("a noisy and demagogic art") but praises Botticelli, Giulio Clovio, the little-known Adolph Stürler, and of course Blake. Yeats had known Blake's series of 102 illustrations to the *Comedy* at least since the early nineties, when he had praised that unfinished final work in both his editions of Blake.¹²

The essay interpreted both Blake and Dante as ancestors of nineteenth-century aesthetes. Yeats sounds like Hallam in arguing that Blake "strove to embody more subtle raptures, more elaborate intuitions than any before him," and he imitates Pater in valuing "'the minute particulars of life,' the little fragments of space and time, which are flooded by beautiful emotion" (*E&I* 127, 135). The phrases describe not the frenzied Blake of Yeats's maturity, who beat upon the wall till truth obeyed his call, but a Blake seen through the spectacles of late Victorian subjectivity. Yeats consigned Dante to the same camp. He disparaged those who would distinguish Blake's world from Dante's, "as if Dante's world were more than a mass of symbols of colour and form and sound which put on humanity, when they arouse some mind to an intense and romantic life that is not theirs" (*E&I* 141). This view reduces Dante to a source of exquisite sensory stimulation which the spectator can anthropomorphize, as Yeats liked to do in the manner of Rossetti. It also reduces the possible poetic adaptation of Dante to local effects.

Eager to preserve Dante's subjectivity, Yeats rejected his broader system under guise of comparing it to Blake's. He fleshed out Blake's scattered comments on Dante into a diabolical reading of the Italian parallel to Blake's own transformation of Milton. "Dante saw devils where I saw none," said Blake. "I see good only" (*E&I* 131). In Yeats's sympathetic elaboration, Dante emerged as a great poet contaminated by a philosophy of judgement and punishment which secretly derived from the absorption in worldly affairs which it sought to condemn; Dante had mistaken Satan, the true architect of his Hell, for his divinity, and in symbolizing God by the Primum Mobile he chose the symbol farthest removed from the human form divine. This diabolical reading held that "Dante, who deified law, selected its antagonist, passion, as the most important of sins," but that "Blake, who deified imaginative freedom,

held ‘corporeal reason’ for the most accursed of things” (*E&I* 139). Against this it is futile to argue that Dante, as a Christian, neither deifies law nor makes passion the most important sin (indeed, in both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* passion is the least severe sin), for Yeats does not really mean to criticize Dante. He means to convince himself that his own preoccupation with abstract system menaces his creative life as poet. He in fact shared Dante’s belief in a spiritual order existing independently of man, and his salvation as artist came when he learned to use that order to free rather than fetter his own imagination.

If Yeats’s essay did not advance the state of Dante scholarship, it did contribute to Dante studies in a way which unfortunately backfired upon the controversial *Savoy*. The only Blakean illustrations to the *Comedy* already available were the seven plates he had managed to engrave before his death. Along with two of those engravings—*The Circle of Thieves* and Yeats’s favorite, *Paolo and Francesca*—the *Savoy* printed for the first time eight of Blake’s other designs as accompaniment to the essay.\(^{13}\) The reproductions both disseminated these important illustrations to an influential audience and led to the failure of the magazine. W. H. Smith and Son, the booksellers who controlled the railway stalls, objected to the frankness of the designs and refused henceforth to carry *The Savoy*. As Yeats tells the story, Smith’s manager objected particularly to Blake’s version of *Antaeus Setting Virgil and Dante upon the Verge of Cocytus*, which he apparently mistook for a Beardsley drawing and feared would offend young ladies (*A* 323). Symons as editor lamented this philistinism in his farewell to his readers.\(^{14}\) To Yeats the episode provided another sad example of the conflict between elite art and a mass audience.

Blake did not long have the best of Dante in Yeats’s prose. Yeats had made a pass at impartiality even in the essay on illustrations to the *Comedy*. Although clearly sympathetic to the diabolical reading, he claimed to have taken Blake’s side simply because Dante enjoyed so much greater public knowledge. “By thus contrasting Blake and Dante by the light of Blake’s paradoxical wisdom, and as though there was no important truth hung from Dante’s beam of the balance, I but seek to interpret a little-understood philosophy rather than one incorporate in the thought and habits of Christendom,” he insisted ingenuously (*E&I* 134). The next year Yeats redressed the balance in his second and shorter Blake essay. The truth that weighed heaviest from Dante’s beam turned out to be the very use of material incorporate in the thought and

