

The Poet and Society in Five Plays of W. B. Yeats

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An Abstract of

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Literary nationalism, by its very nature, involves a dual commitment--to a subjective vision of reality and to the needs of country. Because social and aesthetic values frequently clash, the poet who is also a nationalist inevitably is subjected to a conflict of loyalties.

W. B. Yeats was such a poet and, in attempting to reconcile his two loves, "love of the Unseen Life and love of country,"<sup>1</sup> he faced the painful problem of finding his proper place as a poet in Irish society. He was compelled, as is every creative artist of modern times, to work out some modus vivendi with the society in which he sought to function and with which he sought to communicate.

This study examines five plays of W. B. Yeats--Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Shadowy Waters, The Countess Cathleen, The King's Threshold, and The Unicorn from the Stars--showing that each play reflects Yeats's pre-occupation with the conflict between vision and objective reality. Chapter I focuses on those aspects of society

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<sup>1</sup>"Ireland and the Arts," Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 204.

which particularly influenced Yeats as a poet--Irish politics with its anti-British fervour, the Irish dramatic movement, and the "rough-and-ready conscience of the newspaper and the pulpit"<sup>2</sup>--and seeks to define the poetic faculty upon which these influences impinged. Chapter II juxtaposes two plays, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, with its close identification of the poet with the national struggle, and The Shadowy Waters, with its strong other-worldly emphasis. The analysis in Chapter III of The Countess Cathleen, The King's Threshold and The Unicorn from the Stars reveals a shifting emphasis on the role of the poet. The King's Threshold, more than any of the other plays under consideration, details the forces within society hostile to the functioning of the poet as a member of that society. The play also reveals the poet, a man set apart by society, offering a strong defence of his role, thus bringing together the two opposing emphases developed in Chapter II.

Reconciling the demands of his art with the claims of society involved Yeats in the wider question of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, a relationship which ultimately became the central issue in A Vision as well as in much of his lyric poetry. Inherent in this conflict is the problem of knowing

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<sup>2</sup>"Samhain:1903," Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 111.

truth. The conviction which Yeats voiced near the end of his life, that man cannot know truth but that he can embody it,<sup>3</sup> is a logical conclusion derived from involvement with the subjectivity of creative imagination and the clamour of an external, objective society.

Both poetry and plays reflect the subjective-objective conflict which Yeats experienced, and both incorporate his conclusion that through reason man cannot attain to truth. However, through the imaginative faculty, through art, he can discover as reality the beauty, goodness and unity which go beyond intellectual research.

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<sup>3</sup>Letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, January 4, 1939, in The Letters of W.B. Yeats, Ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 922. Yeats died twenty-four days later, on January 28, 1939.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I . . . . .	1
Chapter II . . . . .	27
Chapter III . . . . .	62
Conclusion . . . . .	96
Bibliography . . . . .	99

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" of his autobiography, Yeats expresses his indebtedness to the Fenian leader, John O'Leary. Contrasting O'Leary's spontaneity with Edward Dowden's "ironical calm" he says:

. . . here was something as spontaneous as the life of an artist. Sometimes he would say things that would have sounded well in some heroic Elizabethan play. It became my delight to rouse him to these outbursts for I was the poet in the presence of my theme. Once when I was defending an Irish politician who had made a great outcry because he was treated as a common felon, by showing that he did it for the cause's sake, he said, "There are things that a man must not do to save a nation." He would speak a sentence like that in ignorance of its passionate value, and would forget it the moment after.<sup>1</sup>

The passage is more important for what it reveals about Yeats than for what it says about O'Leary. We see, first, that Yeats associates the artist's life with "spontaneity," that is, with the unhampered operation of creative imagination. Further, the kind of "passionate value" Yeats found in O'Leary's statement is suggested by its place in the context; he is speaking of the artist's need for a free imagination (for what Frank Kermode has aptly termed

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<sup>1</sup> Autobiographies (London: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 95-96.

a "free, self-delighting intellect").<sup>2</sup> In looking back to these earlier days, Yeats, in his autobiography, affirms what he has painfully worked out, that it is wrong for any man--and particularly for a poet--to give up personal integrity when striving for any public cause. The issue of a poet's relationship to society has special ramifications, since social and aesthetic values frequently clash.

