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“ Passionate Intensity ” : Commitment in William Butler Yeats’ poetry

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« **Passionate Intensity** »

Commitment in William Butler Yeats' poetry

**MAFFEIS
Olivier**

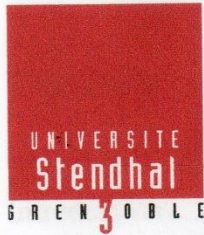
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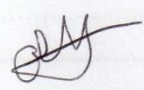
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INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats is one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He was loved by his readers and, as his winning of the 1923 Nobel Prize demonstrates, his genius was widely recognized by his peers. Another immensely talented poet and contemporary of Yeats, T. S. Eliot, talked of him as a “Master” and a committed artist who deeply influenced him. The notion of commitment is at the heart of Yeats’ life, at the heart of his work too, not to say of his creative process. In order to have a better understanding of how, why and to what extent his works were committed, we must look at his biography, at his life in general because, as he said in his poem entitled “To Ireland In The Coming Times” which he wrote in 1893: “I cast my heart into my rhymes”. Towards the end of his life, he added: “A poet always writes of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness” (W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 509). Without any doubt Yeats was politically, culturally, sentimentally and artistically committed. These four types of commitment will be the four main parts of this essay.

William Butler Yeats was born on June 13th, 1865 in Sandymount, County Dublin, Ireland. Only two years later the family moved to London, where he grew up. But his childhood was marked by the constant travelling between England and Ireland (during the holidays), and this dichotomy opposing England and Ireland became instrumental in his creation. He always said he hated England, and, as a child, dreamt only of returning to his beloved land of Ireland, which he idealised. In 1881, Yeats was sixteen, the family moved back to Dublin because of financial difficulties. Considering this childhood one question is raised: was Yeats truly an Irishman or an Anglo-Irish? He always considered himself an Irishman, for he truly loved Ireland. The country always influenced and inspired him, and his early works, which he started writing at the age of twenty, are deeply rooted in Irish mythology and beliefs, as well as “divine” locations praised by the poet: Lake Inisfree, Ben Bulbin, Thor Ballyllee... In the 1880s Nationalists were growing powerful in Ireland, and, in a way, Yeats defended them because he advocated “Cultural” nationalism. But those who fought for Home Rule in Ireland at the time were mostly Catholic nationalists and Yeats was not a Catholic, he was of the Protestant Ascendancy, a minority of landowners in Ireland known to exclude Catholics. It was always hard for a born protestant to fight for the independence of Ireland, and this remained a problem throughout his life.

As Yeats’ interest in the struggle for Irish Home Rule increased at the end of the 1880s he met someone who was to change his life forever: Maud Gonne. To be precise, he did not simply meet

a woman, for he also met one of the most inspiring feelings a poet can encounter as he was first struck by a powerful, overwhelming (and ultimately devastating) love. Maud Gonne was a 23 year-old actress, and a fierce militant for Ireland's independence. She was to become his muse for the rest of his life. He wrote many poems about her, and never really accepted the fact that she refused to marry him on several occasions. Melancholy for this unrequited love marked his late poems in particular, and this is what he had in mind when he wrote about remorse, lost love and loneliness. Unconditional love is indeed one of the most frequent themes of his poems. Even after a final refusal of the then widow Maud Gonne he did not give up on love though he focused on a new type of feeling: marital love, a new kind of inspiration for new poems.

Finally, the one thing he was most committed to during all his life was art. In his opinion art was so important in people's existences that he believed poets and painters should be humanity's leaders! Until the day he died he always tried to produce the best work possible. His love for beauty drove him to always look for new ways to write the most magnificent poems. As we shall see, art, to him, was actually a way to reach immortality.

Politics, culture, love and art: these are the four main aspects of Yeats' commitment in his poetical works. The four are intrinsically linked and often work together. For instance Maud Gonne, the love of his life, is often compared to Ireland itself in his poems. Much as love and culture are mingled, so politics is always close to culture (especially when one is dealing with Ireland), and art is a major element of a culture. These will therefore be the four main parts of this essay whose aim will be to discuss how deeply Yeats' different types of commitment mingle and how far they go. The first part will deal with political commitment, the most obvious and the most striking. Then we will discuss Yeats' poems from a cultural point of view, mentioning elements of the rich mythologies present in his poetry. Thirdly we will see how love in all its forms is dealt with in his poems. To finish with, the last part of this essay will focus on Yeats' powerful and far-reaching commitment to art itself.

I. Political Commitment

Ch1- Political views at the beginning of his career

1- Yeats, An Irish Nationalist?

Was Yeats a true Irish Nationalist at the beginning of his career? This is a tricky question. He joined the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood, ancestor of the IRA) in 1889 after meeting Maud Gonne. He first got political mainly for sentimental reasons, because he had fallen in love with “his” Helen (cf the poem “No Second Troy”). Yeats wanted the independence of Ireland, as “Easter 1916” makes explicit (“A terrible beauty is born”) but not necessarily by force. He wanted an elite of aristocratic poets or artists to govern Ireland, and not “violent” men like John MacBride (Maud Gonne’s husband since 1903, whom Yeats hated.) When he was twenty years old he was a nationalist and close to the Fenian brotherhood. But things changed during his lifetime, events that changed his world and more generally, the world. One should not forget that he was of the Protestant Ascendancy (heir to Protestants who emigrated to Ireland, who were a minority but were “helped” by the English.) This made it difficult for him to be an Irish nationalist since most of those who advocated the independence of Ireland were Roman Catholics. The majority of Irish Protestants were unionists. Even the love of his life Maud Gonne, who was like him of the Protestant Ascendancy, eventually converted to Catholicism, because she felt it was the price to pay to free the Irish from the British. Yeats thought differently. He thought that, as an Anglo-Irish and a Protestant he had more to offer, especially through culture, and that the Protestant Ascendancy had brought much to Irish Culture. But then again, a bit like William Blake, Yeats was more of a mystical figure than a true religious man.

As we shall see in the following part, culture was really important to him. But from a political viewpoint, he was clearly a *cultural* patriot, who believed his writings, his first poems set in Connemara, would change things, and that people reading his poems should feel more Irish and realize that, because Ireland had such history, culture and mythology, this country should be independent. Differences between Ireland and England were too numerous for them to stay together. Home Rule bills were always delayed by the English (because of the first world war for instance) so they could take care of the “Irish question” later. In this context Yeats wrote perhaps his most well-known poem (“Easter 1916”) on the event that took place at the Dublin General

Post Office on the 24th of April, 1916, when 500 men and women led by Patrick Pearse and James Connolly declared the independence of the Republic of Ireland. They fought for six days and the rebellion was crushed by the English. It was the most significant rebellion in Ireland since 1798 and Wolfe Tone. Sixteen men were executed, including, of course, Pearse and Connolly but also John MacBride, Maud Gonne's husband.

2- Early political poems

The poem "Easter 1916" in itself is a response to the event, a romantic response, a bit like Shelley's "Masks of anarchy" written on the occasion of the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester. It is also an answer to his previous poem "September 1913" where he regretted the lack of revolutionary spirit in Ireland (Allison, 192). It is not a coincidence if like "September 1913", "Easter 1916" has a refrain at the end of each stanza: "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, it's with O'leary in the grave" ("September 1913"); "changed utterly : a terrible beauty is born" ("Easter 1916"). The poem is divided into four stanzas, each ending with the refrain. This necessity to repeat, to say the same thing several times can reveal some sort of obsession the Irish people had, the obsession of freedom. The date of the event (24/4/(19)16) is included in the form of the poem; indeed there are stanzas of sixteen lines; stanzas of twenty four lines and the stanzas are divided into four lines units (Vendler, 2006, 80).

Yeats saw the return of Romantic Ireland in this event in a romantic fashion, he almost saw the Sublime in the rising: beautiful, but terrible. Maybe he also saw the ancient heroes of Ireland coming back, like Cuchulain. However he did not completely approve of what took place, and the oxymoron "terrible beauty" denotes the tragedy of the event. Maybe the price to pay was too high. Once again his views were ambiguous. He criticized John Mac Bride (Maud Gonne's husband) in the lines:

The other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart

He also quotes the other leaders of the rising without naming them: "That woman" (l.17) is Constance Gore-Booth (or Constance Markievicz, see her picture page 77) who was not

executed with the others; “This man” (l.24) is Patrick Pearse; “This other his helper and friend” (l.26) is Thomas Mac Donagh, a poet. The four names are given at the end (l.75). He wrote other poems that were reactions to the Easter Rising: “Sixteen Dead Men”, “The Rose Tree”, “On a Political Prisoner”. Just the fact that he was so much inspired by political events of his time show that he was strongly politically committed. “The Rose Tree”, for instance, is less ambiguous; it is a fictional conversation between Connolly and Pearse about the rose tree, which is a symbol for the nation of Ireland. Yeats puts the leader of the independence movement on a pedestal, like the ancient heroes of medieval Ireland.

“Sixteen Dead Men” was written in 1916 but not published until 1920. It is a short poem about the men who were executed in the aftermath of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. There are three stanzas that are actually three questions, three rhetorical questions addressed to England. Yeats wondered whether the fact that these men had become martyrs was a good thing: “while those dead men are loitering there/ To stir the boiling pot?”(l.5-6). The poet quotes the name of two leaders of earlier risings: “Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone” (l.16). Yeats asked the right questions, because it is these executions that deeply marked the people of Ireland and eventually led to the revolutionary war in 1919, as the phrase “to stir the boiling pot” expresses. Once again Yeats correctly read through the events of his time.

“On a Political Prisoner” is about Constance Markievicz in her cell, with a gull visiting her. The poem was written in 1921, Markievicz was imprisoned from 1916 to 1917 after the Rising. The poem is considered anti-revolutionary and even misogynist by some critics (Jonathan Alison, 194). In spite of that Yeats was writing about an Irish revolutionary, and only that could be considered a way to support their fight against England. It is the same with the poem “In Memory Of Major Robert Gregory” published in *The Wild Swans At Coole* in 1919. In this elaborate twelve-stanza poem, the author wrote about his contemporaries who had passed away (Lionel Johnson, John Synge, George Pollexfen) and finally about “his dear friend’s dear son”, Robert Gregory, who had died fighting the English. All these men were true Irishmen who represented the independence of Ireland over England, so just naming them contributes to support the fight of the revolutionaries. This poem is full of references to the land of Ireland: The “Mayo men” (l.34), “The Galway foxhounds” (l.57), “Castle Taylor” (l.58) , “Roxborough” (l.58), “Esserkelly” (l.59), “Clare rock” (l.66) , “Galway rock” (l.66).

“An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” is an another poem about Robert Gregory, published in the same *The Wild Swans At Coole*. It is about the Irish who fought in the Second World War with the British against the Germans. The poem is composed of sixteen line tetrameters, with an

abab cdcd masculine rhyming pattern, the masculine rhymes reminding us of a beat, like drums during war. (Vendler, 2007, 8). The memorable lines 3 and 4 “Those I Fight I do not hate/ Those I guard I do not love” are a testimony to the absurdity of all wars, and especially the absurdity of this one. What good is there to fight for the English, who are the oppressors of Ireland? However “The clouds” are high above such considerations, it is a place of freedom from this war, where he shall “meet his fate”. (Richard Gill, 92). This poem is a reflection on the utility and legitimacy of pointless wars, fought by a true Irishman who remembers his homeland (“Kiltartan Cross” 1.5) at the moment of his death.

“Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen” is one of Yeats’ most complicated pieces of work; it is a sequence of six poems within the poem and requires a careful study to be understood correctly. It was written in 1921 and published in *The Tower* in 1928. More than just a political work, it is a global reflection on human violence. It was inspired by an event occurring during the Irish Revolutionary War (1919-1921) between the Irish Republicans and England’s police force (and the Black and Tans, a paramilitary group known for their violence). This event was the murder of Eileen Queen, mother of three children, shot from a lorry, with her child still in her arms (Vendler, 2006, 64). This motivated Yeats to write about the event and even if the poem contains more philosophical than political thoughts there is a part which is about the events in Ireland:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free

Here Yeats denounces the violence of the Black And Tans on the people of Ireland, so he takes the stand of a politically committed artist in favour of the independence of Ireland over England. AS an Introduction to the poem called “Politics” (last poems), Yeats quotes this sentence by Thomas Mann, a German novelist and writer who was born in 1875 and died in 1955: “In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms”. Even though Yeats did not like politics in the first place he thought it was his duty to get political over the years for the sake of Ireland, his country.

Ch2- Changing, ambiguous views at the end of his career

1- His ambiguities towards politics

Yeats started as an Irish nationalist (under the banner of the IRB, the Irish National Brotherhood, ancestor of the IRA) but at the end of his life he was closer to fascists. His political views were always ambiguous and changing. He always said he disliked politics, even when he was elected senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, like for example in the poem “Politics”, one of his last:

How can I, that girl standing there
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russia
Or on Spanish politics?

One of the paradoxes is that he claimed he was not interested in politics even though he often ended up writing about it or taking political sides, especially when it came to his country, Ireland. In October 1918 he wrote to Lord Haldane, “I have no part in politics and no liking for politics, but there are moments when one cannot keep out of them.” (Jonathan Allison, 188). We saw in the previous lines that he attacked the British soldiers (The Black and Tans) during the Irish war of independence (1919-1921). So what was his position during the Irish Civil War which began on 28 June 1922 and ended on 24 May 1923? First let us remember how that war broke out. In order to end the Irish war of independence the British side proposed a treaty to the Irish, a treaty that recognized an Irish Free State in the south, but that partitioned the country between that Free State and Ulster in the north. Ulster was to remain within the UK while the south was free, but still part of the Commonwealth. Of course this treaty was to divide Ireland; some were in favor of it, like Michael Collins and The Irish National Army, and some were opposed to it, like Eamon De Valera and the IRA. The conflict lasted 10 months, it made more victims than the War for Independence and it left the country divided.¹

2- Yeats and the Irish Civil War

Yeats wrote a poem named “Meditations in Time Of Civil War” in 1922 when he was secluded in his tower. Even if there is the phrase “Civil War” in the title the poem does not tell much of the author’s side in this particular war. We can find some clues though. When there is mention of “violent, bitter men” Yeats is surely referring to the IRA. At the time when he was writing these

¹ As we know, Ireland is still divided nowadays between the Republic (the south) and the north, a part of the UK.

lines the poet was isolated, he had no papers, no news, he could not travel safely so he stayed in his house, a high tower from which he could only see the road. It is in the part of the poem called “The Road At My Door” that we find the most “political” lines:

An affable irregular
A heavy built Falstaffian man
Comes cracking jokes of Civil War
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun

Here the word “irregular” means a man who is not from the regular army, so in this conflict it corresponds to an IRA member, a member of the anti-treaty forces. “Falstaffian” is a reminder of Sir John Falstaff, a Shakespearian character, who is a fat coward, vain and boastful. So in this part of the poem Yeats criticizes the members of the IRA, who are apparently violent, rude men. But what comes next is different:

A brown lieutenant and his men
Half dressed in national uniform
Stand at my door, and I complain
On the foul weather, hail and rain
A pear tree broken by the storm

There Yeats criticized the other side, the “national” army (Michael Collins’ army). Their colour was brown. He sees these men at his door and this does not please him. There is another part of the poem that is relevant to emphasize: it is in part six, called “The Stare’s nest by my window” which is actually referring to burned houses because of the war:

A barricade of stone or of wood:
Some fourteen days of Civil War
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood
Come build in the empty house of the stare

The title excepted, it is the first time in the poem that Yeats has actually named the conflict. Here he condemned violence without taking sides. He was describing the war with the eyes of an outsider in his tower, referring to the atrocities that were common (the burning of houses, the barricades, young soldiers dying). So in this poem “Meditations in Time of Civil War” it is hard to say which sides Yeats was taking because first he seemed to condemn the IRA with the Falstaffian soldier, then he talked of the National Army, and finally he criticized the violence of

the conflict in general. But we do not really need the poem to know that Yeats was with the national army of Michael Collins, against the IRA and with the pro-treaty forces, first because he was of the Protestant Ascendancy, and did not want Ulster to leave the UK or to become part of an all-Catholic country, and secondly because he was appointed senator of the Irish Free State in 1922. But if we only look at his poetical works his position in this conflict remains ambiguous: claim that he did not like politics in 1918 and end up senator four years later is one of the paradoxes of the character. Another paradox was to begin his political career in 1886 by swearing the Fenian oath, to a nationalist and socialist group and end up admiring Mussolini and hating communists. The man was definitely complex and his poems certainly mirror such ambiguities.

It is also important to link Yeats' taste for occultism with his nationalist behaviours. Yeats was occult before he was a nationalist. He was a member of the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885 and he joined the Order Of The Golden Dawn in 1890, where he practiced magic. He actually believed in the supernatural forces of Ireland, which were supposed to be superior to godless England. It is easy to link this superiority to Nationalism and the fact that Ireland should be freed from the yoke of England. We can see this in such early poems as "To Ireland In The Coming Times" or "The Man Who Dreamed Of Faeryland" published in *The Rose* in 1892 which are full of references to Irish folklore and occultism.