---

\(^{13}\) The eight included the watercolors of *The Passing of Dante and Virgil through the Portico of Hell; Angry Spirits Fighting in the Waters of the Styx; Antaeus Setting Virgil and Dante upon the Verge of Cocytus; Dante and Uberti; Dante and Virgil Climbing to the Foot of the Mountain of Purgatory; Dante, Virgil and Statius; The Car of Beatrice;* and John Linnell’s tracing of Blake’s drawing for *The Car Following the Seven Candlesticks*. For Yeats’s projected use of the Paolo and Francesca as frontispiece to *Ideas of Good and Evil* see *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 377; hereafter cited as *Lett.*

habits of Christendom noted a year earlier. Towards the end of his short "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897) Yeats invoked Dante to explain Blake’s continuing inaccessibility:

[Blake] spoke confusedly and obscurely because he spoke of things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world about him. He was a symbolist who had to invent his symbols; and his counties of England, with their correspondence to tribes of Israel, and his mountains and rivers, with their correspondence to parts of a man's body, are arbitrary. . . . He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand. Had he been a Catholic of Dante's time he would have been well content with Mary and the angels; or had he been a scholar of our time he would have taken his symbols . . . from Norse mythology; or . . . Welsh mythology . . . or have gone to Ireland and chosen for his symbols the sacred mountains, along whose sides the peasant still sees enchanted fires, and the divinities which have not faded from the belief . . . and have been less obscure because a traditional mythology stood on the threshold of his meaning. (E&I 114)

Through the example of Blake, that passage analyzes a major obstacle for modern poets more acutely than it proposes a remedy. Although Blake's symbolism owes more to tradition than Yeats allowed, he not only invented his own myth but thought that he had to in order to avoid enslavement by another man's. Yet avoiding enslavement also meant avoiding easy accessibility. So did construction of the myths of most modern poets. Pound's correlation of disparate traditions, Eliot's adaptation of Indian, Christian, and Middle Eastern fertility rites in The Waste Land, or even Stevens' attempt to evolve a supreme fiction, all rank with Blake's mythopoetic achievement but similarly lack the ready comprehension which Dante's adaptation of Catholic myth bore for readers of his time. Yeats sought to ground his own work in Irish soil and continually claimed to have corrected romanticism by fastening it to national mythology. "I could not endure, however, an international art, picking stories and symbols where it pleased," he wrote of himself at the time of Oisin. "Might I not . . . create some new Prometheus Unbound; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in Prometheus' stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulben? Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill" (A 194). But Yeats's proposed remedy works only a little better than the cosmopolitanism he detested. Even in his own time his use of Irish material caused problems even among Irish readers, most of whom learned about Oisin or Finn from recent books rather than from ongoing tradition. And Blake would not have been more accessible had he taken his symbols from Norse, Welsh, or Irish tradition. They would have caused his non-Norse readers, say, as much trouble as Yeats's Celticism has made for his non-Irish ones. Our time offers no counterpart to Dante's advantages.

Yeats's drive to anchor romanticism in Irish tradition led to his early insistence that Dante drew his Christian materials partly from folklore. His favorite example came from Inferno XIII, whose souls imprisoned
in trees he likened to native Celtic myth.¹⁵ In a burst of assimilative enthusiasm he described Dante, along with Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Keats as “folklorists with musical tongues” and insisted that Dante exploited folk sources “continuously.” Yeats offers such parallels and claims more as literary propaganda than as scholarly proof, and in utilizing his own native folklore he usually does not mean to imitate Dante. Rather, he invokes Dante as sanction for his own enterprise. For Yeats, folklore implied not just a ready-made audience but contact with vital imaginative tradition which had survived the onslaughts of European science and mechanism. “Europe belongs to Dante and the witches’ sabbath, not to Newton,” he affirmed later (Lett 807).

Dante had little direct impact on Yeats’s early verse, but the one clear adaptation, the much-revised “The Countess Cathleen in Paradise,” follows the precept of grounding broader vision in local lore. Even the final title shows that, for Cathleen belongs to Irish legend but the vision of Paradise to Dante. The original (1891) version of the poem sounded more like Rossetti than Dante, offering Cathleen as Blessed Damozel in its last quatrain:

She goes down the floor of Heaven,
Shining bright as a new lance;
And her guides are angels seven,
While young stars about her dance.¹⁶

Yeats brought the lines closer to Dante in his 1895 revision:

With white feet of angels seven,
Her white feet go glimmering,
And above the deep of heaven,
Flame on flame and wing on wing.