"I was the poet in the presence of my theme,"<sup>3</sup> Yeats tells us. The theme which O'Leary embodies for him is Ireland--an ideal, romantic Ireland existing in his imagination. This ideal Ireland of the imagination had, in many ways, its opposite in the real Ireland, an opposition which he struggled to resolve. Yeats was a nationalist, but he was also a poet. As well, he was acutely conscious of his poetic calling. Because of this intense awareness, he could not finally embrace political activities, although he did become involved in them. "There are things that a man must not do to save a nation" echoed in his mind, as both his prose and his poetry show. As a nationalist, Yeats was committed to "saving" Ireland; as a poet, he was committed to his own poetic vision. The two commitments,

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Kermode, Romantic Image (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 1, footnote 1.

Yeats discovered, were frequently and crucially at odds; the course of literary nationalism did not run smoothly.

Yeats saw, for example, that in the process of seeking to liberate Ireland men frequently lost their integrity. He describes the effect of political ferment on participants during Parnell's time thus:

And so was founded an agitation where some men pretended to national passion for the land's sake; some men to agrarian passion for the nation's sake; some men to both for their own advancement, and this agitation at the time I write of had but old men to serve it, who found themselves after years of labour, after years of imprisonment, derided for unscrupulous rascals. Unscrupulous they certainly were, for they had grown up amid make-believe, and now because their practical grievance was too near settlement to blind and to excite, their make-believe was visible to all. They were as eloquent as ever, they had never indeed shared anything in common but the sentimental imagery, the poetical allusions inherited from a still earlier generation, but were faced by a generation that had turned against all oratory.<sup>4</sup>

The object lesson of men betrayed by the empty rhetoric into which they had fallen was not lost on Yeats. Rhetoric, with its underlying impulse of moving men to action, had its appeal for Yeats, who wanted to persuade his countrymen about the kind of nation Ireland should become. But he also had a clear sense of its danger. Concerning the composition of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the one play that unambiguously extols

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<sup>4</sup> Autobiographies, pp. 358-359.



violent nationalistic fervour, Yeats writes:

I had a very vivid dream one night, and I made Cathleen Ni Houlihan out of this dream. But if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short<sup>5</sup> time, the power to write movingly upon any theme.<sup>5</sup>

Yeats was well aware that poetry (that which is created "out of the quarrel with ourselves") might very well become debased into rhetoric (that which we make "out of the quarrel with others").<sup>6</sup> No poet can nourish himself on make-believe, and Yeats did not doubt that contact with reality involved contact with the depths of his own mind.

Political activism was only one aspect of society which impinged on Yeats's sensibilities--others will be dealt with later. Politics is mentioned first because it became for Yeats an immediate and even urgent problem, and therefore provides a clear illustration of the central issue of this study. The evidence seems clear that the politics of Home Rule became a pressing problem because of Yeats's love for Maud Gonne. His first meeting with her, on

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<sup>5</sup>"An Irish National Theatre," Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 116. See also p. 199.

<sup>6</sup>"Per Amica Silentia Lunae," Essays (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 492.

January 30, 1889, "reverberated in his life like the sound of a Burmese gong in the middle of a tent."<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Miss O'Leary four days after that fateful meeting, his enthusiasm for Maud Gonne is evident.

Did I tell you how much I admire Miss Gonne? She will make many converts to her political belief. If she said the world was flat or the moon an old caubeen tossed up into the sky I would be proud to be of her party.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever other converts she may have made, she certainly had made one of the sensitive and introverted young poet, and at the same time provided him with one of the antinomies which became so important in formulating the doctrine of the mask. To a large extent, his love for Maud Gonne provided the motivation for his claiming and then developing "a very public and declamatory talent."<sup>9</sup> Richard Ellman sums up the situation clearly.