Ch3- Political influences

Yeats inherited his Irish Nationalism from brilliant elders. In regard to Yeats' political influences, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) comes first. He was an Irish National leader even though, like Yeats, he was a Protestant. He was the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. He managed to reconcile every different Irish Nationalist, regarding of their confessions, and unite them under the same banner (The Irish Home Rule League and then the Irish Parliamentary Party). His political career ended after he consented the divorce of William O'Shea and his wife Katherine, whom Parnell married later. The Catholics turned against Parnell, with the help of the English. This downfall hurt Yeats deeply, who considered that Parnell was killed by the Irish

people. He admired Parnell, whom he compared to Jonathan Swift, and wrote many poems in his honour, including “Parnell’s Funeral”.²

If we look at earlier references, we have to count Henry Grattan as an important figure. The latter was born in 1746 and died in 1820; he was an Irish statesman and a wonderful orator. He spoke for Irish independence throughout all his life. He was a Protestant, which mattered to Yeats, a Protestant himself. According to Yeats he was one of the great Protestant figures who marked Irish history, along with Swift, Berkeley and Burke.³

Robert Emmet (1778-1803) was also one of Yeats’ political idols. He was a great Irish Patriot, exiled by the English because he was a Nationalist. He fled to France and then returned to Ireland to lead an uprising against the English (the famous uprising of 1798). He was captured in Dublin and, after a trial, sentenced to be hung and decapitated. He made a famous speech from the dock which made him a national hero and a reference for future generations of Nationalists. Minutes before dying he said “My friends, I die in peace, and with sentiments of universal love and kindness toward all men” (Conner, 56). Yeats looked to him as a hero. This is what he said about him: “My great-grandfather (John Yeats) had been Robert Emmet’s friend and was suspected and imprisoned through but a few hours”.⁴

Edward Fitzgerald (1763-1798) took part in the same uprising. He was an Irish patriot, member of the United Irishmen. He tried to obtain French help for the uprising but somebody betrayed him, which led to his capture by the English. He died from the injuries of the capture. Yeats considered he was killed by “strangers” (that is the English) like Emmet or Tone, whereas Parnell was killed by the Irish themselves.⁵

Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798) was the leader of the 1798 uprising. He was a well-known Irish revolutionary whose aim was to unite Catholics and Protestants against the English. He created the Society of United Irishmen. He was captured by the English and sentenced to death, but he committed suicide just before. Yeats, aided by Maud Gonne, tried to raise funds for a memorial statue of Wolfe Tone. He became president of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association in

² See also the poems “Come Gather Round Me Parnellites”, “Parnell”, and “Three Marching Songs”.

³ For instance see the poems “The Tower” and “The Seven Sages”.

⁴ See the poems “Pardon Old Fathers”, “September, 1913”, “Parnell’s Funeral”, “Three Songs To The Same Tune” and “Three Marching Songs”.

⁵ See the poems “September 1913”, “Sixteen Dead Men” and “Parnell’s Funeral”.

1898. But he never got to see the monument erected during his lifetime (today there is a Wolfe Tone monument in St Stephen's Green, Dublin.).⁶

After Emmet, Fitzgerald Tone and before Parnell, the great Irish hero, according to Yeats, is Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) called the Great Liberator and also the Great Comedian by Yeats. He fought for Catholic Emancipation in Ireland through the Catholic Association he created in 1823. Thanks to this association the Penal Laws were abolished in 1829. Yeats writes about him: "I had seen Ireland in my own time turn from the bragging rhetoric and gregarious humour of O'Connell's generation and school, and offer herself to the solitary and proud Parnell as to her anti-self" (Conner, 75). In the poem "Parnell's Funeral". Yeats called Parnell "The Great Tragedian".

Kevin O'Higgins (1892-1927) was a contemporary of Yeats. He was an Irish lawyer and statesman who had fought for Irish independence all his life. After the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 he became Minister of Justice and minister of external affairs. He was a great friend of Yeats. O'Higgins followed Michael Collins and the Pro-Treaty side during the Irish Civil War against De Valera. He signed the death warrant of someone who had been best man at his wedding during this war. O'Higgins was murdered in 1927 (probably by the IRA). This assassination moved Yeats deeply. He wrote to Olivia Shakespear: "The murder of O'Higgins was no mere public event to us. He was our personal friend, as well as the one strong intellect in Irish political life and then too his pretty young wife was our friend." Two poems were written after the death of O'Higgins: "Blood And The Moon" and "Death".⁷

But the oldest political influence of Yeats is probably Hugh Roe O'Donnell (1571-1602) called Red Hugh. He was lord of Tyrconnell, and he hated the English. He beat them at Sligo and elsewhere in Ireland, which made him a national hero. There is a traditional song named after him.⁸

Of course Yeats was also influenced by the events of the Easter Rising in 1916, and especially by the men executed afterwards (the poem "Sixteen Dead Men" is about them.) I will just briefly name those who were killed by the English after the Rising: James Connolly, Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Thomas J. Clarke, Joseph Plunkett, William Pearse, Edward Daly, Michael

⁶ See the poems "September 1913", "Sixteen Dead Men" and "Parnell's Funeral"

⁷ See also the poems "Parnell's Funeral" and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited".

⁸ See also the poems "Three Songs To The Same Tune" and "Three Marching Songs".

O'Hanrahan, John MacBride (Maud Gonne's husband) Eamonn Ceannt, Michael Mallin, Sean Heuston, Conn Colbert, James Connolly and Sean MacDiarmada.

Ch-4 Relation with the people of Ireland

The greatest ambiguity in Yeats' career and life was with the people of Ireland. His first poems were sympathetic especially with Irish peasantry but he always bore a grudge to middle-class, city people as this quote from "The People" (l.33) makes explicit: "The drunkards, pilferers of public funds/ All the dishonest crowd I had driven away". Here Yeats criticized the people of Dublin. The "dishonest crowd" is also referred to in "Adam's Curse" as: "The noisy set/ Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" (l.12). Yeats always believed in the fact that artists, aristocrats, even peasants were superior to the common people of the middle class. But there was a progression in his career. He grew disillusioned with the people of his country. At the beginning he was enthusiastic. One thing broke down that enthusiasm. It was the relative failure of the Abbey Theatre. In 1903, along with Lady Gregory and John Synge, Yeats founded the Irish National Theatre Society because they wanted a National Theatre for Ireland. When the Abbey Theatre opened Yeats declared: "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted & imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory". But these hopes were not met. And as early as 1907 there were troubles at Synge's play *The Playboy Of A Western World* (called "The Playboy Riots") where nationalists thought the play was not political enough. This was one of the elements that caused Yeats to mistrust the people of Ireland, because he wanted to cultivate the masses with art and the Abbey Theatre could not achieve that goal. And this was why he wrote in "September 1913" that "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone" l.7. He was always more aristocratic than democratic. The great masses frightened him. He believed in an aristocratic leadership that could educate these masses. He was opposed to "out-of-class marriages" (Jonathan Allison, 186), as he advocated the "despotic rule of the educated classes" (as he wrote to Olivia Shakespear on 13 July 1933). He can be described as a radical nationalist at the beginning of his career, a patriotic Tory in the middle, and a fascist at the end. (Allison, 186). Indeed in his late years Yeats developed extreme undemocratic points of view. He firmly opposed communists, the IRA of Eamon de Valera and ended up supporting the Blue Shirts of

General O'Duffy in 1933, which was a fascist organization opposing the IRA which was obviously left wing. In his words it was a way to avoid an upcoming chaos, chaos that was often described in his poems (Jonathan Allison, 186). He wrote songs for the Blue Shirts. But it did not last long; Yeats realized his error and his songs were not sung. Even if he left this organization, he shared ideas with the far-right like eugenics. He admired Benito Mussolini at the end of his life.

Yeats was a poet who always commented on the events of his time. Thus he can be considered to be a politically committed artist. But he is not just a political poet. There was something above politics, something he was more committed to. And this thing is culture.

II Cultural Commitment

Ch-5 The cult of Ancient Greece

1- Greek divinities and legends

As an art lover and an educated man, William Butler Yeats was fond of the golden age of the Greek antiquity. This period was a great source of inspiration for him, and many elements of Greek mythology and ancient civilisation are to be found in his poems.

In the early poem “The Sorrow Of Love” Yeats mentions the Trojan War and Ulysses:

The greatness of the world in tears
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers

Odysseus (another name for Ulysses) is the king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, the central figure of the work *The Odyssey*. The Trojan war is mentioned again in the poem “No Second Troy” and in many others after that; indeed Maud Gonne, Yeats’ muse and unrequited love, is often compared to Helen of Troy because of her great beauty and also because she is linked to a war (Maud Gonne being a fierce Irish nationalist involved in the Irish Revolutionary War). In “No Second Troy” Yeats asks the question: “Was there another Troy for her to burn?” (l.12) meaning that Maud Gonne, being involved in Irish politics, was a fearsome dangerous figure, capable of setting an entire country in flames (in her case England would be the “other” Troy). Helen of Troy appears in ten other poems by Yeats⁹. Hector, the prince of Troy, is also quite present in Yeats’ poems. He is the son of King Priam, and the hero in Homer’s *Iliad*. He was killed by Achilles.¹⁰ One famous poem written by Yeats is inspired by Greek mythology: “Leda And The Swan”. Leda was the wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta. The story about Leda is quite unsettling (but rather common in Greek mythology): she was raped by Zeus who took the form of a swan. Of this forced union resulted the birth of Helen, Clytemnestra, Castor and Pollux. Helen’s beauty led to the destruction of Troy; Clytemnestra married Agamemnon (who is quoted

⁹ For more references to Helen of Troy and Troy see the poems :”Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad ”,”When Helen Lived», «A Prayer For My Daughter», «The Tower”, ”Lullaby»” “Three Songs To The Same Tune», «The Rose Of The World», «Two Songs From A Play”, “His Memories” and “Three Marching Songs”.

¹⁰ See the poems “The Phases Of The Moon”, “His Memories” and “The Gyres” for more references to Hector

in “Leda And The Swan”). Yeats’ poem is about sex and rape, but it is also about the origin of destructive beauty (as we know in his mind Maud Gonne was the new Helen of Troy)..¹¹

The Furies or Proud Furies, also called the Erinyes, the Eumenides, or the Dirae were three goddesses in Greek mythology. There was the envious, Maegera; the avenger, Tisifone; and the unceasing, Alecto. They were specialized in chasing and torturing criminals. They were often represented in black and red (blood) with snakes. The image of a dangerous woman caught Yeats’ attention, he who loved women with tempers. In the poem “To Dorothy Wellesley”, Yeats compares his friends to the Proud Furies from line14 to 16:

Neither Content
Nor satisfied conscience, but that great family
Some ancient famous authors misrepresent
The proud Furies each with their torch on high.

The phoenix is not a character but an important element in Greek mythology. It is a lonely bird which, according to the legends, lives more than five hundred years, dies, and then lives again as a new phoenix. It is a symbol of immortality. “The immortal phoenix of his youth” is Maud Gonne according to critics, in the way that his love for her never faded away.¹²

The sphinx is another legendary animal: a lion with wings and the head of a woman. She asks riddles and kills those who cannot solve them. The only one who succeeded in solving a sphinx is Oedipus, Sophocles’ hero. The sphinx in Gizeh, Egypt is probably the most famous one. In Yeats’ poetry, the “lion body and the head of a man” represents the passage of a new era (the so called gyres which I will develop later). It can also be the symbol of the triumph of intellect.¹³

Several Greek gods and heroes can be found in Yeats’ poems: Achilles, the great hero; Perseus, the slayer of Medusa; Chronos, the god of the titans; Minos, the king and lawgiver of Crete and his brother Rhadamantus both sons of Zeus and Europa; Dionysius, the god of vegetation and wine, who is believed to have died and relived again many times. He is the son of Zeus. His mother is Semele, maiden loved by Zeus who died seeing him under his divine form, and his sister is Minerva (or Athene). Athene is the goddess of wisdom and the daughter of Zeus. She supports the Greek during the Trojan War. She was also the patroness of art and war (two

¹¹ For references to Leda in other poems by Yeats, see “Lullaby” and “Among School Children”.

¹² See the poems “The Lover Asks Forgiveness Because Of His Many Moods” and “His Phoenix”.

¹³ See the poems “The Second Coming” and “The Double Vision Of Michael Robartes

important words in Yeats' career). The poet associates her with great beauty and pride (Maud Gonne again)... Attis, the god of death and resurrection (important to Yeats), appears. Mount Olympus was the place where the Olympians lived, the twelve most important gods under the rule of Zeus. Yeats compared the Olympians to his friends. Greek gods fascinated Yeats because, to him, they were symbols of greatness, of nobility. They inspired respect. ¹⁴

2- Greek philosophers and authors

Concerning references to Greek philosophers to be found in Yeats' poetry, the major one is obviously Plato (427-347 B.C). Disciple of Socrates, he is probably the most influential philosopher of the antiquity. The famous notion of Unity Of Being derives from Plato, with his opposite ideas of the sensitive (the mortal, finite, concrete world) and the supra-sensitive (the heavenly, abstract, timeless world). The aim of art is to go beyond the sensitive into the supra-sensitive, and to seek unity in creation. Several expressions from Plato are frequently found in Yeats' poems, like the "Platonic Year" or "Magnus Annus" quoted from *The Republic*, a work which refers to the year when the heavenly entities return to their starting positions after completing a cycling movement. For Yeats it is a way to announce a new age, the beginning of a new era, with another resurrection (after Dionysius and Christ). This is part of the poet's taste for occultism which I will discuss later on. "Anima Mundi", the "spirit of the world" is another Platonic concept that Yeats used and changed into "Spiritus Mundi". It consists of a whole set of images or symbols that every human being on earth recognizes. It is close to Carl Jung's "collective unconscious (See the poem "The Second Coming"). Other words from Plato appear in the poem "Among School Children" at the end of the second stanza l.16 when Yeats speaks of himself and Maud Gonne as being "The yolk and white of the one shell". This is about the Unity Of Being again, that may be attainable through love (love making or merging of the souls?). At Yeats' home in Ballylee, Plato's works were on the study shelf, proof that the Greek philosopher

¹⁴ All these names are to be found in the following poems : "The Fascination Of What's Difficult", "Beautiful Lofty Things", "Upon A Dying Lady", "The Phases Of The Moon", "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", "Colonus' Praise", "News For The Delphic Oracle", "Vacillation", "A Woman Young And Old", "The Song Of The Happy Shepherd", "The Delphic Oracle Upon Plotinus", "Words For Music Perhaps" ,"A Thought From Propertius" ,"Michael Robartes And The Dancer" ,"At The Abbey Theatre" and "Two Songs From A Play".

had great influence on him, even if at the end of his career the Irish poet tended to drift away from Plato's ideas. There is also a mention of "Platonic love" in the poem "All Souls' Night":

Horton's the first I call. He loved strange thought
And knew that sweet extremity of pride
That's called platonic love

Platonic love is a kind of love which involves a minimum of physical contact, a kind of pure love, on which Yeats tends to disagree.¹⁵

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was Plato's disciple. He was, after his master's death, the teacher of Alexander, the future conqueror of Macedonia. Yeats appreciates the way Aristotle looks at nature, in a better way in comparison with Plato, as we can see in stanza VI of the poem "Among School Children":

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of Things
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of the king of kings (l.41-44)

Aristotle is "solider" than Plato according to Yeats, because of a greater relation with nature. To Plato reality was just made of "ghostly images". Here the "king of kings" is Alexander of Macedonia who turned out to be one of the greatest conquerors in the history of humanity. Aristotle was Alexander's tutor, he taught him how to behave, how to live, so Alexander's conquests can be attributed to Aristotle. This detail had great effect on Yeats, who believed in the power of knowledge.

Along with Plato and Aristotle, Pythagoras (VIth century B.C.) was one of the three Greek philosophers from the antiquity that really mattered and especially in the way they considered reality. To Plato reality was "ghostly images", to Aristotle it was in nature, and to Pythagoras it was in the numbers. Indeed Pythagoras believed that all beautiful things on earth were beautiful because they had perfect, geometrical proportions that could be measured. Yeats refers to this in the poem "Among School Children" from line 45 to 47:

¹⁵ For other references to Plato see the poems "The Tower", "Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen", "Two Songs From A Play", "Among School Children", "His Bargain", "Mad As Mist And Snow", "The Delphic Oracle Upon Plotinus" and "What Then ?"

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard

Yeats liked the way Pythagoras had settled these magnificent proportions:

There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers, those faces which are divine because there is empty and measured. (Conner, 153)

Pythagoras, who was said to be extremely handsome, also believed in the transmigration of souls; an idea that Yeats cherished.

To support his theories, Yeats used another Greek philosopher from the antiquity, which was Empedocles (495-435 B.C.) He believed that the four elements (water, fire, earth and air) were indestructible and that two things (harmony and discord) opposed. All the meteorological phenomena were a result of this opposition. Yeats writes about him: "Empedocles and Heraclitus thought that the universe had first one form and then its opposite in perpetual alteration" (Conner, 57). The poet's theories of the masks and the gyres (that I will comment on later in this essay) developed in *A Vision* derive in great part from Empedocles' works.¹⁶

Plotinus (205-270) is another Greek philosopher that can be found in Yeats' poetry. He was the founder of neoplatonism. It is an extension of Plato's doctrine of "The Good" or "The One", both notions referring to the supra-sensitive world, or the world of ideas. Yeats liked his work, as he explains in the preface to his play *The Words Upon The Window Pane*:

Plotinus said that we should not baulk at this limitlessness of the intellectual; it is an infinitude having nothing to do with number or part; yet it seems that it can at will re-enter numbers and part and thereby make itself apparent to our minds. If we can accept this idea many strange or beautiful things become credible. (reference)

Plotinus' disciple Prophyry said that the Delphic Oracle, the most famous Oracle of the ancient world whose prophecies were always ambiguous, had written a poem about Plotinus. Yeats believed in the prophecies as he himself changed into a prophet in *A Vision*. Taking the ancient oracles as examples, he believed a revelation was at hand.¹⁷

¹⁶ See the poems "Book I: The Great Wheel" in *A Vision* and "The Gyres".