The vision of white redeemed spirits with flame and wings in Paradise derives from Paradiso XXXI:

Faces had they of flame, and wings of gold:
The rest was whiter than the driven snow;
And, as they flitted down into the flower . . . (Cary 514)

Yeats indicated his Dantesque source in a 1927 letter, where he discussed first the flames of purgatory and then Beatrice before quoting the final version of the poem—in which he likened Cathleen to a dancer—and then asking, “is there jealousy in such dancers or did Dante find them as little so as colour is of colour?” (Lett 731–32). Cathleen thus becomes a surrogate Beatrice, entering into the angelic company of the paradisal rose. The early context of the song in the play The Countess Cathleen supports the association, for after singing the lyric the First Spirit ex-

¹⁵. Uncoll 141. The following quotations come from pp. 284 and 328.
plains that he and his company must return to the "rose by the seat of
God, / Which is among the angelic multitude," just as Dante's canto
opens by describing the rose in which the spirits abide: "In fashion, as a
snow white rose, lay then / Before my view the saintly multitude."
Yeats, of course, had early known Dante's rose of the Paradiso, but
except for this one lyric it seems not to have affected his own Rose
poems. Besides gaelicizing Dante and following Pater's appreciation of
his subtle detail, the poem evinces Blake's "correction" of Dante's
legalism, for the Countess enters paradise instead of an inferno because
she has sold her soul to the devils out of love for her starving dependents.

Brooding upon the hostile reception to The Countess Cathleen led
Yeats to his most habitual use of Dante during the decade and a half
from 1900 to 1914. Hostile nationalist critics had attacked the Countess
and other plays for tarnishing the image of Ireland; an Irishwoman
would not, like Cathleen, sell her soul to the devil. Dante offered a
means of riposte against demands for a cardboard virtue. "The greater
portion of the Divine Comedy is a catalogue of the sins of Italy," wrote
Yeats in Samhain for 1905. "Imbued with Shelley's Defence, Yeats
thought that a poet could best shape his country by refusing passing
partisanship and instead developing national imagination. Dante had
done that. "A nation can only be created in the deepest thought of its
deepest minds. . . . They create national character," he wrote in 1910.
"Goethe, Shakespeare, Dante, Homer have so created." Yeats, like
Joyce, wanted to forge the uncreated conscience of his race. It was a ro-
manic goal, and for the modern poet meant alienation from his society.
A year before describing the Comedy as a catalogue of Italian vice Yeats
argued that "there never have been men more unlike an Englishman's
idea of himself than Keats or Shelley. . . . We call certain minds
creative because they are among the moulders of their nation and are
not made upon its mould" (E 158).

As he remade his mind and art during this period, Yeats more and
more came to value the interrelation of disparate emotions through a
consistent system of imagery. The moulder of a nation had to organize
its psyche. He again paired Dante with a romantic writer to illustrate his
discovery:

All art is sensuous, but when a man puts only his contemplative nature and his more
vague desires into his art, the sensuous images through which it speaks become broken,
fleeting, uncertain, or are chosen for their distance from general experience, and all grows
unsubstantial and fantastic. . . . If we are to sojourn there that world must grow consist-
tent with itself, emotion must be related to emotion by a system of ordered images, as in
the Divine Comedy. . . . Shelley seemed to Matthew Arnold to beat his ineffectual wings

17. The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York:
"Dante is said to have unified Italy"—and E&I 341.
The passage reveals more than mere progress beyond an earlier conception of Dante’s work as a congeries of aesthetic moments to a new appreciation of its architectonic precision. Like much of Yeats’s criticism, it masks an astute self-evaluation under guise of considering poets to whom he felt akin. The opening description of an unsubstantial or fantastic world resulting from fleeting images based only on the poet’s contemplative nature and vaguer desires fits Yeats’s mature conception of his own early work. Although he had tried to deploy symbols like rose and cross, and although a scholar as erudite as Allen R. Grossman can discern a systematic structure in the early work,20 most readers find a deficiency like that described above. More importantly, Yeats needed to find it. He needed later to distort that early work through heightening its defects, as he needed to distort the precursors who inspired it, to free himself to create his own mature achievement. The pairing here of Dante and Shelley both joins two poets whom Yeats could use as models and implies why he became increasingly hostile to Shelley but receptive to Dante. For just as Yeats had written earlier “in imitation of Shelley” (A 66), so does he stand closer to him in his manner of interrelating images. Dante had constructed his imaginative system out of traditional Christianity, but Shelley had massed his towers, rivers, caves, and stars from more eclectic sources. So, too, did Yeats garner the recurrent symbols of his mature phase—which he once identified as sun, moon, tower, mask, tree, and bird21—and he could find a benevolent because more distant sanction in Dante while he saw a threatening because closer similarity in Shelley.