. . . Yeats's dilemma was that he was naturally dreamy, poetic, and self-conscious, and therefore unable to act with the spontaneity of the man of action. But he could not hope to attract Maud Gonne to a farm life in the west of Ireland; no

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<sup>7</sup>Richard Ellmann, Yeats The Man And The Masks (London: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 103-104.

<sup>8</sup>The Letters of W.B. Yeats, Ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939 (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 68.

turning back to Sligo was possible any more. To win her, he would have to be the man of action, organizing and building for Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

Yeats did succeed in developing organizational abilities, becoming in the process an effective public speaker. He did not, however, lose sight of dreams and poetry. In seeking to win Maud Gonne he maintained a tension between objective and subjective activities.<sup>11</sup> He did join her in street parades and demonstrations, but he also drew her into his occult studies.

Increasingly, however, Maud Gonne became immersed in extremist activity, and eventually Yeats dissociated himself from her work as the Irish Literary Theatre came to absorb his energies. The climax of Yeats's direct partici-

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<sup>10</sup>Ellmann, The Man and The Masks, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>The terms objective and subjective are important in Yeats's system, being associated respectively with the primary and antithetical cones. The following quotation from A Vision defines Yeats's use of this terminology.

By the antithetical cone, which is left unshaded in my diagram, we express more and more, as it broadens, our inner world of desire and imagination, whereas by the primary, the shaded cone, we express more and more, as it broadens, that objectivity of mind which, in the words of Murray's Dictionary, lays "stress upon that which is external to the mind" or treats "of outward things and events rather than of inward thought" or seeks "to exhibit the actual facts, not coloured by the opinions or feelings."

Quoted from A Vision (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 72.

pation with her in political activity came on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897. His comments on the street procession and the ensuing riot spell out his uneasiness with these happenings.

. . . we find a great crowd in the street, who surround us and accompany us. Presently I hear a sound of breaking glass, the crowd has begun to stone the windows of decorated houses, and when I try to speak that I may restore order, I discover that I have lost my voice through much speaking at the Convention. I can only whisper and gesticulate, and as I am thus freed from responsibility I share the emotion of the crowd, and perhaps even feel as they feel when the glass crashes. Maud Gonne has a look of exultation, and she walks with her laughing head thrown back.<sup>12</sup>

Momentarily, Yeats becomes a part of the crowd, submerged in the emotion of the mob. Paradoxically, habitual sharing of such emotion, even though it may be a moment of "intense life,"<sup>13</sup> leads to rhetoric and propaganda rather than to literature. "The dramatist," Yeats has written, "must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind, as the musician pictures her in sound and the sculptor in form."<sup>14</sup>

There is a further problem in his mind, showing that the complex question of responsibility for words and actions is beginning to weigh upon him.

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<sup>12</sup>Autobiographies, pp. 367-368.

<sup>13</sup>"First Principles," Explorations, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

And there are fights between police and window-breakers, and I read in the morning papers that many have been wounded; some two hundred heads have been dressed at the hospitals; an old woman killed by baton blows, or perhaps trampled under the feet of the crowd; and that two thousand pounds worth of decorated plate-glass windows have been broken. I count the links in the chain of responsibility, run them across my fingers, and wonder if any link there is from my workshop.<sup>15</sup>

We see here a contrast between Yeats and his contemporary Oscar Wilde, who--during the trial in which he brought a charge of criminal libel against Lord Queensbury--was questioned about the possible adverse moral effects of his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. His reply was simple and direct--"I am not concerned with the ignorance of others."<sup>16</sup> There was, of course, a difference in the circumstances under which the two statements were made, Yeats commenting on the effect of specific, overt activities and Wilde on the possible moral effect of literature. However, as will be shown later, Yeats's comments about responsibility extend also to his imaginative writings. In other words, Yeats accepts responsibility as a necessary corollary of living, and is not ultimately an adherent of the doctrine of art for art's sake. If responsibility to society inter-

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<sup>15</sup>Autobiographies, p. 368.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by H. Montgomery Hyde in Famous Trials: Oscar Wilde (Harmondsworth: Penquin, 1962), p. 114.

feres with the "unpreoccupied mind," some resolution to the conflicting opposites must be found; if the "colt" is dragging "road metal,"<sup>17</sup> the load may be lightened, but not jettisoned.