¹⁷ See the poems: "The Tower", "The Delphic Oracle Upon Plotinus", and "News For the Delphic Oracle".

Yeats worked also on Parmenides (Vth century B.C.) a Greek philosopher who wrote a poem called “Nature” about an abstract doctrine of reality. He is featured in many of Plato’s dialogues. In Yeats’ poem “The Gift Of Harun Al-Rashid” we read:

The signs and shapes
All those abstractions that you fancied were
From the great Treatise of Parmenides (l.181-183)

Here the “Treatise of Parmenides” is his poem “Nature” in which he explained that reality is made of the “way of truth” and the “way of opinion”. The “way of truth” describes reality as unchanging and change as being impossible. The “way of opinion” is the world of appearances, in which our senses make us believe in things which are untrue. Yeats in his poem warned us against the deceitful character of images (“signs and shapes”).

Sappho (600 B.C.) was a Greek poetess of Lesbos. Plato called her the tenth muse. She was famous for her love poems, which interested Yeats. In “The Gift Of Harun al-Rashid”, we can read l.11-12: “And pause at last, I was about to say/ At the great book of Sappho’s song” In this poem the narrator is talking to Abd Al-Rabban, one of his fellows, and he is trying to tell him to pass on great literature and great ideas. We can deduce from these lines that Sappho’s works were the most beautiful love poems existing according to Yeats.

Sophocles’ characters Oedipus and Antigone appear in Yeats’ poetical works. Sophocles(497-406 B.C.) was a Greek tragedian (or dramatist) of the Antiquity, who is famous for his plays *Antigone*, *Oedipus The King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Yeats staged these plays for the Irish audience. The story of Oedipus is well known (especially by psychoanalysts): Oedipus kills his father (not on purpose) then marries his mother and has children with her. He blinds himself when he learns the truth and wanders until his last breath at Colonus. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta (his mother). She buries her brother Polyneices in spite of King Creon’s warning; she is condemned to be buried alive but she kills herself first and she kills with her her lover Haemon, son of Creon. In the last stanza (l 14-16) of “From The Antigone” which is part IX of the poem “A Woman Young And Old” Yeats wrote:

Pray I will and sing I must
And yet I weep – Oedipus’ child
Descends into the loveless dust

Yeats enjoyed these tragedies because they represent the failure of love in face of power and a hard world, like these lines (l. 5-6) from “Oedipus At Colonus” by Yeats testify: “Death, despair,

division of families, all entanglements of mankind grow/ As that old wandering beggar and these God-hated children know”. There Yeats made the link between fictional tragedies and real life events like the wars of the XXth century which brought “death, despair and division of families” and seemed to result from the true nature of human beings, the “entanglements of mankind”.

3- Greek artists

The first name which comes to mind when we think of Greek artists present in Yeats’ poetry is Phidias (Vth century B.C.) He is probably the greatest sculptor of the classical age and some consider even of all time. His statue of Zeus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. He worked in bronze or ivory, and gold. He worked at the construction of the Parthenon, where there was a statue of Athene, circled with golden grasshoppers and bees. This image marked Yeats who wrote in his poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”:

Amid the ornamental bronze and stone
An ancient image made of olive wood
And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories
and all the golden Grasshoppers and bees

Yeats liked the beauty of the sculptures but he especially admired the perfection of Phidias’ work, perfection he sought to attain when he was writing poetry.¹⁸

Callimachus was a sculptor from Athens of the Vth century B.C. He is believed to have invented a new technique: a drill to make draperies in marble. He worked on the Acropolis in Athens. He represented perfection in art and great beauty, things that Yeats was fond of.¹⁹

The Acropolis, in Greek, is the upper part of a town, where the temple was built. The most well-known acropolis is situated in Athens, and it is full of Phidias’ statues. To Yeats it was one of the perfect places in the world, covered with great, timeless works of art.²⁰

Eurotas is a river of ancient Sparta, in Greece. This is where in the myth Leda was visited by Zeus in the form of a swan, who raped her, begetting children: Helen, Clytemnestra, Castor and

¹⁸ . See also “Under Ben Bulben” for references to Phidias.

¹⁹ See the poem: “Lapis Lazuli”.

²⁰ See the poem “Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen”.

Pollux. Yeats linked this to Maud Gonne, the new Helen Of Troy with divine parentage, the goddess born in violence whose beauty was fatal.²¹

Ephesus was a Greek city in Lydia, known to be an early Christian area. The emperor persecuted Christians (in year 250 approximately) and there is a legend that says that seven young men escaped from the city and hid in a cave where they slept for two hundred years. Then they were reborn, thanks to divine intervention. In the poem “On A Picture Of A Black Centaur By Edmond Dulac” Yeats recalled this miracle l.10-12:

I bring full-flavoured wine out of a barrel found
Where seven Ephesian topers slept and never knew
When Alexander’s empire passed, they slept so sound.

Yeats believed in this kind of miracles and he showed an interest in religions.

Ch-6 Religion and mysticism

1- Yeats: not a traditional Christian

Yeats was a religious man. He was of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy and had strong links with Christianity. He believed in God, in Jesus Christ, but as his career evolved the precise definition of his Christian beliefs became hard to define. Indeed he showed interests in other religions, in occultism, in magic. I will try to describe what kind of a Christian Yeats was, first by quoting elements of the Christian faith from his poems.

Yeats references to God are not simple. He calls him the “Great Questioner” in the poem “At Algeciras; A Meditation Upon Death”. There are more references to Jesus, the prophet. In “The Magi”, Yeats mentions the Calvary, the hill where Jesus Christ was crucified:

All Their eyes still fixed; hoping to find once more
Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied
The uncontrollable mystery of the bestial floor.

Here the image is striking: Baby Jesus compared to a mystery, which cannot be controlled? This is a strange vision for a Christian, as if Jesus was seen as a potentially dangerous, unpredictable figure. In the brilliant poem “The Second Coming” we have another uncanny image associated to

²¹ See the poem “Leda And The Swan” and “Words For Music Perhaps”

Jesus: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus. Here the “mystery” has turned into a “rough beast”. The title of the poem “The Second Coming” is obviously a reference to the prophecy of the Christian faith in which the prophet will return to earth to save humanity. But if we read the whole poem we are surprised; this is not a religious poem as it is more a poem about the apocalypse. Yeats believed in the reincarnation of a prophet but not in a “romantic”, beautiful way in which Jesus Christ is this handsome benevolent young man who will get rid of all evil. Yeats’ Second Coming prophet takes the form of a strange sphinx, with a fearful look: “A shape with lion body and the head of a man/ A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun”. Yeats reinterprets Christianity in his own way, which is far from being conventional.

In the last stanza of the poem “Vacillation”, l.78, Yeats said he disagreed with Von Hügel: “Must we part, Von Hügel, though much alike?” Baron Friedrich Von Hügel (1852-1925) was a theologian and teacher in the Roman Catholic Faith. He wrote *The Mystic Element Of Religion* in 1903. His main idea is that the vision of the artist can only be Christian, and that the only way to achieve true happiness is through suffering and repentance. He did not believe in reincarnation, or karma or anything outside the Christian faith. This is why Yeats had to depart from him even though as he said in “Vacillation”, they were “much alike, for we accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity?” Yeats was more open minded, spiritually speaking. As a proof that miracles do happen Yeats takes the example of Saint Teresa, who lies “undecayed in tomb” (l.80). But after that he explains that he chose not to “become a Christian man and choose for my belief/ What seems most welcome in the tomb” (l.86-87). This is a clear criticism of the behaviour of Christians who, according to Yeats, choose the easy way. He then says he takes as his example Homer, the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, even though he is not a Christian, with his “unchristened heart” (l.88). So we can say that even though Yeats is clearly a Christian he is not so narrow minded as to forget about all the other cultural influences he can benefit from.

But this was not the way he dealt with God in his early poems. When he mentioned Him it was always in a conventional, traditional way. If we take the example of three poems from *The Rose* (“The Rose Of The World”, “The Rose Of Peace” and “The Rose Of Battle”) written in 1893 when Yeats was twenty eight years old, we realise that god appears under the terms “God”, “His seat”, “His wars” etc. So when he was young Yeats behaved like a good

Christian when he wrote about God. We can see that this evolved as the years passed. His links with religions evolved too.

At the beginning of his career God was much more present in his poems than at the end. Then again, Yeats' spirituality was so complex and so hazy that it became difficult to know what he really believed in in the final years.

2- References to religion in his poems

I will now quote some references to Christianity in Yeats' poetical works in order to show that Yeats' poetry is deeply rooted in the Christian faith, and also to point out that he drew inspiration from a multitude of cultural elements. Mary the mother of God appears quite a few times. In "The Countess Cathleen In Paradise" we can read the lines: "Did the kiss of Mother Mary/ Put that music in her face?"²² There is also a mention of Bethlehem, the birth place of Jesus, in "The Second Coming": "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (l.22). The hill where Jesus was crucified, The Calvary, is named in "The Magi": "Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied" (l.7). For references to the Bible, Yeats used Adam to represent the fall of man and the original sin (as he was banned from Paradise).²³ The archangels Gabriel and Michael are seen in the poem "The Happy Townland", but once again, in a rather odd way (for a traditional Christian). Indeed Michael is described as such :

Michael will unhook his trumpet
From a bough overhead
A blow a little noise
When the supper has been spread. (l.41-44)

This image of Michael is quite traditional. Gabriel, however, is described as follows:

Gabriel will come from the water
With a fish tail, and talk
Of wonders that have happened
And lift up an old horn
Of hammered silver, and drink
Till he has fallen asleep

²² See the poems "The Countess Cathleen In Paradise" and "The Unappeasable Host".

²³ See the poems "Long Legged Fly" and "Under Ben Bulbin"

Upon the starry brink (l.45-51)

There Gabriel is seen as half-man half-fish, which is peculiar for a representation of a Christian character. We can see here the influence of the Greek religion, or the Celtic legends on Yeats. Indeed in the Greek religion the gods are able to change into animals (like Zeus who turns into a swan to rape Leda) and in the Celtic Irish myths there are many transformations of men into beasts. Michael was also used by Yeats as the one who announces Judgment day. This is also the way the poet named his son.²⁴ There is a line about “the daughters of Herodias” in “Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen”. One of the daughters of Herodias was Salome, whose dance caused the death of John The Baptist. This reference is without any doubt a way for Yeats to say that the beauty of a woman can be deadly. Of course one of the most important religious figures for Yeats is Saint Patrick (389-461), who brought Christianity to Ireland in 432, and became the saint patron of Ireland. In the legends Saint Patrick meets Oisín, one of the heroes of Irish mythology.²⁵ Worshipping Saint Patrick was a way for Yeats to make the connection between Christianity and the Celtic religion, in which he both believed. There are references to Saint Peter who was one of Jesus Christ’s disciples and also the keeper of the gates to Heaven. Saint George is depicted in the poem “A Woman Young And Old”. He is famous in the legend for slaying a dragon. Finally Yeats refers to Saint Teresa (1515-1582) in “Vacillation”. Nine months after her death her grave was reopened and the body was not putrefied; this is supposed to be a Christian miracle, in which Yeats believed. Believing in miracles means believing in a superior force greater than men. This is the kind of detail that proves us that Yeats was a true believer, far from his predecessor and model Shelley who was an atheist. Yeats used lots of cultural and religious references that he included in his poems as he wished, so as to show the reader that he was educated and that he believed in superior forces.

Two prophets are mentioned in Yeats’ poems: Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah is one of the most important prophets of the Old Testament. He represents forgiveness, through the symbol of the burning coal. See the poem “Vacillation”. Ezekiel is another prophet of the Old Testament. He had the vision of the throne-chariot of God, guided by a cherubim. See the poem “To A Young Beauty”. Yeats showed interest in the Old Testament which was not usual for a public man of the 19th century.

²⁴ See the poems “The Rose Of Peace”, “The Happy Townland”, “The Hour Before Dawn” and “Tom O’Roughley”.

²⁵ See “Supernatural Songs” and “The Wanderings Of Oisín”. In “The Fiddler Of Dooney” and “A Man Young And Old”

Yeats believed in God, but he also believed in demons. In “Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen” in the last stanza we come across the name Robert Artisson. Robert Artisson was the incubus, or demon, of Alice Kyteler, a lady convicted for being a sorceress in Ireland in the 14th century. She practiced animal sacrifices in order to get rid of this demon. These sacrifices are the “bronzed peacock feathers red combs of her cocks” that is the last line of the poem. In this poem Yeats describes the state of the world and he ends with sorcery and demons; this can be interpreted as a way to announce tragedies in the years to come

As a conclusion on this subpart Christianity is important in Yeats’ poetry because he was a true believer and because it was in his traditions to be a good Christian; however he was not just a typical Christian, his beliefs were complex. We will develop this in the next part that will be about other religions, his own created mythology and occultism.

3- Yeats’ mysticism: his visions

We know that Yeats liked to lean himself on mythologies for his poetry. The Greek mythology, The Irish mythology, the Christian mythology...But at a certain point of his career he wanted to create his own mythology, like William Blake, in order to become a visionary poet. Yeats became a visionary poet when *A Vision* was published. In *A Vision* Yeats’ first great theory is revealed: the theory of The Gyres. It is quite complicated but I will try to explain it in a simple manner. Actually this theory is derived from Blake’s “Union Of The Contraries” and summarized in Yeats’ own statement that “an age is a reversal of an age”. We already know that Yeats liked to foretell the end of the world as we know it, the best poem expressing just this is the marvelous “The Second Coming”. It is in this poem that the gyres appear for the first time: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer” (l.1-2).In the first stanza the poet describes the state of the world, where total anarchy reigns:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed (l.3-5)

In the second stanza the new age that will come after the end of the Christian era (about 2000 years) with the second coming which is undefined. The idea is that spirit and time can be rationalized to geometric shapes, two cone-shape gyres, whose pointy ends hit the centre of each other (See diagram 1 p80). Each era is symbolized by a gyre. The current era expands itself outwards, whereas the era before Christ was born was expanding inwards, and had reached its

limit. And because our civilization is expanding outwards, a revelation is at hand, some kind of lightning. It is a mathematical movement which explains time not by a simple line, but by gyres turning and opposing each other. It is also interesting to note that the gyres can be compared to the spiral, another important symbol in Yeats' poetry. Indeed in the last part of his life he lived in Thor Ballylee, which was a tower, and his study was on top of that tower, which you accessed through a spiral staircase. This is why we must pay attention to geometric shapes when we read his poems, especially "The Gyres". For another vision of apocalypse, see "There" which is poem IV of the "Supernatural Songs":

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

Another theory dear to Yeats is the "theory of the masks". It is a theory about the true-self, that is supposedly hidden behind masks that we create for ourselves. This theory appears in the poem "The Mask", which is a conversation between a man and a woman, wearing masks: "Put off that mask of burning gold/With emerald eyes..." (1.1-2). We can wonder if this theory is not a way to say that the true self is our soul, and the body only there to deceive people about who we really are. The link between the theory of the Masks and the theory of the Gyres is the union of contraries. Indeed there is a clear opposition between the true self and the anti self, just like the opposition there is between an old age and a new age. Linked to the theory of the gyres, the theory of the Great Wheel is also interesting. There's a poem called "The Wheel". We have to look at diagram 2 for a better understanding. These gyres, these cone-like figures, are divided into different Phases, always in movement and doubled into a mirror image. The diagram shows a circle, divided into twenty-eight sections (a remainder of the 28 phases of the moon) each representing one phase. The circle makes a round, the Phases increase and then decrease, as the moon is full and then dark again. It is a bit like the zodiac signs, but here the Phases are abstract. Yeats places himself in Phase seventeen, where creative imagination is achieved through antithetical emotion, where the Unity Of Being is most likely to happen. Dante is also in Phase seventeen. The Venetian painter Giorgione is in Phase fourteen, and according to Yeats "at Phase 14 and Phase 16 the greatest human beauty becomes possible" (Conner, 69).

The *Anima Mundi* or *Spiritus Mundi* is another example of Yeats' occult concepts. It means the spirit of the world, and it is actually a set of images that everyone in the world shares, what the world remembers in a way. In the poem "The Second Coming": "When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*/ Troubles my sight". (l.12-13). Yeats also calls it the "Great Memory" in the poem "The Tower". The term *Anima Mundi* comes from Plato, but the notion of "Spirit of the world" can also be linked to Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" in psychoanalysis.