Fascination with the most important image for a poet’s own character, the mask, powered Yeats’s resurgence of interest in Dante for the decade from 1915 to 1925. One of the most complete early formulations, “Ego Dominus Tuus,” makes Dante a paradigm of the poet successfully creating an appropriate mask. The title itself comes from the first commandment by way of the Vita Nuova, which Yeats cites in Rossetti’s translation at the start of his gloss on the poem in Per Amica Silentia Lunae (M 326). Early in the Vita Nuova Love comes to Dante’s chamber in a dream vision during which He speaks many things, of which “ego dominus tuus” becomes one of the few Dante can understand and the only one he records. Thomas Vance has shrewdly surmised the importance of the passage: “Dante’s fatal commitment of his

life to the love of Beatrice is identical with his initiation as a poet," for after this scene follows the first sonnet. But the application to Yeats lies not in the parallel, as Vance supposes, but in the contrast. For Dante's Love, as desire for the earthly Beatrice which becomes caritas for the heavenly Beatrice, Yeats substitutes the poet's passion for his anti-self. Yeats's commitment not to his old love for Maud Gonne but to his new dialectic between artist and work initiates the new phase of his poetic career.

The poem itself centers on the contrast between Dante and Keats, from which Dante again emerges as perfected romantic. Ille corrects Hic's naive notion by arguing that Dante created in his poetry an image of an anti-self opposite to his ordinary personality:

\*Hic.*
And yet
The chief imagination of Christendom,
Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind's eye than any face
But that of Christ.

\*Ille.*
And did he find himself
Or was the hunger that had made it hollow
A hunger for the apple on the bough
Most out of reach? and is that spectral image
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?
I think he fashioned from his opposite
An image that might have been a stony face
Staring upon a Bedouin's horse-hair roof
From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned
Among the coarse grass and the camel-dung.
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,
Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by a man.

In contrast, Keats created not an anti-self but simply a satisfied heightening of his normal character:

\*Hic.*
And yet
No one denies to Keats love of the world;
Remember his deliberate happiness.

\*Ille.*
His art is happy, but who knows his mind?
I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
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. (VP 368-370)

This ascribes to Dante and Keats the same drive—a hunger for things of the world, represented by Dante's lechery and Keats's more generalized luxury. The difference lies in the resultant work. While Keats's luxuriant song became a substitute for the satisfactions denied him by life, Dante's severe ecstasy became antithetical to the worldly satisfaction he craved: his work incorporated the dialectic between his hollow and human selves. "All happy art seems to me that hollow image, but when its lineaments express also the poverty or the exasperation that set its maker to the work, we call it tragic art," explained Yeats. "Keats but gave us his dream of luxury; but while reading Dante, we never long escape the conflict..." (M 329). This interpretation catches Keats's desire for sensuous fulfillment but misses his crucial insistence upon the obliteration of ego through negative capability. It works a little better for Dante, about whom we have less biographical information, though Yeats stands on safer ground in the prose account when he yokes lust to political anger as twin motives. But the interpretation works best of all for Yeats himself, who has again performed a self-examination under cover of literary criticism. The description of Keats closely fits Yeats's own art of the nineties, that luxuriant song produced by a poet perennially nervous about his ancestry and education, and the portrait of Dante limns the kind of poet Yeats wanted to become (and who found in Dante "my own mood between spiritual excitement, and the sexual torture" [Lett 731]). Indeed, the contrast between Keats and Dante opens by opposing "the gentle, sensitive mind" of modern aesthetes to the sterner "nonchalance of the hand" Yeats wanted to recover from past artists.

Yeats culled the information for his portrait mostly from readily accessible literary sources, principally Dante's own work, but commentators have erred in ascribing his image of Dante in exile ("To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread") directly to Cacciaguida's famous description in Paradiso XVII:

Thou shalt prove
How salt the savour is of other's bread;
How hard the passage, to descend and climb
By other's stairs. (Cary, 446)

Yeats's lines ultimately derive from Dante's, of course, but they do so by way of Rossetti's paraphrase in his poem Dante at Verona. Rossetti used Cacciaguida's remarks as epigraph but transformed them into Yeats's diction in two freer renderings during the poem itself: "Of the