Before proceeding to other aspects of society that affected Yeats, it will perhaps be best to give an account of the poetic faculty as it will be viewed in this study. Terms such as "poetic faculty," "creative imagination" and "poetic sensibilities" are taken to be synonymous and will be used interchangeably. A good brief definition of sensibility is given by Frank Kermode in his discussion of Walter Pater--sensibility is "the power of profoundly experiencing what is significant in life and art."<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between creative imagination and responsibility has been of concern to many writers. A scene in Aldous Huxley's novel Point Counter Point places a clear focus on poetic sensibility. Lady Edward has invited a cross-section of London society to her musical party. The orchestra is playing the Suite in B minor, for flute and strings. In what amounts to program notes for Bach's music, Huxley's exposition raises important questions about the value of imagination generally. According to Huxley,

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<sup>17</sup>"The Fascination of What's Difficult," The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 104.

<sup>18</sup>Kermode, Romantic Image, p. 20.

the music depicts, in the Rondeau, "a young girl singing among the hills, with the clouds drifting overhead,"<sup>19</sup> and in the Saraband, the thoughts of a poet who overhears the singing.

His is a slow and lovely meditation on the beauty (in spite of squalor and stupidity), the profound goodness (in spite of all the evil), the oneness (in spite of such bewildering diversity) of the world. It is a beauty, a goodness, a unity that no intellectual research can discover, that analysis dispels, but of whose reality the spirit is from time to time suddenly and overwhelmingly convinced.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Huxley describes the beatific vision, in order to raise the central question about it--a question to which Yeats found an emphatic answer.

Is it illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth? who knows? Pongileoni blew, the fiddlers drew their rosined horse-hair across the stretched intestines of lambs; through the long Saraband the poet slowly meditated his lovely and consoling certitude.<sup>21</sup>

The scientific way of looking at reality is thus clearly set against the imaginative. Huxley did not, of course, commit himself to either of these views till he

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<sup>19</sup>Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p. 32.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

adopted the mystical view later in his life, but in this novel he does indicate that the evidence is not as yet complete, and that intuitive apprehension of reality beyond the senses is still a possibility. The crucial reservation comes in the light-hearted description of Lord Edward's perception of the music and his reaction to it.

The shaking air rattled Lord Edward's membrana tympani; the interlocked malleus, incus and stirrup bones were set in motion so as to agitate the membrane of the oval window and raise an infinitesimal storm in the fluid of the labyrinth. The hairy endings of the auditory nerve shuddered like weeds in a rough sea; a vast number of obscure miracles were performed in the brain, and Lord Edward ecstatically whispered "Bach!" He smiled with pleasure, his eyes lit up. The young girl was singing to herself in solitude under the floating clouds. And then the cloud-solitary philosopher began poetically to meditate.<sup>22</sup>

Here the scientific view predominates in that the meditation of the poet who overhears the girl's singing has its existence in purely physiological phenomena, and is perceived by a sentient instrument that is also primarily physical. However, between the auditory nerve endings and Lord Edward's joyful response there is a bridge of "obscure miracles." These miracles are performed "in the brain," but are not necessarily purely physiological, since John Bidlake, whose molecular composition is presumably the same

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 44.



as Lord Edward's, registers no perception of beauty at all; "This music is getting tedious"<sup>23</sup> is his response. In Point Counter Point Huxley points up the incongruity between the beatific vision of beauty, goodness and oneness which art can give and the material context in which it must exist. In Yeats's terminology, we have here the unhappy fact of subjectivity in an overwhelmingly objective context.

There is, then, a bridge of miracles that are beyond scientific analysis, and which, in persons with developed sensitivities, transforms physical stimuli into spiritual perception. The "objective" question remains--is such perception "illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth?" Yeats, speaking out of a strong intuitive faculty affirms that neither the material nor the invisible world is illusion; rather, one has its counterpart in the other.

Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation. We hear much of his need for the restraints of reason, but the only restraint he can obey is the mysterious instinct that teaches him to discover immortal moods in mortal desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup>"The Moods," Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 195.

Although the spiritual is seen to be immanent within the physical, the emphasis in this statement (dated 1895) is rather strongly on the spiritual, since that which is experienced by the senses "is nothing more than a means." It is probably fair to say that Yeats moved to a finer balance between the two. For example, the poem, "A Last Confession," (from "A Woman Young and Old," placed by A.N. Jeffares between 1931 and 1935) strikes a precise balance, stanzas two and three illustrating this balance clearly.

Flinging from his arms I laughed  
 To think his passion such  
 He fancied that I gave a soul  
 Did but our bodies touch,  
 And laughed upon his breast to think  
 Beast gave beast as much.

I gave what other women gave  
 That stepped out of their clothes,  
 But when this soul, its body off,  
 Naked to naked goes,  
 He it has found shall find therein  
 What none other knows.<sup>25</sup>

And there is, of course, the famous passage that achieves the same balance in eleven words--"But Love has pitched his mansion in/ The place of excrement."<sup>26</sup> In a comment on Yeats's Per Amica Silentia Lunae, J. Hillis Miller sums up

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<sup>25</sup>Collected Poems, pp. 313-314.

<sup>26</sup>"Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Collected Poems, p. 295.

Yeats's position:

So Per Amica Silentia Lunae is divided into two sections, one about the soul of man and one about the soul of the world. Binding these together is the poet, singing songs which are simultaneously expressions of a personal emotion and the dramatization of a universal mythology.<sup>27</sup>

If the imaginative faculty by whose means the poet is able to bind together the souls of man and the world is not fully definable, it still is possible to gain some picture of Yeats's concept of it.

For example, Yeats clearly differentiates imaginative thinking from voluntary, rational thought:

. . . art, in its highest moments, is not a deliberate creation, but the creation of intense feeling, of pure life . . . .<sup>28</sup>

More explicit than these words from "First Principles" (1904) is Yeats's description of the creative act in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae:"

But when I shut my door and light the candle,  
I invite a marmorean Muse, an art where no  
thought or emotion has come to mind because  
another man has thought or felt something different,  
for now there must be no reaction,  
action only, and the world must move my heart

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<sup>27</sup>J.H. Miller, Poets of Reality, Six Twentieth Century Writers (Cambridge: Belknap, 1965), p. 73.

<sup>28</sup>"First Principles," p. 152.

but to the heart's discovery of itself, and I begin to dream of eyelids that do not quiver before the bayonet: all my thoughts have ease and joy, I am all virtue and confidence. When I come to put in rhyme what I have found, it will be a hard toil, but for a moment I believe I have found myself and not my anti-self. It is only the shrinking from toil, perhaps, that convinces me that I have been no more myself than is the cat the medicinal grass it is eating in the garden.<sup>29</sup>

The labour of writing poetry is in finding words and rhythms to embody what the mind has already discovered. The revelation itself is effortless, and seems to come as a voice from beyond that ordinary self which Yeats describes in another essay as the "bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast."<sup>30</sup> The paragraph following the one quoted above reflects even more clearly Yeats's sense of receiving communication from beyond himself.

How could I have mistaken for myself an heroic condition that from early boyhood has made me superstitious? That which comes as complete, as minutely organised, as are those elaborate, brightly lighted buildings and sceneries appearing in a moment, as I lie between sleeping and waking, must come from above me and beyond me.<sup>31</sup>

Visions, fully constructed products of the imagina-

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<sup>29</sup>"Per Amica Silentia Lunae," pp. 485-486.

<sup>30</sup>"General Introduction for my Work," Essays and Introductions, p. 509.