Yeats' belief in the Irish folk stories and fairies (which I will treat later) led him to occultism; indeed he could no longer be satisfied with traditional religion. In his letters he said: "The mystic life that is to say the occult life is at the core of everything I think, of everything I write." We can divide Yeats' occultism into four parts: theosophy, magic, spiritualism and Hindu mysticism (Harper; 152). In 1885 Yeats and his friends created the Dublin Hermetic Society. The group studied the occult, in a combination of Eastern mysticism and Western science. They were influenced by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Theosophical Society (Harper, 153). Yeats met Blavatsky and joined in 1888 the Esoteric Section, which was a secret section of the Theosophical Society. Theosophy believes in reincarnation, or metempsychosis (the transmigration of the souls), a concept in which Yeats believed firmly too. Being a member of this society made him feel important, socially accepted, and it gave a mysterious background to his first poems. But the Theosophical society did not allow his members to do "real" magic so, at a point, Yeats got fed up with it. He joined The Hermetic Order Of The Golden Dawn in 1888. This society was founded by S.L MacGregor Mathers, which gave Yeats an inspiration to create his character Michael Robartes. Yeats was also influenced by Cabbalistic and Rosicrucian ideas (with the symbols of the rose and the tree that we can see in his poems). This new "magic" power provided by the Order is seen in his poems of the 1890s especially in "The Secret Rose" and "The Wind Among The Reeds". But his enthusiasm for the Order eventually receded. He found another inspiration in Spiritualism, and in particular, in what is called automatic writing. Automatic writing is writing without thinking, in a kind of trance or hypnosis. He attended séances with a woman named Elizabeth Radcliffe. The Spiritualism of Emmanuel Swedenborg interested Yeats. The poet, from year 1909, began summoning demons, and especially one which was supposed to be his alter ego, a demon named Leo, the disincarnate spirit of a sixteenth century explorer (whose name was Al Hassan Ibn-Mohammed al-Wezat Al-Fasi). He even wrote essays about Leo, believing that he spoke through him (Harper, 159). Of course Leo is associated with the Orient, which makes us think about Orientalism, but also about something which is not Western Culture, a different kind of religion. George Hyde Lees, the poet's wife, was introduced by him in the Order of The Golden Dawn. She shared the same spiritual ideas and she practiced

automatic writing herself. It was an occult marriage between the two. Yeats' belief in reincarnation naturally led him to Hindu Mysticism. He believed, when death was near, that his soul would migrate into a new body and that he would live another life, and this again and again eternally. It was a way for him not to be afraid of death, and also a way to reach immortality. He got interested in Hinduism towards the end of his life, which is not surprising. He worked with Indian writers such as Shri Purohit Swami, and Bhagwan Shri Hamsa. He practiced Hinduism at home with his wife George; indeed they were into Tantrism, or non-orgasmic sex which is all about the merging of the souls (Margaret Mills Harper, 162). There is one particular poem about Hinduism called "Anashuya and Vijaya". Yeats talks about The Golden Age, named Krita Yuga, when all things are good and unaltered. It is the first cycle in the Hindu religion (reminiscing of Yeats' gyres), the last one being Kali Yuga, when the evil dominates the good until destruction and the beginning of another cycle. According to Yeats of course 20th-century Europe is in the Kali Yuga cycle until a possible "Second Coming".

Ch-7 Literary influences: from Dante to Rossetti

1- Old influences

Dante (1265-1321) is the oldest of Yeats' influences. His *Divine Comedy* is his most famous work and thought to be the best piece of literature ever achieved in the Italian language. In Yeats' *A Vision* Dante is located in Phase Seventeen, where creative imagination is realized through contrary feelings, the ideal Phase where Unity Of Being is most possible. The notion of the "Unity Of Being" so precious to Yeats comes from Dante when he "compared beauty to a perfectly proportioned body" (Conner, 44). Yeats called Dante "the Chief Imagination Of Christendom". Dante's words "His will is our Peace" had a particular impact on Yeats (Conner, 44).. These were better than Spenser's or Shelley's according to the Irish poet. In the poem "Why Should Old Men Be Mad?" there is a line that says: "A girl that knew all Dante once/Live to bear children to a dunce". Here the girl is probably Maud Gonne.²⁶

Concerning poetical influences we cannot forget about Pierre De Ronsard (1524-1585). He was a French poet, member of The Pléiade, a bunch of French poets trying to promote the French language. Yeats saw a similarity between the Pléiade's struggle and his own concerning reviving

²⁶ See also the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus".

culture in Ireland. Ronsard was known for his love poems and patriotism. Just like William Butler. Yeats imitates Ronsard in the poem “At The Abbey Theatre” and also in “When You Are Old”, Yeats’ version of Ronsard’s famous “Quand Vous Serez Bien Vieille”, even if “When You Are Old” is not just an imitation, but clearly a true Yeatsian poem inspired from Ronsard.

One of Yeats’ earliest poetical influences is Edmund Spenser (1552-1599). He was an English poet, who wrote *The Faerie Queen*, a poem about Elizabeth I. He had his own poetical form, called the Spenserian stanza, rhyming ababbcbcc. Yeats liked his work so much he wrote an introduction for *Poems Of Spenser* in 1902. He also wrote an essay on Spenser in his *Essays And Introductions*. Yeats’ elegy of Robert Gregory in “In Memory Of Major Robert Gregory” is directly inspired from Spenser’s elegy on Philip Sidney. In “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” the “image out of Spenser” comes from Spenser’s poem called “The Ruins Of Time”, which is an ode to the Earl Of Leicester.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is also one of Yeats’ influences. Of course he influenced pretty much everyone, because he was so prolific and so diverse. Several plays are mentioned in Yeats’ poems, starting with *King Lear*, the drama, about which Yeats wrote:

There is Lear, his head still wet with the thunder storm, and he laughs because you thought yourself an existence who are but a shadow, and him a shadow who is eternal God.

This appears in “Lapis Lazuli” and “An Acre Of Grass”. Yeats talks about Ophelia, the beloved of Prince Hamlet, in “Lapis Lazuli”. Hamlet himself is quoted as well in “Lapis Lazuli” and “The Statues”. Yeats liked tragedies and bad ending love stories, maybe because he thought his own love life was tragic.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) deeply influenced Yeats. He was born in Dublin. He is famous for his depiction of human stupidity and vice. His most notable work is *Gulliver’s Travels*. He was a satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer. Yeats inherited his political commitment, among other things. The Irish poet tells of Swift: “Swift haunts me; he is always just around the next corner”. Swift wrote his epitaph five and a half years before he died; Yeats imitated him with “Under Ben Bulben”. He also tried to translate Swift’s epitaph from Latin, which became a poem named “Swift’s Epitaph”. According to Yeats Swift has the “good blood” many Irishmen have, including Berkeley, Burke, Grattan, Parnell, Augusta Gregory, Synge and Kevin O’Higgins.²⁷

²⁷ See the poems “Blood And The Moon”, “The Seven Sages” and “Parnell’s Funeral”.

Another great Irish philosopher is George Berkeley (1685-1753). He is well-known for his theory of “Immaterialism” that implies that every object is just a projection of a mind and that nothing is material. He was also the bishop of Cloyne, and he always tried to improve the lives of the Irish. Yeats said about him “I want Protestant Ireland to base some vital part of its culture upon Burke, Swift and Berkeley”. In the poet’s opinion Berkeley is one of the founding stones of Irish culture.²⁸

Regarding occultism Yeats’ reference was Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). He was a Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic. He is famous for his book on the afterlife called *Heaven And Hell* and published in 1758. He is said to have had many visions; one in particular when The Lord (God) talked to him and asked him to write *The Heavenly Doctrine* in order to reform Christianity. This happened in 1744 and from that moment he was able to visit heaven and hell and talk to angels and demons. There are stories about him knowing things he could not possibly know. Just like Swedenborg, Yeats was fond of spiritualism and invoked demons too.

Another Irish influence was Edmund Burke (1729-1797). He was born in Dublin. He was an orator, political theorist and philosopher. He supported the American Revolution but later opposed the French Revolution, praised by his rival Thomas Paine. He was in favour of a self-governed Ireland. Yeats considered him one of the best men in Anglo-Irish history. He also wrote a treaty on the Sublime, a notion which Yeats was interested in, especially in “Easter 1916” when he dealt with the Irish “Terrible beauty”.²⁹

2- Romanticism

Concerning Yeats’ literary influences, of course one word comes to mouth: Romanticism. He says so himself in the last stanza of “Coole Park And Ballylee, 1931”:²⁸ “We were the last romantics” and in the poem “September 1913” the refrain at the end of each stanza laments that “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone”. We can date the Romantic Age starting in 1775 (with the beginning of the American War of Independence) and ending in 1837 (with the accession of Queen Victoria). The Modern Age began in 1901 (with the death of Queen Victoria and the accession of Edward VII). Yeats; being active from 1885 to 1939 is in between two ages. He was a late Romantic and an early Modern. His early works bear the mark of Romanticism: landscapes

²⁸ See “Blood And The Moon”

²⁹ See also the poems “The Tower”, “Blood On The Moon” and “The Seven Sages”.

descriptions linked to the mood of the poet. The poem “Down By The Salley Gardens” illustrates this perfectly: “She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree” (l.3) and in the second stanza: “She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs” (l.7), and the last line: “But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears”. This notion of time passing, of melancholy regarding a lost love while contemplating beautiful scenery is typical of the Romantics. Similarly “The Lake Isle Of Innisfree” gives an accurate description of the surroundings of the poet: “the bee loud glade”, “I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore”, “there midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow”. This makes us think of the first Romantics, Wordsworth (with his daffodils), Coleridge (and the nightingale), Keats (and his ode to autumn).

But according to critics, the most profound influences attributed to Yeats are to be found in Blake and Shelley. Yeats wrote an essay about William Blake, and often quoted Shelley as one of his masters.

William Blake is considered to be the first Romantic. He was born in 1757 and died in 1827. He is known to be a visionary poet and a mystical poet. Of course both these things are of paramount importance among Yeats’ poetry. He was visionary but also politically committed (he was in favour of the French Revolution) like Yeats (Grellet, 84). Blake believed in the power of the imagination against rationalism. He had his own complex mythology (with Urizen, Los, Luvah, the Zoas...) Yeats tried to do the same with *A Vision*. Blake thought that “without contraries, there is no progression”; Yeats’ theory of the Masks is linked to Blake’s idea about contraries, just like the theory of the gyres that says “an age is the reversal of an age” (George Bornstein, 25). Another thing which is common in Blake and Yeats is the powerful sentences in their poetry: short sentences full of meaning that hits the reader like a blow to the head. We can take any line from Blake’s *The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell* like: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (l.3) which can be compared to Yeats’ “The ceremony of innocence is drowned” (l.6 of “The Second Coming”), or “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (l.4 of the same poem). The symbol of the spiral, so important to Yeats, comes from Blake’s “Jerusalem” (Genet, 1989, 398.) The two poets share the same cyclical conception of history, the same fascination for apocalyptic images, the same belief in the power of imagination against rationalism. Thus it is not a surprise to learn that Yeats studied William Blake, he edited *The Works Of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical* in 1893 and *The Poems Of William Blake* the same year.

Another great influence on Yeats from the Romantic Age is Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley was a very sensitive man, who marked his era by his political commitment. He was always a left-wing rebel, fighting authority and conventions. He even went to Ireland to

support the growing Nationalist revolt (Grellet, 94). There we can see a direct link to Yeats. He was an atheist, which was rare at the time, and caused him to have an awful reputation in England. He died young (32 years old) in a storm in Italy. Yeats said that he started to write poetry in imitation of Shelley. *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's masterpiece, was his "sacred book" (Bloom, 57). According to Yeats' mythology, Shelley belongs to Phase 17 (with Dante), where Unity Of Being is most possible. That tells us how Yeats admired Shelley. The English poet appears in two poems by Yeats: "The Phases Of The Moon" and "Blood Of The Moon". We also owe Yeats' fascination for towers to Shelley, whose character Athanase studies philosophy alone in a tower, a bit like Yeats writing poetry in his late years at Thor Ballylee. Shelley was interested in the occult, just like Yeats. But I think the most important influence Shelley had on Yeats is his poetical awareness and commitment. Shelley defended the oppressed against the rich powerful classes; he had the "passionate intensity", the "terrible beauty" (in Yeatsian terms) of those willing to die for an ideal. Shelley's notion of Intellectual Beauty (which originates from Plato) particularly interested Yeats (Bornstein, 22). It can be interpreted in different ways though. Some might think Intellectual Beauty is beauty beyond the material world, a sort of supra sensitive ideal. Others might think of the perfect social system, or complete esoteric wisdom. Yeats wrote about Shelley: "He had shared our curiosities, our political problems, our conviction that, despite all experiences to the contrary, love is enough" (Bornstein, 22). Shelley therefore inspired Yeats on occultism and mysteries, on politics and on love, even sexual love if we believe Yeats' statement that he first got sexually aroused around the age of seventeen reading Shelley's poems "Alastor" and "Prince Athanase". (Bloom, 52).

3- The Pre-Raphaelites and Pater

If we deal with authors other than the Romantics who influenced Yeats, we have to mention Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). He was an English poet, illustrator and painter. He founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 with Millais and Hunt. The Pre-Raphaelites believed in art as an imitation of nature. Their first doctrine is to "have genuine ideas to express". They were fascinated by medieval culture. The Pre-Raphaelite paintings were all located outdoors, with great light. Their subjects were beautiful, young women. We can say that Yeats was a Pre-Raphaelite poet in his early works, with lots of references to nature, and the obsession to create something beautiful.

Walter Horatio Pater (1839-1894) also had a great influence on Yeats and on all the late 19th century writers. He was an English essayist, literary, art critic and novelist. He worked on the Renaissance and is famous for these words: “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (cf Wikipedia.org). He was friends with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic Movement originates from Pater. Yeats said about him:

If Rossetti was a subconscious influence, and perhaps the most powerful of all, we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy. Three or four years ago I re-read *Marius The Epicurean* (Pater’s famous novel), expecting to find I cared for it no longer, but it still seemed to me, as I think seemed to us all, the only great prose in modern English.

Later, Oscar Wilde will say about Pater’s *Studies In The History Of The Renaissance*: “It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it.”³⁰

Ch-8 Ireland

1- Yeats as an Irish patriot

As he said so himself in his poem named “A Coat”: he took his inspiration from ancient myths: “I made my song a coat/(...)/Out of old mythologies” (l.1-3). And after the Greek mythology, more common in the poems of the XIXth century, comes the Irish mythology, which Yeats tried to make his own.

When we think of Yeats we think of Ireland, despite the fact that he spent much of his lifetime in England (London in particular). We think that mainly because his early poetical works were all set in Ireland, and were about Irish mythology and folklore and the musicality of his words. As a young child and as a teenager, Yeats hated England and he dreamed of Ireland, making it his perfect place, a shelter in his mind where everything was beautiful, quiet, ideal for creation and close to gods and faeries (called TiR Na Nog) One of his first poems, “Down by the Salley Gardens”, is a rewriting of an old traditional song. The gardens of the poem are probably located in Ballysadare, county Sligo. The love he talks about is probably Olivia Shakespear, one of his first lovers. He did not accept to be called “Anglo-Irish” as he had always been proud of his roots. In his opinion) he was a true Irishman. The folklore and mythology of the country of

³⁰ For references to Pater in Yeats’ poems, see “The Phases Of The Moon”.

Ireland fascinated him. He wrote about Cuchulain, the great Irish hero (the Irish equivalent of Hercules) who disappeared fighting with the waves after defeating a lion. All these legends come from the Ulster Cycle, who may have been published in the Vth century, the first piece of Literature of Ireland, pagan but with some Christian elements already. So the stories he wrote are well known to the Irish people, but he makes them unique by using his late-victorian English aristocratic style. (Bloom, 83) as in “The Wanderings of Oisín”, a huge epic poem in three parts consisting in a dialogue between Oisín, the greatest Irish poet, and St Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland.

Many things can be said about Yeats’ commitment, the change of ideas he experienced, the ambiguous views he had, but one thing was a constant throughout all his long career: his patriotism. Indeed he has always remained faithful to his land of Ireland, as the late poem (1929) entitled “I Am Of Ireland” demonstrates. This poem is a rendition of a XIVth century Irish poem Frank O’Connor read one night to Yeats. The original poem goes like this:

Icham of Irlande
Aut of the holy lande of Irlande
Gode sir pray ich ye
For of saynte charite
Come and daunce wyt me
In Irlande

In Yeats’ version the singer goes like this:

I am Of Ireland,
And the Holy land of Ireland
And time runs on, cried she.
Come out of charity
Come dance with me in Ireland

This poem perfectly represents the love Yeats had for his country, also the destiny of Ireland; “time runs on” is an invitation to go to Ireland and support its culture, so that finally this country gets the freedom it deserves. To revive old Irish songs and stories was the poet’s mission.

Yeats is the founder of the Irish Literary revival or Celtic Revival. Along with Augusta Gregory he met the Irish people, came to houses; it was a kind of research in order to know what the people of Ireland liked and sang. This inspired him deeply, so deeply that he wrote *The Folk Tales Of The Irish Peasantry* in 1888, *Irish Fairy Tales* in 1892 and *The Celtic Twilight* in 1893. All these interviews and books about Irish mythology were part of a larger project: Create a

national Irish literature. But the poet evolved. He grew tired of being considered a folklorist only and his poetry changed; it became more complex, more symbolist (he met with Verlaine in Paris). His interest in occultism increased (he was accepted as a member of the order of the Secret Rose). From this period he was stuck between his growing interest in Secret societies and his patriotism for the Ireland that he wished romantic. But his love for the people of the Emerald Isle was stronger, as we can see in the poem "To Ireland In The Coming Times": in which he portrays himself as "the true brother of a company that sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong". "Ireland's wrong" being of course the political turmoil and wars that occurred in the country at the beginning of the century. There is another poem which is like a praise to Ireland: "The Fisherman". This poem is about a simple fisherman from Connemara, the "simple and wise" Yeats loved so much. He preferred talking about a fisherman than mentioning politics and what happened in Dublin at the time (the consequences of the Easter Rising.) Yeats was more interested in peasants, fishermen, hunters and everything related to tradition such as ghosts of ancient gods and heroes.