23. Yeats knew Boccaccio's life of Dante; for example, he quotes his remark that "Always both in youth and maturity [Dante] found room among his virtues for lechery" (M 330). In the same place Yeats quoted Rossetti's translation of Guido Cavalcanti's reproach to Dante. The conjunction of an "apple" on a "bough" out of reach occurs in Shadwell's version of Purgatory XXVII, "That apple sweet, from bough to bough / By man so dearly sought..." (Shadwell 407). I owe this last point to my student, Mr. David Spurr, who has written a useful essay on "A Celtic Commedia: Dante in Yeats's Poetry," Rackham Literary Studies (Spring 1977), pp. 99-116.
steep stairs and bitter bread” (line 22) and “that bitter bread; / And . . . those stairs” (lines 501-02). Yeats clearly remembered Rossetti in attaching “bitter” to “bread” and the demonstrative adjective (though plural instead of singular) to “stairs.” Rossetti’s poem itself dramatized the role of Dante that most fascinated Yeats, the visionary poet in exile.

Dante’s life showed the penchant for solitude which Yeats ascribed to all subjective artists. Exile had forced Dante into gregarious circumstances which Yeats as public man knew well. They sprang from both poverty and politics. Just as Dante had needed to please princes and courtiers, so did Yeats contend first with the Abbey company and audiences and then with the duties of a senator and Nobel Prize winner. In 1919 and again in 1925 he cited sympathetically Dante’s autobiographical remarks in the first treatise of the Convito: “Dante in that passage in the Convito which is, I think, the first passage of poignant autobiography in literary history . . . in describing his poverty and his exile counts as his chief misfortune that he has had to show himself to all Italy and so publish his human frailties that men who honoured him unknown honour him no more. Lacking means, he had lacked seclusion, and he explains that men such as he should have but few and intimate friends.”

By 1925 the Convito seemed properly not the first “poignant” but the first “modern” autobiography. It presented the earliest self-conscious artist of the modern gyre, whose psyche operated in terms of the dialectic of will and antithetical mask; by impressing that dialectic upon an abstract system, he achieved in the Divine Comedy the first modern victory of personality. Such a poet found his artistic mask in the passionate quester who stood apart from society. As man he sought to retire from partisan rancor to philosophic solitude. Yeats particularly approved Dante’s refusal of a tainted Florentine pardon in the Ninth Epistle, from which he twice quoted to his own correspondents: “Cannot I anywhere look upon the stars and think the sweet thoughts of philosophy?” (Lett 849, 882).

Yeats’s own sweet thoughts of philosophy matured into A Vision, which contains the last of his major discussions contrasting Dante to a romantic. The entire work has a Dantesque side. In translating the Comedy Cary had chosen The Vision as title, with Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri as subtitle. More importantly, Yeats structured his work around an abstract system almost as geometric as Dante’s, and he, too, selected historical personages to exemplify its classifications. He hoped that his esoteric system would free his imagination as he thought that medieval Christianity had freed Dante’s. “I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create
as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the
one history, and that the soul's," he wrote in his original dedication.
"The Greeks certainly had such a system, and Dante—though Boccac­
cio thought him a bitter partisan and therefore a modern abstract man—
and I think no man since" (1925 V xi). Most important of all, Yeats
ascribed the highest goal of his system—the Unity of Being resulting
from the antithetical mask's capacity to unite us to our true selves—to
Dante: "the self so sought is that Unity of Being compared by Dante in
the Convito to that of 'a perfectly proportioned human body' " (V 82).
As scholars have realized despite Yeats's persistent assertions,25 Dante
does not make such a comparison there. Why Yeats should thus repeat­
edly err in citing a source for one of his principal doctrines remains a
mystery, but I should like to suggest that he may have faultily remem­
bered two passages from the Third Treatise, which in an 1887 transla­
tion run: "Man is the most wonderful, considering how in one form the
Divine Power joined three natures; and in such a form how subtly har­
monized his body must be. It is organized for all his distinct powers;
wherefore, because of the great concord there must be, among so many
organs, to secure their perfect response to each other . . ." "and the
beauty of the body is the result of its members in proportion as they are
fitly ordered . . ."26 Yeats's phantom translation accords well with
both these passages and the general tenor of the Convito, and his mis­
taken lineage for his cherished concept signifies less than does his obvi­
ous desire to claim a Dantesque ancestry for it.