<sup>31</sup>"Per Amica Silentia Lunae," p. 486.

tion, Yeats thus affirms to have come "from above . . . and beyond" him. His essay "Magic" (1901) enlarges on what he regards as the source of vision. Much of the essay has to do with the evocative power of symbols, in the use of which he sees the artist sharing the realm of the magician. The chief difference between them is that the magician uses symbols consciously, whereas the artist uses them unconsciously. The magician and the artist have the power to evoke meaningful images because of their connection with "the Great Memory"--

. . . they [symbols] act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons.<sup>32</sup>

Writing more than ten years before the appearance of Jung's The Psychology of the Unconscious (Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido), Yeats seems to anticipate the main lines of Jungian psychology. The essay "Magic" opens with a statement of creed. In it Yeats sets down three doctrines which provide the basis for what we have seen to be Yeats's preoccupation with symbols.

. . . and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:

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<sup>32</sup>"Magic," Essays and Introductions, p. 50.

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.<sup>33</sup>

In illustration of these doctrines, Yeats elaborates the details of two visions he insists took place simultaneously in the three persons engaged in a magical experiment, some details being more clearly seen by one than by another, but in the main all three sharing the same trance. Our twentieth-century, scientifically oriented minds boggle at a serious discussion of magic such as Yeats engages in here. We look for evidence of hoax; if, however, the author's integrity bears up under inspection, then we are apt to dismiss him on grounds of naïveté. Yeats confronts us with a dilemma because it is difficult to charge him with either deliberate deceit or inadequate mental powers.

It seems inconceivable that he would simply fabricate stories such as these in "Magic," and that he would maintain such fabrications throughout life, basing his philosophy of art on something he knew to be false. Whatever doubts Yeats may have entertained regarding his mythology, they seem not to have seriously engaged the question

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

of the reality of an unseen world; he seems quite consistent in insisting that the spiritual reality exists. Further, he is eclectic in his conception of that reality; hence Christian theology and druidism become entwined with any other sources from which Yeats felt occult knowledge could be gleaned.

In a letter to John O'Leary in 1892, he insists that his researches into magic are essential to him.

If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would The Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin holds to the work of Shelley and I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance --the revolt of the soul against the intellect-- now beginning in the world.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, for Yeats, the scientific method to serve the "greater renaissance" was that experimentation with symbols which would tap the resources of "the memory of Nature herself."<sup>35</sup> In that memory, by way of his own subconscious, he sought symbols for poetry.

For those that love the world serve it in action  
Grow rich, popular and full of influence,

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<sup>34</sup>Letters, p. 211.

<sup>35</sup>See above, p. 17, footnote 33.

And should they paint or write, still it is action:  
 The struggle of the fly in marmalade.  
 The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,  
 The sentimentalist himself; while art  
 Is but a vision of reality.  
 What portion in the world can the artist have  
 Who has awakened from the common dream  
 But dissipation and despair?<sup>36</sup>

This thesis is about the conflict Yeats found between his role as a poet and the society within which he worked and to which he sought to relate his work. His efforts on behalf of political activism have already been dealt with. There was, however, another kind of activism to which he turned--"the day's war with every knave and dolt,/ Theatre business, management of men."<sup>37</sup>

That Yeats turned from Irish politics to Irish theatre indicates that his earlier public efforts, although motivated in part by his desire to win Maud Gonne, were also rooted in a genuine love for Ireland. If that love frequently placed him at odds with his countrymen, it also restrained him from any precipitate retreat to the isolation of the tower. By the time Yeats joined with a small group of playwrights and actors to found the Irish dramatic movement, he had a well-defined ideal of the kind of Ireland

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<sup>36</sup>"Ego Dominus Tuus," Collected Poems, pp. 181-182.

<sup>37</sup>"The Fascination of What's Difficult," p. 104.



he hoped to see. A speech delivered at a Wolfe Tone banquet in 1898 spelled out Yeats's views succinctly enough.