2- Yeats and the Irish mythology

Several mythological characters (derived from the Ulster Cycle for instance) are found in Yeats' poems. Cuchulain (pronounced koo'hoo'lin) is maybe the most important of them. He was a hero from Ulster, the son of Dechtire and Conchubar. He is often compared to Achilles from the Greek mythology, praised for his valour in battle and his athletic qualities. But he was also, and this is important to Yeats, a lover to many women, like Emer (the mother of his son, she had six gifts : beauty, voice, sweet speech, needlework, wisdom and chastity) Fand, queen of the Danaan (the Irish fairy folk) and wife of the Irish sea god Manannan and Aoife (an immortal female warrior). At the end of his life Cuchulain accidentally killed his only son, and out of frustration he went in the ocean to fight the waves, a final battle he obviously lost. This symbolizes for Yeats the way a hard life can destroy a man's feelings, driving him crazy. The poet rearranges the legend by saying that Cuchulain changed to a bird after death. This hero is an important figure of Irish culture, as there is a statue of Cuchulain in the General Post Office in Dublin (where the events of Easter 1916 occurred). Six poems mention him.³¹

³¹ To The Rose Upon The Rood Of Time", "Cuchulain's Fight With The Sea", "Crazy Jane On The Mountain", "The Statues", "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and "Cuchulain Comforted"

Another example of a character from the Irish mythology that meant a lot to Yeats is Deirdre. She appears in the Ulster Cycle too. When she was born there was a prophecy: her beauty would eventually bring Ulster to an end. Her looks could kill. She was banned because of that. The king of Ulster, Conchubar, learned about her beauty and wanted her hand, but Deirdre had fallen in love with another man, a young warrior named Naoise. She later died broken-hearted. This idea of “fatal” beauty spoke to Yeats (as we will see later on he always thought Maud Gonne was a “supernatural beauty”). He liked this story so much that he wrote a play about it in 1907, a play called *Deirdre*.³²

Baile (Bal’ya) and Ailinn (il’yin) are also quite present in Yeats’ work. They are probably the most famous lovers of the Irish mythology. Their story is a tragedy quite similar to William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed they love each other until they are told by Aengus that the other is dead, which causes them to die of broken heart. Aengus is, according to Yeats, “the old Irish God of love and poetry and ecstasy, who changed four of his kisses into birds”. Eight poems talk about Baile, Ailinn and Aengus³³. Love stories always interested Yeats, and a love story in Ireland even more.

Grania is also part one of these major love stories in the Irish mythology, but of the White Cycle (opposed to the Red Branch or Ulster Cycle.) It is similar to the story of Deirdre. Daughter of the king of Ireland, Grania was supposed to be married to Finn, the great hero of the White Cycle, but she accidentally fell in love with Diarmuid (der’mid) who had a “love-spot” on his forehead. Finn chased the two until Diarmuid is killed by a boar, and Grania finally accepts to be Finn’s lover.³⁴

Another mythological character loved by Yeats is Oisín (pronounced ush’een). He wrote a long poem about it called “The Wanderings Of Oisín”. Oisín was the poet of the Fenian cycle. He was picked by Niamh, the daughter of the king of the Country of the Young (or Tir-nanog) and he travelled with her to that land of immortality. They lived happily for centuries together but at one point Oisín wanted to go back to Ireland. Niamh accepted, on one condition: he was not allowed to get down of his horse and touch the floor. Unfortunately he ended up falling, which caused him to become a very old man at once. This story makes sense to Yeats

³² Concerning his poetical works, see the poem “Baile and Ailinn”.

³³ “Ribh At The Tomb Of Baile”, “Ailinn” (poem I of “Supernatural Songs”) “Baile and Ailinn”, “The Song Of The Wandering Aengus”, “Under The Moon”, “The Wanderings Of Oisín”, “The Old Age Of Queen Maeve”, “The Harp Of Aengus” and “The Shadowy Waters”.

³⁴ See references in the poems “A Faery Song, Upon A Lady Dying” and “The Wanderings Of Oisín”

because he always wanted to reach for immortality, to go beyond reality and look for something more beautiful. We can compare the Irish Country of the Young to Byzantium in his poem “Sailing To Byzantium” which I will discuss later on this essay. As opposed to Oisín, there is also Fergus, who is the poet of the Red Branch (or Ulster Cycle). Yeats wrote this about him: “He was once a king of all Ireland, but he gave up his throne so that he might live at peace hunting in the woods” (Conner, 63). To Yeats he is a symbol of simplicity and humility, giving up power to live a simple life. The poet always admired peasants in the countryside as opposed to the middle class in the cities.³⁵

The Druids are an important element of the Irish mythology, and they are quite present in Yeats’ poetry. They constituted the ancient order of Celtic priests. They believed in the transmigration of souls (like Yeats) and they were prophets. There are eight poems that include the druids³⁶. It is important to remember that Yeats believed in magic. He actually believed in fairies and in all the Celtic legends. That is why druids are so present in his works.

He wanted to preserve this because it was the Ireland he imagined when he was young and studying in England. That is one of the reasons why the Easter Rising was fearful to him: “A terrible beauty is born” goes the refrain of his poem called “Easter 1916”. A beauty indeed, but a terrible one; Yeats was not really a fighter, and thought it was better to write a poem that was like a magnificent post card of Connemara (“The Fisherman”) than getting involved in politics.

3- Yeats and the land

Yeats tried to reinvent Ireland, as we see in the poem “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”: “This is not, I say, the dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland the poets have imagined, terrible and gay” (l.10-12). Here the term “terrible” is close to the “Sublime” in

³⁵ See the poems “To The Rose Upon The Rood Of Time”, “Fergus And The Druid”, “Who Goes With Fergus?”, “The Wanderings Of Oisín” and “The Old Age Of Queen Maeve”

³⁶ “To The Rose Upon The Rood Of Time”, “Fergus And The Druid”, “Cuchulain’s Fight With The Sea”, “The Dedication To A Book Of Stories Selected From The Irish Novelists”, “To Ireland In The Coming Times”, “The Secret Rose”, “The Wanderings Of Oisín”, “The Old Age Of Queen Maeve”, “The Harp Of Aengus” and “The Shadowy Waters”.

romantic poetry: It means great and so beautiful that it inspires fear and terror on the viewer. In his poems, mostly his early works, he evoked places (always real) that he dreamed of when he was stuck in London. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is a real place in Lough Hill, County Sligo for instance. Ben Bulbin is real of course, that is where he rests in peace (cf the poem “Under Ben Bulbin” and the picture in the appendices). Thor Ballylee was the place where he went to get some inspiration, where he retired in a secluded place on top of a tower (cf “The Tower”) where he composed his late poems. Coole Park was near Thor Ballylee, where he used to take strolls with lady Gregory (see the poem “Coole Park, 1929” and the picture in the appendices). All these places are on the western coast of Ireland, around Connemara (cf “The Fisherman”) and he managed to give these places a magical effect, relating them to the gods and heroes of the Irish Mythology. He turned the landscape into human entities, like for instance “The Lake Isle Of Innisfree”, where nature is really powerful: we have “the bees” the dew: “the veils of morning”, “the crickets and the linnet are singing (cricket and linnet, symbols of desire) in line 10 we have the sound of the river (“I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore”). To sum up my idea, a place like Lake Innisfree that would appear boring to most of people is transformed in an idyllic place by Yeats who personifies Nature with amazing skills. It makes anyone want to go to Ireland!

Two late poems are also important because they are about culture: “Coole Park, 1929 “ and “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931”. Coole Park was the place where Lady Gregory lived. Yeats explains in these poems the importance of a high cultural level in a society. He’s quoting names of deceased artists (as often in his work) in “Coole Park, 1929”: Douglas Hyde (1860-1949) (l.9) who was a poet and a scholar Yeats met at the Contemporary Club and the Young Ireland Society. Hyde became the first President of the Irish Republic in 1937; John Synge (1871-1909) the “meditative man” (l.13) was a playwright and a poet, often praised by Yeats; John Shawne-Taylor (1866-1911) (l.14) was a nephew of Lady Gregory who was particularly handsome; and finally Hugh Lane (1875-1915) (l.14) was another nephew of Lady Gregory who had a collection of Impressionist paintings which he offered to Dublin authorities on the condition that they built an art gallery, but they refused so the paintings went to London. This is another example of what Yeats resented in Ireland: the fact that people did not really like art there. But the two poems are an encouragement to keep trying and build a true fine art tradition in this country. Art that is timeless, that can “cut through time” (l.24). The image of the swallows (“I meditate upon a swallow’s flight”, l.1) can mean different things: they can represent great artistry because of their

gracious movements in the sky; they are migratory, reminding us of summer; they can also embody the soul. The image is used again in line 17: “They came like swallows and like swallows went” This time he compares the souls of the artists he names in the previous stanzas to swallows: they did not last long but the beauty they created will remain.

“Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” is an extension of “Coole Park, 1929” but it is more descriptive, there are more details on the landscape he is trying to depict, the landscape he sees from his window: “Under my window ledge the waters race/ Otters below and moor-hens on the top” (l.2). He is zooming in: “Upon the border of that lake’s a wood” (l.9). He is also comparing elements of landscape with the soul: “What’s water but the generated soul?”(l.8) and line 19:

That stormy white
But seems a concentration of the sky.
And like the soul, it sails into the sight

Here we have the idea that a soul can travel, it is the concept of metempsychosis often found in Yeats’ works. Like the romantic poets Shelley or Wordsworth Yeats uses the landscape to represent art, and the artists’ souls. By the way he says at the end of the poem: “We were the last Romantics” l.41.

One of the places that matter in Yeats’ poetry is of course Cro Patrick. It is a 2,500 feet high mountain located near Clew Bay in country Mayo. It is a holy mountain for the religious people of Ireland because it is supposedly the mountain St Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland, climbed and banished the snakes from Ireland. Still today people in July come in a pilgrimage to this mountain. Saint Patrick was important to Yeats because he is the Patron Saint of Ireland, and also because he represents the transition from Celtic beliefs to Christianity.³⁷

Cruachan (kro‘ken) is another mountain or hill situated in county Roscommon. It was the seat of Maeve, the queen of Connaught and enemy of Cuchulain (the hero from Ulster). Yeats writes about this hill: “What beauty was lost to me, what depths of emotions is still lacking in me, because nobody told me...that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills.”³⁸

³⁷ See references in the poem “The Dancer At Cruachan” And “Cro-Patrick”

³⁸ See the poems “The Hour Before Dawn”, “The Dancer At Cruachan and Cro-Patrick”, “Words For Music Perhaps” and “The Old Age Of Queen Maeve”.

Knocknarea (nok na ray) is a well-know mountain near Sligo which is flat on top and where there is a mound of stones covering, as the legend says, the remains of Queen Maeve. It represents the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology. In maps it is referred to as “The King’s Mountain”.³⁹

The last mountain I will talk about is the one under which Yeats was buried. Ben-Bulben represents the White Cycle of Irish mythology, as opposed to Knocknarea. You can see a picture of Ben Bulben in the appendices; it is a lovely flat top mountain, famous in the legends involving Grania and Diarmuid. Constance Markievicz, a friend of Yeats, lived near Ben Bulben, in Lisadell. This mountain became a symbol so important to him that he wished to be buried under it.⁴⁰

4- Cultural influences and ancestors

Several people inspired him this passion and devotion to the culture of Ireland. The most important of them is without any doubts John O’Leary (1830-1907). He was a leader of the Fenians, a group which wanted to promote Irish literature and Irish culture. This group was illegal and in 1865 he went to prison, then in exile. He returned to Ireland in 1885. Yeats said so himself, O’Leary is his most important influence: From O’Leary’s conversation and from the Irish books he lent or gave me has come all that I have set my hand to since” (Conner, 137) and that he “had the moral genius that moves all young people” (Conner, 138). O’Leary helped Yeats publish *The Wanderings Of Oisín And Other Poems* in 1889. Meeting that man changed his life. In one of Yeats’ most celebrated poems, “September 1913”, the poet pays a tribute to his old deceased friend by saying: “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, it’s with O’Leary in the grave”.⁴¹

Another cultural reference of Yeats is Standish O’Grady (1846-1928). He was an Irish author, a historian and a major figure of the Celtic Renaissance. He wrote books of reference about Irish history and culture, like for example the legends of the Ulster Cycle (Cuchulain, Deirdre, Baille and Aillinn....) books which helped Yeats become the Cultural Nationalist everyone knows now. O’Grady said once a visionary sentence, when Yeats was in the room:

³⁹ See the poems “The Ballad Of Father O’Hart”, “The Hosting Of the Sidhe”, “Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland” and “Alternative Song For The Severed Head”.

⁴⁰ See the poems “On A Political Prisoner”, “Towards Break Of Day”, “The Tower”, “Alternative Song For The Severed Head” and “Under Ben Bulben”.

⁴¹ For other references, see the poem “Beautiful Lofty Things”

We have now a literary movement, it is not very important; it will be followed by a political movement that will not be very important; then must come a military movement that will be important indeed. (Conner, 134)

Considering this we can say that O'Grady participated in making Yeats aware that freedom from the British had to begin with a cultural movement that would eventually end in complete independence.

John Millington Synge (1871-1909) was also someone who deeply marked Yeats' life. He was an Irish dramatist, Protestant like Yeats. The poet met Synge in Paris, and he persuaded Yeats to go to the Aran Islands to find peace and quiet in order to create. Synge created many plays that are still famous: *In The Shadow Of The Glen*, *Riders To The Sea*, *The Well Of The Saints*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Playboy Of The Western World* and the uncompleted *Deirdre Of The Sorrows*. He also wrote poetry from time to time. Yeats always had eulogistic words about him: according to him he was "the greatest dramatic genius of Ireland" and he said he was "incapable of a political idea". This led the Irish audience to riot after one of his plays was presented in 1907 at the Abbey Theatre, created by Yeats.⁴²

Yeats' writings about the Irish folklore was surely inspired by Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), "the greatest folklorist who ever lived" according to the poet (Conner, 89). Hyde studied at Trinity University in Dublin. He translated old texts from the Irish language and his works allowed the non Gaelic speakers (like Yeats himself!) to rediscover and revive the ancient legends of their country. Hyde became the first president of The Republic Of Ireland in 1939, and he stayed in position until 1946. That is how important he was to the Irish people.⁴³

An earlier influence is Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) who was a poet, a novelist and a dramatist. Born in county Roscommon, Ireland, he studied at Trinity College in Dublin. He was a Protestant, like many of Yeats' "masters", and he tried to start an Irish literature, freed from the yoke of the British. His most famous works are the novel *The Vicar Of Wakefield* (1766), the play *She Stoops To Conquer* (1773) and the poem "The Deserted Village" (1770). He was admired by Yeats because he was an true-born Irish successful writer. See the poems "The Seven Sages" and "Blood And The Moon".⁴⁴

⁴² For references to Synge in Yeats' poems see: "In Memory Of Major Robert Gregory", "Coole Park 1929" and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited".

⁴³ See the poems "At The Abbey Theatre" and "Coole Park 1929".

⁴⁴ See the poems "The Seven Sages" and "Blood And The Moon".

Lionel Pigot Johnson (1867-1902) was an Irish poet and a friend of Yeats. He was a member of the Rhymers' Club. A very educated man, as Yeats puts it: "Nor was there any branch of knowledge Johnson did not claim for his own"; but also an alcoholic, who died early because of his addiction. (Conner, 94) ⁴⁵

Another artist who influenced the young Yeats was Anthony Raftery (1784-1834). He was a poet and a wandering minstrel, playing at feasts all around Ireland. In his essay called *The Galway Plains* (published in 1903) Yeats defines him as such: "It was here that Raftery, the wandering country poet of ninety years ago, praised and blamed, chanting fine verses, and playing badly on his fiddle". Yeats felt close to him because the minstrel was from Ballylee and Coole. In addition to that, he embodied perfectly the traditions of the countryside that Yeats loved so much. Because Raftery was blind (he had small pox) he compared him to Homer, the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.⁴⁶

To close this chapter about the people who influenced Yeats in a cultural way (concerning Ireland). I will mention three authors: Sir Samuel Ferguson, Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan. Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886) was an Irish poet and scholar, notable for participating in the revival of Irish literature in the XIXth century. One of his major poems is "Pashteen Finn" meaning "fair-haired maid", a rendering of a very old and very famous traditional Irish song.⁴⁷ Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-1845) was an Irish essayist and poet who founded the important newspaper *The Nation* and was leader of the Young Ireland Party, which inspired many Irish Nationalists. Yeats thought that he knew "how to treat Irish subjects with an Irish fashion" and that he "was the foremost moral influence on our politics." Davis contributed to the revival of the Irish culture with his poems and his essays. See the poem "To Ireland In The Coming Times". James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) was an Irish poet born in Dublin. Almost all of his poems were based on translations from the Gaelic. His most well-known poem was called "Dark Rosaleen". The young Yeats would read Mangan's poems and be moved by the authentic and the purity of his words. In his autobiography Yeats talks of him as "our one poet raised to the first rank by intensity". One of Mangan's poems, entitled "Kathleen ny Houlihan" and translated from the Gaelic, inspired Yeats' play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Mangan was one of

⁴⁵ There are references to Johnson in "Ego Dominus Tuus", "The Grey Rock" and "In Memory Of Major Robert Gregory".

⁴⁶ For other references to Raftery, see the poems "The Tower" and "Coole Park And Ballylee".

⁴⁷ See the poem: "To Ireland In The Coming Times".

Yeats' favourite poets in the Irish tradition.⁴⁸ Every true Irish artist was a friend of Yeats because he wanted to create a national culture. These three authors are good examples according to him.

Yeats was also proud of his ancestry. He quotes his ancestors in some of his poems. Jervis Yeats was the poet's great-great-great-great-grandfather. He is the "Old Dublin Merchant" in the poem "Pardon Old Fathers". He was in the linen business in Dublin but he probably emigrated from Yorkshire, England. He died in 1712. Benjamin Yeats was Jervis' son, a follower of Swift and active in Irish Protestant Nationalism.