The habit of contrasting Dante with a romantic poet as alternate self­
images culminated in the crucial formulation of phase seventeen in A
Vision, the same phase to which Yeats privately assigned himself. The
1925 text used Dante and Shelley as sole examples (the brief paragraph
on Landor was added for the 1937 revision). Yeats calls the man of this
phase Daimonic because he can most easily attain Unity of Being. The
Daimonic man does that by finding a true mask of simplification
through intensity, which allows his creative imagination to forge an
image of desire in defiance of the inevitable loss which constitutes his
fate. As Yeats explains, "This Mask may represent intellectual or sexual
passion; seem some Ahasuerus or Athanase; be the gaunt Dante of the
Divine Comedy; its corresponding Image may be Shelley's Venus
Urania, Dante's Beatrice, or even the Great Yellow Rose of the Para­
diso" (V 141). This illuminates a genuine if obvious affinity between
Dante and Shelley, who admired him; the corresponding mask for Yeats
would be the lover in his early verse and the towered philosopher of his
later work. But the investigation goes increasingly awry in contrasting
the relation between the life and art of the two poets. Yeats lambastes

25. For other instances see E&I 483 and 509, E 356, A 190, and V 258 and 291.
1887), pp. 126 and 156.
Shelley for inability to “see anything that opposes him as it really is”: Shelley’s millenarian hopes for the future of mankind constituted a false image for the mask and thus led him into caricatures of evil, mental instability, vague and cloudy art, and automatism rather than poetic invention. I have argued elsewhere that these strictures so clash with both the sceptical Shelley and with Yeats’s earlier and more accurate views on him that they become intelligible only as an attempt to throw off the poet who had “shaped my life”\textsuperscript{27} and to emerge into artistic independence. The critique fits Yeats’s own work of the 1890’s better than it does Shelley’s. Correspondingly, the portrait of Dante, while more accurate historically, offers principally a self-image of Yeats as he wished to become:

Dante, who lamented his exile as of all possible things the worst for such as he, and sighed for his lost solitude, and yet could never keep from politics, was, according to a contemporary, such a partisan, that if a child, or a woman, spoke against his party he would pelt this child or woman with stones. Yet Dante, having attained, as poet, to Unity of Being, as poet saw all things set in order, had an intellect that served the Mask alone, that compelled even those things that opposed it to serve, and was content to see both good and evil. . . . Dante suffering injustice and the loss of Beatrice, found divine justice and the heavenly Beatrice, but the justice of Prometheus Unbound is a vague propagandist emotion and the women that await its coming are but clouds. (V 143-44)

While truer to its overt subject than the remarks on Shelley, this account epitomizes the poetic goals of the mature Yeats. He longed for a Unity of Being to render both good and evil convincingly rather than to produce the vague emotion and cloudy women he had grown to suspect in his early work. We have only to remember incidents like Dante’s pleasure in Filippo Argenti’s suffering in Inferno VIII or his abuse of Bocca degli Abbati in Inferno XXXII to see that Yeats subtly distorts Dante’s view of evil. Not only does the entire Comedy share a structure which condemns evil, but the Inferno shows in detail the replacement of Dante’s initial tears and sympathy for the inmates of Hell by a sterner moralism. Yeats overstates his case in developing his true contention that Dante’s view of both good and evil carries conviction. Yeats’s phrase “content to see” applies better to the mature work he was then writing or would write, to “The Gyres” for example, in which acceptance on occasion degenerates into indifference or acquiescence.

Often Yeats used the notion of a Vision of Evil to compare Dante with other writers. He capitalized the phrase in A Vision and elsewhere to indicate that he meant not a mere vision of evil but rather a vision of both good and evil informing “the world as a continual conflict” (V 144). Need to divorce himself from his chief precursors led to continual misperception that the romantics, like Shelley, lacked such a quality.

\textsuperscript{27} In Yeats and Shelley (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 199–218; pp. 218–222 discuss the relation between Shelley and Yeats as critics of Dante. The quotation about Shelley shaping Yeats’s life is from E&I 424.
But two writers to whom he also liked to compare Dante had it—Villon and Balzac. By accurately perceiving evil, both enabled themselves to detect an actual rather than imaginary good as well. They avoided the pitfalls of false optimism. “Had not Dante and Villon understood that their fate wrecked what life could not rebuild, had they lacked their Vision of Evil, had they cherished any species of false optimism, they could but have found a false beauty” (A 273) concluded Yeats. So, too, would have Balzac, “the only modern mind which has made a synthesis comparable to that of Dante” (E 269). The Comedie humaine had closed a counter-movement to the Divine Comedy (E&I 468), and Yeats saw his own work as heralding a return to Europe “upon its knees” before the supernatural. The Vision of Evil became a sort of litmus paper for determining whether a writer had achieved Unity of Being in his work. Poets like Dante or Shakespeare “sought no impossible perfection” either in the world or in their lives but only in their own artifice (M 333). The intellect of man was forced to choose.