First of all, we Irish do not desire, like the English, to build up a nation where there shall be a very rich class and a very poor class.  
 . . . I think that the best ideal for our people . . . is that Ireland is going to become a country where, if there are few rich, there shall be nobody very poor. Wherever men have tried to imagine a perfect life, they have imagined a place where men plough and sow and reap, not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke. Ireland will always be a country where men plough and sow and reap.<sup>38</sup>

Not political action, but the Irish theatre was to be the vehicle through which such an agrarian, utopian society was to be molded. In such a society a poet might enjoy something like his former function of seer, philosopher, priest.<sup>39</sup>

To a considerable extent, the story of Yeats's part in the Irish Literary Theatre is a story of conflict between Yeats's ideal for Ireland and popular Irish nationalism which enthusiastically waved the flag of rebellion against England. Only in Cathleen Ni Houlihan does Yeats

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<sup>38</sup>Quoted by Ann Saddlemyer in "The Noble and the Beggar-Man': Yeats and Literary Nationalism," in The World of W.B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective (Victoria: Adelphi, 1965), p. 36.

<sup>39</sup>Robin Skelton, "W.B. Yeats: The Poet as Synopsis," Mosaic, I (Oct., 1967), p. 7.

fully capture the popular mood. Conflict with the forces of Irish nationalism was assured by the poetic, imaginative nature of Yeats, and confirmed at the outset of the Irish Literary Theatre by the manifesto issued in 1897 and signed by W.B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn.

In part it reads:

We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. . . . We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.<sup>40</sup>

The manifesto of 1897, then, marked the beginning of a fourteen-year period during which Yeats was engaged with administrative, promotional and creative work on behalf of the infant dramatic movement. It was also a period in which his "love of the Unseen Life" was brought into more jarring conflict with "love of country" than in his earlier pre-occupation with politics. The conflict now was more immediate because it arose directly out of the nature of his poetic vision.

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<sup>40</sup>Quoted by Ann Saddlemyer in "Worn Out With Dreams': Dublin's Abbey Theatre," in The World of W.B. Yeats, p. 105.

Over and over, his prose writings during this period defend the allegedly unpatriotic stance he has taken as motivated by a twofold commitment--to love of country and to the deeper reality with which he sought to fuse this love. One such passage has already been cited, but bears repetition here.

. . . if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme.<sup>41</sup>

In "Samhain:1901" Yeats explains the aims of the Irish Literary Theatre, its initial three-year trial period having been successfully completed. The note of controversy is not absent. Directing his words at the "Irish upper classes" (the middle class?) he berates them for their materialism.

When any one among them begins to write or paint they ask him, 'How much money have you made?' 'Will it pay?' Or they say, 'If you do this or that you will make more money'. The poor Irish clerk or shopboy, who writes verses or articles in his brief leisure, writes for the glory of God and of his country; and because his motive is high, there is not one vulgar thought in the countless little ballad books that have been written from Callanan's day to this. . . . All Irish writers have to choose whether they will write as

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<sup>41</sup>See above, p. 4, footnote 5.

the upper classes have done, not to express but to exploit this country; or join the intellectual movement which has raised the cry that was heard in Russia in the 'seventies, the cry, 'To the people'.<sup>42</sup>

The passage reveals Yeats's class-consciousness and sympathy with the poorer classes. Seven years later, however, his evaluation has changed somewhat, as a footnote to his words concerning "the poor Irish clerk or shopboy" makes clear. "The mood has gone, with Fenianism and its wild hopes," he says; "The National movement has been commercialized in the last few years." It is Yeats, one suspects, rather than the shopboy, who has undergone the change in those few years. His newly found disappointment with the poorer classes, however, reflects a consistent attitude toward society; he hates materialism wherever he finds it, recognizing its hostility toward everything he hopes to accomplish.

Yeats inevitably finds his ideals for a national theatre at odds with "the rough-and-ready conscience of the newspaper and the pulpit in a matter so delicate and so difficult as literature."<sup>43</sup> He labels them as "but voices of the mob," because they judge literature without reference

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<sup>42</sup>Explorations, pp. 82-83.

<sup>43</sup>"Samhain:1903," Explorations, p. 111.

to "intellectual tradition."<sup>44</sup> He discovers newspaper critics praising as "pure and innocent" plays which Yeats condemns for their "illogical thinking and insincere feeling,"<sup>45</sup> and whose effect on character can only be damaging--"making the mind timid and the heart effeminate."<sup>46</sup> The pulpit he dislikes for its caution.