Benjamin Yeats (the second) lived in William Street, Dublin. He was wealthy. He married Mary Butler in 1773. He was a member of one of the most powerful Irish medieval families.

John Yeats (1774-1846) was the poet great-grandfather. He is the "Old Country scholar" of the poem "Pardon Old Fathers" and the rector of Drumcliff church (see the poem "Under Ben Bulbin"). He settled in Sligo.

William Butler Yeats was the poet's grandfather. He appears in the poem "Are You Content?" under the words "the red-headed rector in county Down". He died in 1862.

John Butler Yeats (1832-1922) was the poet's father. He was a painter. We can link Yeats' inclination to visual arts to his father (this will be treated further in this essay). See the poem "Beautiful Lofty Things".

William Pollexfen was the poet's grandfather on his mother's side, born in 1811. In the poem "Pardon Old Fathers" he is the "Old merchant skipper that leaped overboard after a ragged hat in Biscay Bay".

The fact that the poet included his ancestors in his poems mean that they are important to him; he knew where he came from and that helped him to know where he was going.

5- Relation with the common people

⁴⁸ See the poem "To Ireland In The Coming Times"

The one aspect of William Butler Yeats which remains controversial is his relation with the people of Ireland. He always seemed to like the peasantry but not the common worker. In the poem "The People", people only want money and go to church not by devotion but out of habit. His words were harsh: he referred to Dublin as an "unmannerly town" (l.3), "most defamed" (l.4) and called the people "drunkards", "pilferers of public funds" (l.23), "dishonest crowd" (l.24). This poem is the sequel of "September 1913" where he said that "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone; it's with O'Leary in the grave". Three years later he published "Easter 1916" where he wrote those famous words (as a refrain): "A terrible beauty is born" as if Romantic Ireland was back, with new heroes (Padraic Pearse, James Connolly, Constance Markievicz...) the issue of a national identity, a powerful and real "Irishness" against "Anglo-Irishness". Yeats tried to build "Irishness" with his words, his plays which were full of mythical elements (the Famous "Abbey Theatre") but it did not work, the public did not respond very well; Yeats considered it a failure and that was the beginning of a kind of divorce between him and Irish people. In spite of that Yeats has been and always will be the main voice of "Irishness" in the emerald isle and around the world.

In 1905 Yeats wanted to take part in a project to build an art gallery in Dublin, with the works of the French impressionists. But the local (Irish) authorities rejected the project and all the paintings went to the National Gallery in London. This was another disappointment for Yeats who considered Dublin and Ireland in general as an uncivilized land. ("That is no country for old men" he would say later in "Sailing for Byzantium".)

Yeats thought he was "on a mission" for Ireland. For the public and his peers he was the instigator of Cultural Ireland, Cultural Nationalism, the "Mystical patriot". With all he brought to his mother country, and, being around Maud Gonne, a fierce nationalist, we can be tempted to say that Yeats was an Irish Nationalist for independence and against the English. But things are more complicated than that. One thing is sure: after an early career as a folkloric poet, Yeats moved away from culture to focus on politics, in Ireland and around the world. His body was buried under Ben Bulbin, as the title of his last poem "Under Ben Bulbin" indicates. It was his will to be buried there, with the words from the poem written on his grave stone:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!

Even after death he wanted people to see him as a true Irishman. A true Irishman who loved Ireland, who loved its culture, but who also loved its women...

III. Love commitment

Yeats was celebrated and grew influential thanks to his early love poems that were to some critics the most beautiful love poems of the time (he was active from 1889 to his death in 1939). Even nowadays we can easily imagine people trying to woo their sweethearts with Yeats' stanzas.

Ch-9 From passion to marital love and family

1- Maud Gonne: the passionate love of his life

As a young man Yeats first laid his eyes on Maud Gonne, the love of his life (according to him). He met her in 1889. She was a militant for Irish independence, an active member of the IRB (The Irish Republican Brotherhood). To him, she was the perfect beauty, the ideal woman, the allegory of his much praised Romantic Ireland. He also called her his Helen, as a reference to Helen of Troy. He mythologized her in his works. Among his first poems such as "Down by the Salley Gardens", "When you are old", "Adam's Curse", thirteen in total are implicitly dedicated to Maud Gonne. He even used a special type of poetic form when he wrote a poem about her: the seven-line aristocratic rhyme royal: ababbbc. (Vendler, 2007, 263). He said that his love for Maud was the most important thing of his life (Gill, 6). He proposed to her a lot of times between 1891 and 1903 with style and "grandeur". Each time she refused, saying that a poet cannot be a good husband. In a letter, she said to him: "Be true to yourself and let nothing interfere with your literary work" (Allison, 189). "Nothing", including love.

In 1902, Yeats, aged 37, wrote "Adam's Curse". By then, he had already proposed to Maud Gonne four times. Maud Gonne was to marry John Mac Bride in 1903. Yeats was a mature man, but frustrated. The poem is autobiographical, as he sat once with Maud, her sister Kathleen ("The beautiful mild woman") one summer to talk about beauty, love and art. It is important to point out the fact that the poem is a conversational poem, the first one written by Yeats. It is a

conversation between Yeats and Maud. Adam's curse is an obvious reference to the Bible, when Eve and Adam were banned from the Garden of Eden and cursed for their sin (the original sin). But here the curse is Yeats' curse, the fact that he cannot have the woman he loves. The poem is written in 5 stanzas; the first one longer (14 lines) than the others. The rhyming pattern is aabb ccdd. First they talk about poetry:

A Line may take hours maybe
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught

Yeats is praising the activity of writing poetry which he opposes with the work of paupers: "break stones like an old pauper" and "bankers, schoolmasters and clergymen"(l.13) "for to articulate sweet sounds together is to work harder than all these"(l.10-11). Yeats emphasizes the superiority of the poet to celebrate beauty. In the second stanza "the beautiful mild woman" (who is Maud Gonne's sister) talks about beauty, saying it is hard for a woman to be beautiful, and that it is an obligation:

To be born woman is to know
Although they do not talk of it at school
That we must labour to be beautiful (l.18-20)

That illustrates the sexism of the time. Yeats' reply is about courtly love in the third stanza. He says this kind of love "seems an idle trade enough"(l.27) The word "love" changes the scenery around the characters: the moon appears. The last stanza is the poet's love declaration to Maud:

I had a thought for no one's but your ears
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love

But that is not enough, the high way of love, courteous love is not enough, because at the end the lovers' hearts grow weary, they need more than just platonic love: "And yet we've grown as weary hearted as that hollow moon". The last two lines of the poem remind us of the kind of relationship Yeats and Maud Gonne had at the time: they loved each other, yet like chivalry-courteous love their relation was not consummated.

But in spite of these refusals, and Maud Gonne's marriage to John Mac Bride (a drunken lout, Yeats once said.) William and Maud consummated their relationship in 1908, but the passion had gone. In 1916, the Leaders of the Easter Rising were executed, (see the poem "Sixteen Men Dead") and among them Constance Marcievicz (member of the Irish Citizen Army, see the picture page 78 on the appendices) and John Mac Bride, former husband of Maud Gonne. Since she was now a widow, Yeats proposed to Maud that same year (1916) but she refused again. This was his last proposal to the love of his life.

2- His other lovers

In October 1917, one year after his last proposal to Maud, he even proposed to Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult, but she refused also. He dedicated a poem to her ("To A Young Girl"), in which he describes Iseult's eyes resembling her mother's.

Although we always talk of Maud Gonne as his only real love, Yeats had many other inspirations from women. He loved women, all women, and he had many lovers. His first crush, the first woman who aroused him, was his cousin Laura Armstrong. She came to see him when he was eighteen years old. She had long red hair. She took a stroll with him. But she was already engaged to someone else. He wrote her "a few bad poems" and he grew angry at the thought of her fiancé. In the poem "A Dream Of Death" dedicated to Maud Gonne, Yeats has these words: "She was more beautiful than my first love." He will say later about her "Do not be mistaken. She is just a myth and a symbol." She is the symbol of an impossible love, of frustration, of anger caused by an ideal that can never be fulfilled. These were the founding stones of the melancholy he later developed about Maud Gonne (Genet, 1989, 129).

After this first encounter with passion, Yeats met another woman who counted for him: Katharine Tynan. He met her in 1885 and began a correspondence with her two years later. She was a poetess, and he liked her work very much. He even considered her as the better female poet of her time. Beyond his admiration for her poems he grew very fond of her: "I write to you as if I was writing to myself" he said in one of his letters (Genet, 1989, 130). But then he met Maud Gonne, and although he kept writing to Katharine, she began to feel his heart was taken. He continued asking for her letters when they became scarce. But eventually, Katharine married H.A. Dickinson in 1893 and their correspondence stopped (Genet, 1989, 130.)

Yeats met Olivia Shakespear in 1894. She was the cousin of Lionel Johnson, an Irish artist. She asked him to read her novels, so their first relation was strictly professional. Yeats liked her

Greek-like beauty, the fact that she was distinguished and refined. She was married to an older man and she had a four-year-old daughter. Yeats found comfort in that woman, away from the frustrating and devouring passion he had for Maud Gonne. He asked Olivia to come live with him. Their relationship lasted less than a year, because Yeats was still obsessed with Maud. In the poem “The Lover Mourns For The Loss Of Love”, Yeats wrote about this period of his life:

She looked in my heart one day
And saw your image was there
She has gone weeping away...

Yeats kept writing to Olivia Shakespear and she became his best friend, but after they broke up Yeats felt depressed and sexually frustrated (Genet, 1989, 132.)

Always trying to get his mind off Maud Gonne Yeats had an affair with Florence Farr. She was an actress, and a member of the Golden Dawn like Yeats. He met her in 1890. According to him she was a good actress with three main qualities: “a quiet beauty”, “a great sense of rhythm” and “a beautiful voice”. She used to read aloud his poems to him. About his relationship with Farr Yeats said it was like “a long lasting friendship and a long-lasting exasperation at the same time” (Genet, 1989, 135).

Lady Gregory was a great help for the poet. She was his greatest friend. She was of the Protestant Ascendancy like him, and she was much refined and educated. In a way she was the patron of his arts. We do not know if their relationship got physical at one point but we can be sure that she had a great influence on him (Genet, 1989, 136).

In 1908 Yeats had an affair with Mabel Dickinson who told him she was pregnant in order to get married to him. This pregnancy was not true after all (Genet, 1989, 136).

Aged 69, in 1934, Yeats got in a relation with Margot Ruddock, who was 27. She was an actress and a poetess. He was attracted to her mainly sexually, (he had just had the Steinach operation) and the passion did not last long. Unfortunately, the girl had a nervous breakdown because she was still in love with him. She was in Spain then, she was having attacks of madness, and Yeats arranged to get her back to England. In spite of that he includes her in the “beautiful lofty things” in the poem “A Crazy Girl” (Genet, 1989, 141).

Dorothy Wellesley was his last confidant. She was a poetess. Although she had for him only feelings of friendship, Yeats felt more than that for her. He wrote to her “Your friend who believes he is much more than a friend” (Genet, 1989, 142.)

All these romantic affairs are part of the quest for the Unity Of Being so dear to Yeats.

3- George Hyde Lees and children: a peaceful love

On 20 October 1917 he married George Hyde Lees, who introduced him to automatic writing, which he was to use in *A Vision*. She inspired him the poems: “Solomon to Sheba” and “On Women”. Marital life was quite enjoyable for him. It gave him a new vitality. “Solomon to Sheba” can be considered a sensual or sexual poem. Sex is seen here as a revelation, an act of creation: (Howes, 1, Cullingford, 168). His marital love for George Hyde Lees was in a way completely opposed to the burning passion he felt for Maud Gonne. In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats wrote about his wife: “My wife is a perfect wife, kind, wise, and unselfish. I think you were such another young girl once. She has made my life serene and full of order” (Conner, 69). George represents serenity and order, Maud Gonne represents passion and tumult.⁴⁹ Georgie gave birth to two children, Anne and Michael. W.B Yeats also loved his children with all his heart, love he put into words in the poem “A Prayer for My Daughter”. But even if he wrote a poem for his daughter, he still mentioned his lost love and frustration. Take a look at these lines: “and for an hour I have walked and prayed/ Because of the great gloom that is in my mind” (l.7-8). And in the last stanza: “how but in custom and ceremony/ Are innocence and beauty born?” (l.77-78). Basically Yeats wanted his daughter to be a beautiful aristocratic girl, to be married to another aristocrat and raise children. This misogynous view of women is rather strange when we know that when he was around Maud Gonne he was surrounded by feminists. Getting married changed his view of women; he grew more conservative and traditionalist. He wanted the world (and his country) to be governed by aristocratic poets. He had a relationship with Olivia Shakspear, which is mentioned in the poem “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, where he “bends his knees” and bows before Olivia Shakespear. It was in his old age. He forgot his pleasant meetings with the great rebels that were Shelley, Blake or even Beaudelaire or Rimbaud, the “poètes maudits” of the late 19th period. He advocated custom and ceremony whereas his first love, Maud Gonne, was fierce, loud and beautiful, more like a warrior than pretty as a lady. But once again we have different kinds of “love”: love for his patrons (O’Leary, Parnell, Blake) unattainable love for Maud Gonne, and the love he had for his family, which was real but less powerful than the one he had for his ideal beauty, Maud.

Yeats also wrote a poem to his son, Michael, entitled “A Prayer For My Son”. Michael Yeats was born in 1921. The poem is a sort of lullaby song to his son: “Bid a strong ghost stand at the head/ That my Michael may sleep sound” (l.1-2), “protecting, till the danger past, with human

⁴⁹ For more references to George Hyde Lees see the poem “To Be Carved On A Stone At Thoor Ballylee”.

love” (l.31-32). Here Yeats stands as a reassuring paternal figure, away from the disorder that was his life before he got married.

Yeats got married in 1917 at the age of fifty-two. She was twenty-four. Of course we can ask ourselves the question: was this George Hyde Lees a substitute, once finally he understood that he would never have Maud Gonne ? Did he still love his “Helen”, was he trying to make her jealous ? Maud’s husband John Mac Bride was executed because he took part in the uprising of Easter 1916. In spite of these rumours he loved his children and he did love his wife. It is a poet’s duty to write what’s in his heart:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. (Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 509).

Ch-10 Physical love

In Yeats’ works, sex is often seen as unity, a beautiful but frightening unity. One poem is considered even nowadays as a poem about sexual intercourse, this poem is “Leda And The Swan” written in 1923, five years after his wedding with George. The story taken from the Greek mythology goes as follows: Zeus comes down from the sky and mates with a mortal girl (Leda).The result of this strange union is the child who became Helen of Troy (Yeats’ Maud). Some have argued that the poem might be just about rape because of the violence of the words : “A Sudden blow : the great things beating still/ Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed” (l.1-2) [...] Another interpretation would be the union of opposites (that William Blake loved so much), the union between the mortal and the immortal, between the sensitive and the supra sensitive. A union of opposites that results in something positive: the birth of the magnificent Helen of Troy. In the poem “On Woman” in the second stanza sexual pleasure is emphasized with the words “harshness”, “pleasure” and “shudder”:

Harshness of their desire
That made them stretch and yawn,
Pleasure that comes with sleep,
Shudder that made them one

Here unity is the key word again (“that made them one”). According to Elisabeth Butler Cullingford (1968) Yeats sees sex as “the supreme trope and guiding philosophical metaphor”. The “metaphor” here is the longing to be one again, to merge into unity. Once again the concept invoked is Plato’s Unity Of Being.

What can be said to sum up all his ideas is that W.B Yeats in his old age (“Leda And The Swan” was published in 1923) was thinking about sex a lot. Eleven years later he had a vasectomy (the Steinach operation) that deeply affected his libido. The period between 1923 and 1934 was to him a period of frustration He experimented Tantric sex, which is sex without contact, to him it was the perfect union of body and soul (reminiscent of Plato). He created , in his ballad-poems of *Words of Music Perhaps* the character of Crazy Jane, a non-conventional frivolous woman (Bloom, 398). It was a way for Yeats to calm his sexually frustrated desires and also to reject the puritanism of the Anglo-Irish Church. In spite of what has been said about this part of this life Yeats was not a misogynist, far from it: he preferred the company of women. These poems are just the reflection of the sexual frustration and even abstinence of his late life. For critics these texts were redundant; I just think they add something new and surprising to his poetical works.

Ch-11 Unrequited love for Maud Gonne: consequences on his late life

Even after Yeats married George, he continued seeing Maud and working with her. They collaborated spiritually in the Rosicrucian Society (the Rose and the Cross, where Maud Gonne was High Priestess). When Maud Gonne became a Nationalist Hero, after the uprising of 1916, he kept talking to her as if she had been a Goddess, whereas Middle class Irish people were just a bunch of “drunken louts” to him. She was for democracy, and advocated violence when necessary, whereas Yeats was aristocratic and was a pacifist. The poem “A Prayer for my daughter” was a warning to Yeats’ daughter not to be “corrupted” like Maud Gonne had been (forced to take arms to free her country). So the poem is more about Gonne than it is about Yeats’s daughter. The last marriage proposal to Maud Gonne occurred in 1916. John Mc Bride, Gonne’s lover at the time was part of the “Sixteen dead men” executed by the crown of England, also like Constance Markievicz leader of the Irish Citizen Army and another martyr whose bust is exposed at St Stephen’s Green, Dublin (see page 77 on the appendices).