Yeats's increasingly unfavorable comparisons of the romantics to Dante do not imply the same attitude as do those of T. S. Eliot. Writing often from a militant anti-romanticism, Eliot exemplified in Dante the order, morality, and maturity which he thought romantics would forever lack. In contrast, Yeats generally wrote from a pro-romantic position and saw Dante as a sort of perfected romantic realizing the romantics’ goals while avoiding their supposed failures in execution. Portions of his literary criticism became a disguised psychomachia, with Dante as exemplar of what Yeats wanted to become and the romantics of what he feared he had been. The resultant poetry owes less to Dante than does that of Eliot or Pound. Although Dante functions chiefly in Yeats’s critical speculations, he did affect some of the creative work, as we have already seen. Rather than rehearse the parallels, I should like instead to focus on the two most important cases, “The Second Coming” and “Byzantium,” to show Yeats’s difference from Dante before concluding with analysis of his one sustained effort at modern Dantesque composition, “Cuchulain Comforted.”

“The Second Coming” (VP 401) projects into poetry the prose pen-
chant for linking Dante with the romantics. Its principal literary allusions systematically reverse their sources. Just as the famous lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" counter the Last Fury’s speech in act one of *Prometheus Unbound* and the phrase "stony sleep" plays against Blake’s usage in *The Book of Urizen*, so do the opening lines

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer

both echo and revise the description of Geryon at the end of *Inferno* XVII:

As falcon, that hath long been on the wing,
But lure nor bird hath seen, while in despair
The falconer cries, 'Ah me! thou stoop' st to earth,'
Wearyed descends, whence nimbly he arose
In many an airy wheel, and lighting sits
At distance from his lord in angry mood. . . . (Cary 88-89)

Not only does Geryon’s flight trace a gyre, but his human head and animal body recall the shape of Yeats’s rough beast. The simile of a falcon refusing the command of his master particularly suits an image of fraud like Geryon, who shuttles between the circle of the violent and the malebolge of the fraudulent and malicious. Yeats carries over these associations into a view of history which radically opposes Dante’s own. “The Second Coming” suggests the Christian scheme of history even in its title. Yet it replaces the meaningful and finite span of that history with an endless and meaningless succession of cycles: the “second” coming could just as well be the “nth,” and is in fact the third implied by the poem. The wit of Yeats’s allusion lies in using a metaphor from one of the great Christian achievements of order to describe a disorder inaugurating a new historical phase which will reverse that of Christian civilization itself. Christianity is a truth for Dante but a source of metaphors for Yeats. 30

The use of Dantesque devices which reveal Yeats’s distance from his predecessor recurs in “Byzantium.” Not only does the speaker’s uncertainty about whether he confronts “an image, man or shade” recall Dante’s confusion about whether Virgil be “shade, or certain man” in *Inferno* I, but in earlier drafts the mummy functioned as a Virgil-like guide to the speaker. 31 The flames constitute the chief Dantesque echo in

30. Yeats had gotten into trouble by using Christian symbols in *The Countess Cathleen*, which we have already seen drew upon Dante. Recalling the protests that the play was anti-Catholic, Yeats wrote that “in using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities” (A 416).

the final version. They recall in several ways the flames and fire of *Purgatory* XXV-XXVII, whose presence burns even clearer in the prose sketch:

```
tall flames wind and unwind
And in the flames dance spirits, by that their agony made pure
And though they are all folded up in flame
It cannot singe a sleeve.
```

Rather than unravel the details in sources, I mean instead to emphasize two distinctions between Yeats’s polysemous symbolism and that of Dante. First, except for the “texts for exposition” of *A Vision*, Yeats’s practice seldom depends for interpretation on a pre-existent and homogenous body of doctrine which he can count on readers knowing or on a symbolic sense (as opposed to the particular meaning) which he can count on them to expect. As Dante explains in the letter to Can Grande, or in the opening of the *Convito*, his work follows the four recognized senses of medieval literature, usually referred to as the literal and the three general allegorical senses of tropological (pertaining to the individual), anagogical (pertaining to the afterlife), and formally allegorical (pertaining to the Church). Dante illustrates these by the famous example of the exodus from Egypt, but we could just as easily use the fires of his own Purgatory, which at once literally burn, tropologically show the purification of the soul from lust, anagogically the progression from body to spirit in the afterlife, and allegorically the redemption through Christ. No such scheme fits Yeats’s symbolism. He draws from diverse and often philosophically contradictory sources and elaborates his meaning in senses developed by the poem itself rather than standing apart from it. Thus, the fires of “Byzantium” pertain at least both to purification after death and to artistic creativity, but the poem itself must define those senses rather than operate in terms of the reader’s inherent expectation of them. Second, elevation of artistic process itself as a primary subject for the symbolism divides this poem from Dante. Dante, of course, often refers to his art and its difficulties, but concentration on creative aesthetic process as both subject and figurative sense seems a distinctively postromantic phenomenon which Yeats shares with many other modern poets.

Deepening steadily throughout his literary career, Yeats’s fascination with Dante culminated in a poem finished just two weeks before his death, “Cuchulain Comforted.” In frankly adapting Dante to the needs of a contemporary poet, that lyric forms a fit analogue to the stunning utilizations of Dante in the last major poem by Yeats’s idol Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, and by his rival Eliot, *Little Gidding*. Here is Yeats:

```
A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.
```
Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three
Came creeping up because the man was still.
And thereupon that linen-carrier said:
‘Your life can grow much sweeter if you will
Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;
Mainly because of what we only know
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

‘We thread the needles’ eyes, and all we do
All must together do.’ That done, the man
Took up the nearest and began to sew.

‘Now must we sing and sing the best we can,
But first you must be told our character:
Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain
Or driven from home and left to die in fear.’
They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common as before;
They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

This recalls Dante not only in its terza rima but also in its subject and setting, the fate of a famous personage in the afterlife. Its twenty-five lines seem a portion of a canto from the *Comedy*. The resemblance extends even to particulars. F. A. C. Wilson has suggested the appropriate similarity of this setting to the Valley of Negligent Rulers in *Purgatory* VII–VIII, while T. R. Henn first noticed the parallel between Yeats’s shades, who “thread the needles’ eyes,” and those of the sodomites who gaze “As an old tailor at his needle’s eye” (Cary 74) in *Inferno* XV.\(^{32}\)

Even in this most Dantesque of his poems Yeats shows a distance. The tailor image, in Dante’s poem a sign of the impaired perception of the squinting sodomites in contrast to the clearer sight of Virgil and Dante, becomes in Yeats’s a neutral or even positive activity of the cowards, which Cuchulain must imitate. The poem itself defines the range of application of its symbolism, with a slight assist from the eschatology of *A Vision* (Cuchulain appears to be in the state there known as the Shiftings, in which a man’s nature “is reversed” [V 231]).

---

Further, "Cuchulain Comforted" lacks the full structural support of the Comedy, in which Dante's placement of an episode itself directs exegesis. Yeats's lyric counterpart to the architectonics of epic must rely as best it can on reflections from other Cuchulain works, related imagery elsewhere—for instance, the bird and singing school of Byzantium—and its placement within the volume. Scholars have increasingly realized the thematic importance of Yeats's arrangement of poems within each book. In this case his manuscript list, discovered only after the present arrangement had been set posthumously, indicates that "Cuchulain Comforted" would have come fourth in a volume moving from the supernatural determinism and escape of "Under Ben Bulben" to the choice for reimmersion in experience of "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Even Cuchulain's acceptance of his new role in the poem prepares for that movement in ratifying by implication his "violent and famous" life on earth. In this respect Yeats's poem inverts the relation between life and death that would shortly inform the only comparable modern work, the Dantesque passage in Part II of Little Gidding. Whereas Eliot presents a bleak picture of natural senescence in implied contrast to supernatural salvation hereafter, Yeats projects a melancholy but acquiescent view of the afterlife which exalts by contrast Cuchulain's heroic life on earth.

In his crucial late tribute to Dante, Yeats himself emerges as the perfected romantic poet of his prose criticism. First, he has grounded his vision securely in Irish lore. The figure of Cuchulain carries the national particularity for which Yeats praised Dante in contrast to Blake. Second, he adopts the dialectic of the anti-self which he found lacking in Keats. Not only does Cuchulain himself form a mask for Yeats, but he also here turns into his own anti-self by joining the gregarious cowards instead of remaining a solitary hero. And finally, the poem displays the Vision of Evil which Yeats excoriated Shelley for lacking. Acceptance permeates the poem, as both Yeats and his hero accept the ignoble end of the noble warrior as a necessary working out of destiny. Cuchulain's willing submission strengthens both the sorrow of his present lot and the grandeur of his former state. Yeats as author at last saw all things set in order. He could now boast even more truly than he had in "The Tower":

I have prepared my peace
With learned Italian things.

University of Michigan
Ann Arbor