Yeats' love for Maud Gonne was considered the greatest love story of modern literature and in poetry in general. In 1898 they agreed to a sort of "cosmic" marriage. But Yeats wanted a real one. Unrequited love became a recurrent theme in his poetical works (Cullingford, 167). Women always haunted his nightmares. In spite of that he continued seeing women and working with women. He wanted her, but she always rejected him. Like the ultimate woman, the goddess (the Helen) slipping away from his arms.

The collection of poems named *The Wind among The Reeds* is a kind of "testimony" to this unrequited love. Published in 1899, half journey in this world for Yeats. We can sense his bitterness and his disillusiones especially in the poem "He Wished For the Cloth of Heaven":

I would spread the cloths under your feet
But, being poor, have only my dreams
I have spread my dreams under your feet
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams

She broke his heart, several times, and now she is stepping on it. Even his affair with Olivia Shakespear could not soothe his pain. It was almost pathetic, the state he was in, at that time. Mrs Shakespear understood that he was still in love with Maud and she left him. In the 1890s Yeats could not write a poem without mentioning his unrequited love. That shows the stubbornness of the man (like the five proposals, all refused). They "consummated" their love in 1908 but that did not raise Yeats' spirits, on the contrary, he blamed time (of course Maud Gonne had grown older) and the disappearance of passion between them.

According to Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (Cullingford, 167) "Yeats' frustrated devotion to an unattainable Muse dominated his life and poetry". In spite of this bitterness in his poems due to unrequited love we cannot say that Yeats hated women, but that he feared them or idealized them. He did not treat men and women as equals. He was a late Victorian misogynist who thought women should look pretty and nothing else.

In his late life he also wrote a poem about an old friend (and one of his first lovers): Olivia Shakespear, named "After Long Silence". A tragic piece of genius , melancholy due to old age , and long lost love:

My hair is white
Your hair is white
Come let us talk about love
What other theme do we know
When we were young
We loved each other and were ignorant

Here we can see the sadness in this encounter, their only subject of conversation is love, when they meet again after all those years, their love is gone, their lives are nearly over.

Now that they are old, they are wiser and no longer “ignorant”. They know what is coming, old age, decrepitude and death. The refrain at the end of each stanza describes perfectly and in just a few words the state of passionate first love; passion that fades away (according to Yeats) when we grow older. In the same poem Yeats refers to love as the “supreme theme of art and song”, another proof that love was one of his favourite themes, even more important than politics or culture.

Another poem about love and time passing is “When You Are Old” published in *The Rose* in 1891 inspired by the XVIth century French poet Ronsard’s “Quand Vous Serez Bien Vieille”. Here we have three melancholic stanzas with a rhyming pattern abba cddc and so on. The rhythm is regular and cyclical like time passing. The poem is of course dedicated to Maud Gonne, with the will to make her regret the powerful love young Yeats had for her, love which she refused, as we see in the second stanza:

How many loved your moments of glad grace
And loved your beauty with love false or true
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you
And loved the sorrows of your changing face

The only man to love her truly was Yeats, because he loved her beyond the veil of appearances. The “pilgrim soul” makes us think of reincarnation, of Indian beliefs in metempsychosis. He loved her soul, not just her external beauty. This is a strong statement to make, but that is how much he loved his Maud.

“The Folly Of Being Comforted” is another poem on the same theme, written in a rather long stanza of fourteen lines, in the classical aabbccdd rhyme pattern. It is a conversational poem dealing with the passing of time, its effects and the fact that it does not change the intensity of the poet’s love (Bloom, 164) “The Fire that stirs about her, when she stirs/ Burns but more clearly” l 10-11. This is the opposite of what is said (by another voice) at the beginning of the poem:

Your well beloved’s hair has threads of grey
And little shadows come about her eyes;
Time can but make it easier to be wise
Though now it seems impossible, and so

All that you need is patience (l 2-6)

According to Yeats, it is as if Maud's beauty will never fade, and even if it does fade, he will never cease to love her.

He was so in love with her that in almost all of his poems we can sense her presence. He put her on a pedestal and left her there. She was his ultimate muse, his Helen of Troy and she was to him the allegory of "Romantic Ireland", a kind of Celtic goddess, both beautiful and fearsome, precious like the Emerald Isle that was Yeats' home land and his idealized heaven at the beginning of his career, from 1885 to 1900. It is this idea of "Romantic Ireland" and "Cultural Nationalism" that we can link with cultural commitment. And cultural commitment is close to political commitment, because in Ireland the political claim for independence was that the country had a strong cultural inheritance that differed from Great Britain, and therefore deserved to have its own state, its own republic. Love is "the supreme theme of art" as Yeats said. His romantic feelings stimulated his creativity and resulted in beautiful, classical poems. So from love commitment to commitment to art there is only one step. Furthermore love is a quest for unity. A man cannot be "one" if he does not find his soul mate to make him whole. The quest for a unity of being is important in Yeats' work, and art is a way to find unity.

IV. Commitment to art

Ch-12 Art and the quest for the Unity Of Being

The Unity Of Being is a concept borrowed from Dante and Plato. In Plato's works Aristophanes makes a speech in which he explains that originally the man was whole and then Zeus has split the human in two, and that all our lives we will try to be one again; we will seek for unity; we will do whatever is possible to recreate this original unity. Some may say that we find unity in love, in the physical act of love as well as the merging of the souls, two into one. Others may say that art is the purest way to achieve unity. William Butler Yeats was one of them. During his whole existence he sought for the Unity Of Being, both artistically and personally. He failed to achieve unity with Maud Gonne, but in his poems we can sense that he approached artistic heaven and perfect unity. In his own cosmology he placed himself in Phase 17, along with Dante. In Phase 17, the Unity Of Being is more possible, creative imagination is more easily obtained. About the concept he said "I thought that in man and race alike there is something called "Unity Of Being" using that term when Dante used it when he compared beauty in the Convicto to a perfectly proportioned body." (Conner, 44). At the beginning of his career mostly, Yeats found in nature a way to achieve Unity. His first poems are full of beautiful landscapes, like in "The Lake Isle Of Innisfree" where there is a description of an island in the middle of a lake, with the sound of bees and crickets. Nature is beautiful, nature is greater than men, and nature should be celebrated, like the lights in the evening on Innisfree "There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow/ And evening full of the linnet's wings." (1.7-8). Another example is "Down By The Salley Gardens". In this poem Yeats described a stroll he took with his beloved, and here again nature appears better than men and their feelings: "She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grows on the tree" (1.3) and "She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs." (1.7) In "The Sorrow Of Love" Yeats compared the natural landscape to human feelings:

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky
And all that famous harmony of leaves
Had blotted out man's image and his cry (1.1-4)

and he ended up saying that all this beauty “could but compose man’s image and his cry” (l.12). He compared himself and his beloved to birds in the poem “The White Birds”. All these early poems show an idealization of nature as a way to go beyond our duality. There are other indirect references to the Unity Of Being in Yeats’ poems. In the poem “There” Yeats said that “there all the gyres converge in one” (l.4) and in “Solomon And the Witch” we have the following lines:

Yet the world ends when these two things,
though several, are a single light,
When oil and wick are burned in one (l.29-31)

Here we have a clear description of what The Unity Of Being is: it has to be achieved through the union of contraries, just like William Blake said. When Yeats describes the apocalypse in “The Second Coming”, he tells us that “The falcon cannot hear the falconer”, implying that the breaking of unity is the beginning of the end of the world. This Unity Of Being, Yeats had searched it all his life. Like Carl Jung said, he embodied “the modern man seeking his own soul” (Genet, 1989, 19).

However, at the end of his life, Yeats stopped being obsessed with this Unity Of Being. Seeing that this endless research was pointless and seeing that he was close to death, he started thinking differently. This can be seen in “Among School Children”, at the end of the last stanza:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (l.61-64)

Here Yeats takes the example of the chestnut tree, symbol of life, of creativity, and explains to us that beauty does not necessarily have to be one, but that the parts of it are beautiful in themselves (here the parts of the tree). He is saying to us (and to all the other artists): stop looking for a Unity that does not exist in real life and start living your own lives, appreciating beauty where it is. Originally in the poem there were two dancers, merging into one in a sensual fusion, but Yeats to create just one dancer, dancing alone, to break this Romantic idea of unity (Scarpa, 8). The dancer alone has achieved unity because he is one with his creation. He has achieved unity through his art, just like Yeats has, and not with a second dancer. Yeats wants to prove to us that Unity is possible even though you are not one with your soul mate (his soul mate being of course Maud Gonne.)

Ch-13 Yeats' creative impulse: a Romantic tradition

In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1800 William Wordsworth, one of the first Romantics, said that “poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Grellet, 88). This creative impulse, this direct link between poetry and personal feelings, between art and life, clearly prevailed in Yeats' works. He says so himself at the end of his poem “To Ireland In The Coming Times”：“I cast my heart into my rhymes” (l.45). He also wrote to Katharine Tynan：“I put my life in my poems. To write them I have crushed it in pieces in a mortar” (Genet, 1989, 15). Yeats' art is a reflection of his life, of his feelings, of his beliefs. He does not cheat, he does not lie. You can know almost everything about him just reading his poems. He also writes in “To Ireland In The Coming Times”：“While I still may, I write for you/ The love I lived, The dream I knew” (l.33-34). He said in a conference in 1910 that “a poet is, by nature, a man who lives in complete sincerity, let's say that the better his poetry is, the more sincere his life is” (Genet, 1989, 15). So we can say that the function of art according to Yeats is quite the one Wordsworth described in 1800: a pure expression of true feelings, a reflection of the life of the artist. In other words, Yeats inherited the lyrical tradition of the great Romantics.

Ch-14 References to art in Yeats' poetry

Yeats had a strong link with the visual arts because his father John Butler Yeats was a painter. In his poems his liking visual arts is quite apparent. I will now quote references to art and artists in Yeats' poetry and explain why they are relevant.

The most obvious reference is the city of Byzantium. Yeats set two of his poems there (“Sailing To Byzantium” and “Byzantium”). It represents antiquity of course, but for Yeats it was also the ideal city for artists. Byzantium also appears in the poems “The Old Age Of Queen Maeve” and “The Gift Of Harun al-Rashid”.

We see the name Cosimo De Medici in the poem “To A Wealthy Man Who Promised A Second Subscription To The Dublin Municipal Gallery If It Were Proved The People Wanted Pictures”:
“And when they drove out Cosimo, indifferent how the rancour ran” (l 20-21). Medici ruled in Florence in the 15th century. He was famous for being a good patron of the arts. In this poem Yeats was talking about the people, the masses, who did not appreciate art so they wanted to get rid of a great patron of the arts like Cosimo De Medici. Once again Yeats insisted on his loathing the people and worshipping the arts.

The city Ferrara is mentioned in the poem “The People”:

And you know well how great the longing has been
Where every day my footfall should have lit
In the green shadow of Ferrara wall;
Or climbed among the images of the past
The unperturbed and courtly images (l.7-11)

Ferrara was a commune in Italy. The dukes of Ferrara were great patrons of the art, especially for artists such as Ariosto, Boiardo, Petrarch, and Tasso. In this poem Yeats insisted on the immortality of art, with these “unperturbed and courtly images” that live on through the years, in the eternal city of Ferrara.

Still on the subject of the Italian Renaissance, there is mention of Giorgione (1478-1510) in the poem “Her Courage”:

And some old cardinal
Pacing with half-closed eyelids in a sunny spot
Who had murmured of Giorgione at his latest breath (l.7-9)

. He was a Venetian painter, also known as Giorgio Barberelli. His work was of paramount importance for fifteenth century painting. Yeats placed him in Phase 14, where the “greatest human beauty becomes possible”. In this poem Yeats elevates Giorgione at the rank of great myth, of something greater than just a man. This was how important artists were to him.

Andrea Mantegna is another reference for the arts. He was an Italian painter active during the fifteenth century. A few of Mantegna’s paintings could be seen in Yeats’ room at Coole. See the lines 19-20 of the poem “Her Vision In The Wood”: “It seemed a Quattrocento painter’s throng/
A thoughtless image of Mantegna’s thought”. There Yeats seemed to mean that all these Quattrocento painters, these painters of the Renaissance, did not “think”, they had feelings and they represented those feelings on a canvas.

Yeats could not mention the Renaissance without talking about Michael Angelo (1475-1564), the most famous Italian painter (along with Da Vinci). Of course he is well-known for his decoration of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. He also wrote poetry in his late years. In “Long-Legged Fly” we have those lines that celebrate Michael Angelo:

There on the scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound that the mice make
His hands move to and fro. (l.25-28)

Yeats wanted to emphasize the virtuosity of the artist and the grace with which he created the roof of the Sistine Chapel.⁵⁰

Yeats really admired the Greek sculptor Phidias. He was active in the fifth century B.C, supposedly the best sculptor of the classical age. He is well-known for his statue of Zeus. See the poems “Nineteen-Hundred And Nineteen” where Yeats wrote: “And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories/ And all the golden grasshoppers and bees” (l.7-8). Phidias’ golden bees and grasshoppers were famous, he decorated the Acropolis in Athens. There Yeats regretted the loss of these great works of art.

The city of Urbino is mentioned in Yeats’ poems. Situated east of Florence, it was a centre of art and literature. In the lines 16-17 of the poem “To a Wealthy Man...” Yeats wrote that “wit and beauty learned their trade/ Upon Urbino’s windy hill”. To him it was like a sacred place of the arts, where magnificent beauty had been made.⁵¹

Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) is another artist Yeats liked. He was an Italian painter of the Venetian School. His masterpiece was *The Rape Of Europa*, a scene that resembles Yeats’ own “Leda And The Swan”, where a mortal girl is raped by a divinity. See the poem “Michael Robartes And The Dancer” where we find these lines:

Paul Veronese
And all his sacred company
Imagined bodies all their days (l.25-27)

Yeats thought these painters were part of some sort of “sacred” brotherhood that was able to create great beauty.

⁵⁰ See other references to the artist in the poems “Michael Robartes And The Dancer”, “An Acre Of Grass”, and “Under Ben Bulbin”.

⁵¹ See also the poem “The People”.

All these names and places of artists in his poems were a way for Yeats to say that he loved art, under all its forms; but also to show the difficulty of the creative process, linked to his own making of poetry.

Concerning his own art, Yeats wrote brilliant lines in the poem “Adam’s Curse”:

And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said: “A line will take us hours maybe
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought
Our stitching and unstitching had been naught (1.3-6)

This shows us how meticulous and precise Yeats was with his poems, always in relation with what was in his mind (“the moment’s thought”). Like a master painter trying to have the best colour, Yeats worked for hours trying to produce the best sounding words that were a complete reflection of his feelings. He named one of his poems “The Fascination Of What’s Difficult” in which he wrote:

The fascination of what’s difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart (1.1-4)

Here we can see that he put his heart in his poems, and that his “secret discipline” as he called it, required many hours and much patience in order to provoke joy in return.

In “Under Ben Bulbin” Yeats called art the “profane perfection of mankind” (1.52), a way for him to say that perfection is attainable through art, he had examples to prove his point (Michael Angelo, Phidias...)

Ch-15 Yeats’ “Secret Discipline”: his style and poetical forms

Regarding William Butler Yeats’ style, the one thing that is striking is his ability to produce short, powerful sentences with multiple meanings. For instance, in the poem “The Second Coming”, we have “The centre cannot hold” (1.3), meaning there is no more centre in the world, nothing to hold it together anymore; “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”(1.4) implying that

anarchy will succeed to democracy, that a new age will come that will be chaos; and “the ceremony of innocence is drowned”(l.6). That sentence could be explained by saying that the world is so violent that there is no longer room for innocence in it. In one of his early poems, “Down By The Salley Gardens”, the last line (l.8) is “But I was young and foolish and now am full of tears”, sentence full of meaning linking young age, foolishness and melancholy. We also have complicated lines at the end of stanzas like “What’s water but the generated soul?” (l.8) in “Coole Park And Ballylee, 1931”. In “Easter 1916” the powerful line is “A terrible beauty is born” (l.16, l.40 and l.80).

Another major feature of Yeats’ poetry is his taste for refrains at the end of stanzas. Of course the most famous is in the poem “Easter 1916”: “All is changed, changed utterly/ A terrible beauty is born”. In “September 1913” we have the refrain “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone/ It’s with O’Leary in the grave”. In “Mad As The Mist And Snow” at the end of each stanza we have the refrain “Mad as the mist and snow.” In the poem “Those Dancing Days Are Gone” each stanza ends with “I carry the sun in a golden cup/ The moon in a silver bag”. In “Long-Legged Fly” the refrain is “Like a long-legged fly upon the stream/ His mind moves upon silence”. It is the same with the poem “The Apparitions”; here the stanzas end with “Fifteen apparitions have I seen;/The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.” Of course the fact that Yeats likes putting refrains in his poems is likely to come from his loving old songs. But it is also a way to remember his poems; perhaps he thought that his audience would learn his poems more easily if they had beautiful, easy refrains in them. Moreover the necessity to repeat can also reveal some sort of obsession like in “Easter 1916” or “September 1913” that are political poems. At the end of each stanza we are reminded the facts, it beats like a drum at war. Either “Ireland is no longer Romantic” or three years later “Ireland has new heroes, they are beautiful but dangerous” is the key sentence to the poem, the main message the poet wanted to convey.

Yeats said in 1908: “Creative work always ruins one’s nerves for a time” (Vendler, 2007, 1). This shows how meticulous he was with the form of his poems. Nothing was left to chance, everything was carefully calculated. Writing poetry was painful to him, causing insomnia, headaches, indigestion; all this suffering so as to attain perfection in the form (Vendler, 2007, 3). Form was always important to him. Without going into too complicated details, we can isolate three different structures in Yeats’ poems: The ballad stanza, the trimeter quatrain and the ottava rima poem (Vendler).

The ballad form is a Romantic tradition; Wordsworth and Keats for instance really liked this form. The ballad stanza is written in alternate tetrameter and trimeter (4-3-4-3) and the rhyming pattern is abcb (Vendler, 2007, 112). We find ballad in Yeats' early poems, like "Ballad Of Father O'Hart" in 1888 and "Ballad Of Moll Magee" in 1889. We can also name "The Blessed", "His Dream". "September 1913" and "The Wild Swans At Coole" can also be considered as ballads. "Sixteen Dead Men" and "The Rose Tree" are ballads . In his late years, Yeats also used the ballad form in the poems "A Man Young And Old", "A Woman Young And Old", "Words For Music Perhaps" and "The Three Bushes". The use of the ballad form by Yeats is a way to show that he was culturally committed: indeed it was for him a way to pay respects to his Romantic elders.

The trimeter quatrain is another form that Yeats liked. A trimeter is a metre where there are three metrical feet per line. The "perfect" trimeter line is rhymed abab. Yeats' first poem with trimeter quatrains was 1913's "To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing". It became for Yeats a form to illustrate nationalist themes (Vendler, 2007, 182). We can quote for example the Nationalist poems *The Fisherman* and of course *Easter 1916*. Here's a list of Yeats' other Trimeter Quatrain poems : "To A Child Dancing On The Shore In The Wind", "Friends", "The Dolls", "On Woman", "Upon A Dying Lady", "The Tower" (part III), "Youth And Age", "Death", "Spilt Milk", "Mohini Chatterjee", and "Quarrel In Old Age" (Vendler, 2007, 203). The trimeter quatrain was used by Yeats for political poems. He showed his political commitment by reserving this form to poems about politics.

And finally, one of Yeats' favorite form was the ottava rima form. It originates in Italy. First it was used to illustrate heroic doings, then it became the form of mock-heroic poems. Basically it is eight iambic line, most of the time iambic pentameters, whose rhyme pattern is abababcc. It is reminiscent of the Renaissance period. Yeats knew that and he used it in the poems dealing with art, like "Sailing To Byzantium" or "Among School Children". We find ottava rima forms in "Meditations In Time Of Civil War", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", "The Choice", "Vacillation", "A Woman Young And Old", "Parnell's Funeral", "The Gyres", "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and "The Statues" (Vendler, 2007, 290). Writing ottava rima poems was a way for Yeats to celebrate the Renaissance, this golden age of art, this devotion to art Ireland lacked according to him. Yeats' commitment to art was revealed through the ottava rima form.

Ch-16 Art superior to politics or nature: The “Byzantium” poems

According to Yeats, art was the supreme discipline, a means to go beyond the mortal world, a way to reach immortality. As he grew older Yeats became obsessed with death (he wrote his own epitaph and he wrote a poem entitled “Death”) and he looked for ways to exist after his death. He found them in art. His interest for the Renaissance increased in the later part of his life (as we have just seen with the ottava rima form).

Eleven years before his death Yeats wrote “Sailing To Byzantium”, perhaps his most celebrated poem. Written in the abababcc ottava rima form, the poem is a tribute to art and the Renaissance, but not only. In the first stanza the poet describes the mortal world, which Ireland embodies: “that is no country for old men”. Everything comes into the world, lives for a short time and then dies. It is the cycle of life in the world below, in the sensitive world as Plato would put it: “those dying generations” (l.3), “fish, flesh or fowl” (l.5), “whatever is begotten, born and dies” (l.6). Death, the end, is the inevitable fate of everything that is born in this world. And lost in this circle of life and death people forget about the “monuments of unageing intellect” (l.8) that is universal knowledge and art. In the second stanza the poet talks of the immortality of the soul that overwhelms the mortal body, the “paltry thing” (l.9). The poet understands that art is a means to overcome mortality so he comes to Byzantium, the holy city of eternal art. In the third stanza the poet wants a song to accompany him to Byzantium: “be the singing masters of my soul” (l.20) He no longer wants to feel, to be human: “consume my heart away, sick with desire” (l.21) and longs for eternity “gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity” (l.23-24). Finally in the last stanza the poet has reached eternity and wants to stay there: “Once out of nature I shall never take/ my bodily form from any natural thing” (l.25-26). He is among the beautiful works of art of Antiquity (reference to Phidias and his golden bees l.27-28), where creativity and art are celebrated for ever. He wants to escape the mortal, sensitive world and access the immortal, supra-sensitive world. He is disappointed with the world of the humans (there is a slight reference to the common people of Ireland which he despised l.1 “That is no country for old men”) and wants to reach immortality through art. This is a way for him to say that there is something stronger than politics, than nature, than man himself, and that thing is art.

In the previous poem (“Sailing To Byzantium”) the poet travels from the mortal world and Ireland to Byzantium and the land of eternity. In this poem named “Byzantium” and written two

years later, the scene takes place in this blessed land of art, purity and eternity. Once again Yeats denigrates human nature:

All that man is
All mere complexities
The fury and the mire of human veins (1.6-8)

At the end of the second stanza he confirms that by placing himself above the mortal world: 'I hail the superhuman; /I call it death in life and life in death' (1.15-16). With this antimetabole Yeats sees in art a way to defeat death and live on through the years. In the third stanza the poet celebrates art through a description of gold and perfect metal, always in comparison with the flaws of men. It is also the stanza that describes Heaven according to Yeats. The following stanza is a description of Purgatory, and a vision of Hell:

Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave
Dying into a dance
An agony of trance
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve (1.28-32)

In the last stanza the triumph of art is reasserted:

The smithies break the blood
the golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity (1.34-37)

The poet opposes the complexities of man to the purity and simplicity of the unageing art and goes back at the end to the sea of life "that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" (1.40).

These two poems show that at the end of his life William Butler Yeats had in mind the supra sensitive world and a way to beat mortality. He wanted to live on through his art and in a way he succeeded. He even referred to his ability to create as a "ladder" to access the supra-sensitive world, in the poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion", in the last stanza:

Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. (1.38-40)

Here the poet is at the end of his life and his poetic skills are weakened, "his ladder" is gone, now all he has to do is die.

In spite of these pessimistic last lines, his poems are still celebrated as standards, for generations of students to come. Has Yeats reached his beloved Byzantium after a life dedicated to Ireland, to love, to culture and to art?

CONCLUSION

Yeats' "passionate intensity" in his poetical works is what defines him not only as an artist, but also as a man. He was not just a committed artist, he was commitment. He embodied love, Irish culture, Irish politics, and art. His poems inspired many generations of other committed artists. If you want to know more about the history and culture of the country of Ireland, it is recommended to read Yeats' works. If you want to seduce your sweetheart, take inspiration from his love poems, probably the most beautiful you will ever find. Yeats mastered the language and played with words so skilfully that even if you do not understand the many layers of meaning in his complicated poems, you have to admit that they are beautiful, that they sound good. Beauty is the aim of the artist, but for Yeats that was not enough. His aim was to leave a deep print in his era, to be remembered after his death, to be the spokesman of the country of Ireland, and also to convince with his political poems.

Even if his political views evolved quite a lot through his lifetime, his readers knew that his opinions meant something, because of what he had lived, because he loved his country. Did he choose to be a Nationalist at the beginning of his career just to be close to Maud Gonne: the question remains. But the fact that he was in love with her, the goddess figure of a free Ireland, meant that he wanted the country to be freed from the yoke of the English. That he was appointed senator of the Irish Free State is another testimony of the trust the leaders of the Free State, representatives of the people of Ireland, had in him. He was popular until the end, even if he despised the "common people" in the last part of his life. Yeats said that he hated politics and did not want to take part in it, but in the end his views were always shown in his poems, as if it had been a necessity to get involved in politics during such troubled times (the Easter Rising, the Irish war of independence, the Civil War and the independence).

Poets had been politically committed before (for instance Shelley and Blake in England, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Hugo in France) but no poet was as diverse and influential as Yeats. He remained true to the four kinds of commitment (politics, culture, love and art) throughout his career. When we look back at his works, a question is raised: is it a necessity to be committed when you are an artist? Of course Jean-Paul Sartre would answer yes, but what about today's artists? Political commitment seems to be out of fashion, artists do not want to take risks anymore, they are afraid these might offend their audience. I think it is sad and I regret the time of Yeats and later Sartre, when artists had the courage to take sides. Commitment is what makes you special and remembered, and William Butler Yeats knew that. But we have to remember that

the reason why Yeats got involved in Irish politics in the first place was because he fell in love with Maud Gonne! She was his ideal, his utopia, his cause...This is why when we deal with Yeats, beyond mere political commitment we always find love, passion and beauty.

Appendices

A- Time-line of Irish history during Yeats' lifetime (1865-1939):

1867	5 March	Fenian Rising.
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20th century[edit]

Year	Date	Event
1913	19 August	A Dublin businessman, William Martin Murphy, fired forty workers he suspected of belonging to the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU).
	26 August	Dublin Lockout: The ITGWU went on strike.
1914	18 January	Dublin Lockout: The Trades Union Congress (TUC) rejected a call by the ITGWU to go on strike in their support. The strikers quit the union and returned to work.
	18 September	Government of Ireland Act, offering Irish Home Rule, passed but application simultaneously postponed for the duration of World War I. ^[27]
1916	24 April	Easter Rising: The Irish Republican Brotherhood led an action which seized key government buildings in Dublin, and issued

		the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.
	29 April	Easter Rising: The leader of the uprising ordered his followers to surrender.
1918	18 April	Acting on a resolution of Dublin Corporation, the Lord Mayor convenes a conference at the Mansion House to devise plans to resist conscription.
	14 December	A general election returns a majority for Sinn Féin.
1919	21 January	The First Dáil of the Irish Republic meets and issues a Declaration of Independence from the UK.
	21 January	Irish War of Independence: Volunteers of the Army of the Irish Republic kill two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in what is considered to be the first act of the War of Independence.
1921	3 May	Northern Ireland is established.
1921	6 December	Irish War of Independence: The War of Independence ends when negotiations between the British government and representatives of the de facto Irish Republic conclude with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation of the Irish Free State
1922	28 June	Irish Civil War: Bombardment by Michael Collins of Anti-Treaty forces occupying the Four Courts marks the start of the Irish Civil War
1923	24 May	Irish Civil War: IRA Chief of Staff Frank Aiken orders volunteers to

		dump arms - effectively ending the Civil War.
1937	29 December	The Constitution of Ireland comes into force replacing the Irish Free State with a new state called "'Éire', or, in the English language, 'Ireland'"

B- Ireland: The people

Portrait of William Butler Yeats:



Portrait of Maud Gonne:



Bust of Constance Markievicz, exposed at Saint Stephen's Green, Dublin:

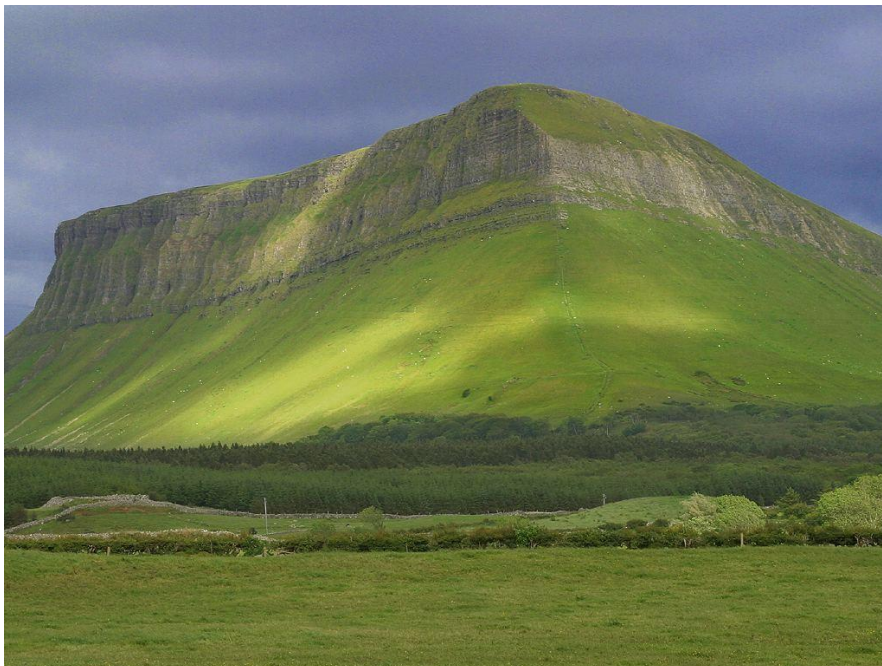


C- Ireland: the places

County Sligo (in red):



Ben Bulbin (in County Sligo, where Yeats was buried):



Lake Innisfree (County Sligo):



Coole Park (County Sligo):



D- Diagrams

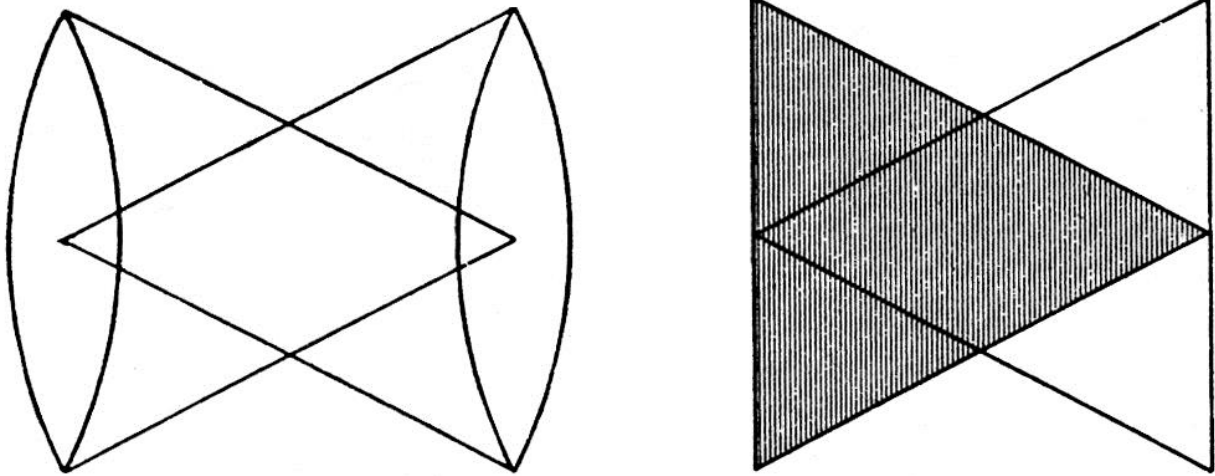


Diagram 1: The Gyres

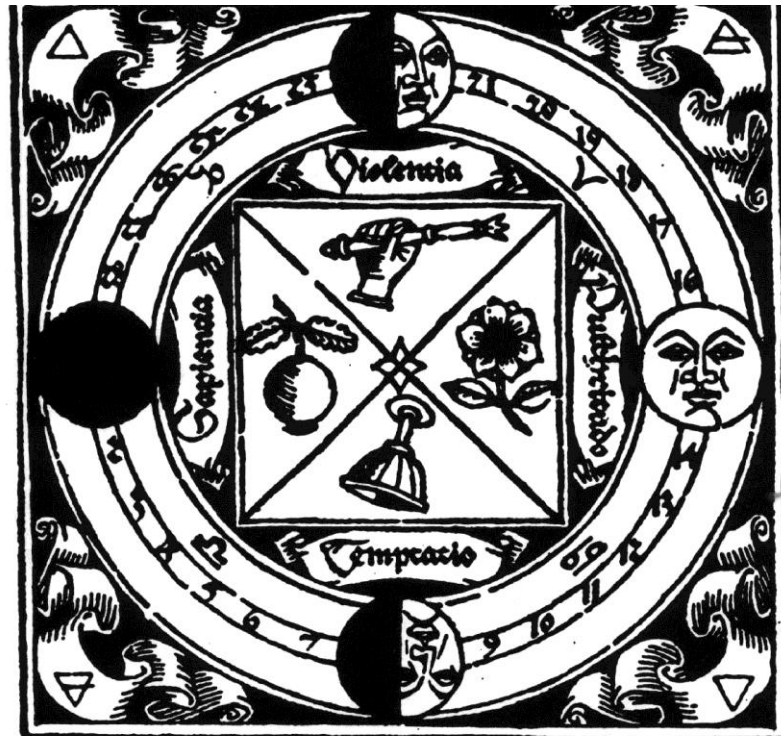


Diagram 2: The Great Wheel

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Summary:

William Butler Yeats' commitment can be divided into four kinds of commitment: politics, culture, love and art. Politics is the most obvious one, as he was committed to Irish Nationalism at the beginning of his career. His early political poems are striking. But his views evolved with time, he grew more undemocratic at the end of his life, supporting Mussolini and the Irish Blue Shirts, a fascist organization. However he remained a true Irish patriot. He was called "Cultural Nationalist" as he was committed to culture first. His poems were rich with references to the Greek mythology, to the Christian mythology and to the Irish mythology. He had many influences including Blake, Shelley, Dante or Rossetti. Love is the quest for the missing object; to Yeats it was the most important source of inspiration. The unrequited love for Maud Gonne dominated his poetry. But he also had other lovers, and his wife and kids, symbols of stability. Finally commitment to art is perhaps the most important, as the Byzantium poem show; art was to Yeats a way to reach immortality. His will to attain perfection in his art was remarkable. These four kinds of commitment are linked and work together.

Key-words: William Butler Yeats, Commitment, Ireland, Maud Gonne, Poetry, Politics, Culture, Love, Art, Patriotism