A Connacht Bishop told his people a while since that they 'should never read stories about the degrading passion of love', and one can only suppose that, being ignorant of a chief glory of his Church, he has never understood that his new puritanism is but an English cuckoo.<sup>47</sup>

Irish society, with its narrow nationalistic (and anti-British) fervour, its shallow criticism of life and art, its puritanism, was for Yeats one horn of a dilemma; the other was his overpowering intuition of an unseen reality motivating his poetic sensibilities. In order to fulfill himself as a poet he needed a society in which the imagination and its works were understood and valued. "It is hard to write without the sympathy of one's friends . . . ," he wrote in "Samhain:1903".<sup>48</sup> However, Irish

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

society as a whole did not share Yeats's vision, as the uproar over Synge's Playboy of the Western World demonstrated more dramatically than any other single event. Introspection was too painful; it was easier to blame deficiencies in Irish affairs on English misrule than to probe the Irish character itself.

Yeats thus recognized the necessity of creating a society within which he could work. The King's Threshold, for example, reflects Yeats's awareness of the poet's role as the shaper of a healthy society. Significantly, it also ends on a pessimistic, though somewhat ambiguous, note.

Yeats's dilemma is well illustrated in Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." The lady, isolated from Camelot and seeing its life only as a reflection "through a mirror clear," is an image of the poet living with his vision in isolation from the world of action. Temptation to join that world comes to her first in the form of lovers whom she sees in her mirror--"I am half sick of shadows," said/ The Lady of Shalott."<sup>49</sup> Then, when Sir Lancelot comes riding by in all his brilliance, she turns from the mirror.

She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces through the room,  
She saw the helmet and the plume,

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<sup>49</sup>Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson's Poems (London: Routledge & Sons), pp. 69-70.

She looked down to Camelot.  
Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror cracked from side to side;  
"The curse is come upon me," cried  
The Lady of Shalott.<sup>50</sup>

Tennyson thus expresses his fear that a too direct exposure to the external world will prove disastrous to his art (the web) and his creative imagination (the mirror).

Like Tennyson, Yeats has faced the problem of the poet in society. Indeed, every creative artist of modern times is forced to work out some modus vivendi with the society in which he seeks to function and with which he seeks to communicate. Unquestionably, the problem is eased in proportion as the prevailing outlook values associative over discursive thought--Homer reflects no conflict between poet and society.

As has already been stated, it is the central contention of this study that Yeats felt such a conflict and reflected it in his work. We will now proceed to the plays for what they have to reveal about the conflict.

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

## CHAPTER II

### CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN AND THE SHADOWY WATERS

Chronology is frequently useful in providing clues concerning the development of an author's thought and thus in facilitating interpretation of his work. However, since Yeats was an inveterate reviser of his work, chronology presents a problem. S.B. Bushrui, in Yeats's Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910, clarifies the nature of the problem. Specifically, he shows that the dates assigned to the plays in Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats are not a clear guide to the order in which particular themes occupied Yeats's mind. Bushrui quotes with approval the following statement by Ernest Boyd:

Yeats has so frequently and so materially revised his plays that they may be considered without insistence upon chronological sequence. Radical changes in rewriting deprive many of them of their priority. Title and theme may belong to an early date, but a new edition often means a new play. It would be superfluous to preserve the form of chronology when the essentials are lacking.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Boyd's statement is supported by evidence in

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<sup>1</sup>S.B. Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. xiv. Bushrui cites as his source for this quotation E.A. Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (Dublin and London, Maunsel, 1916), p. 9.



Yeats's autobiography. The Shadowy Waters, dated 1911 in Collected Plays and 1900 by Bushrui, was in Yeats's mind (in its earliest conception) long before either of these dates, as an anecdote in Autobiographies clearly shows. In the chapter "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" he describes an early morning sailing venture, accompanied by two companions (one being his cousin) who seek, vainly, to make the venture respectable by putting out a trawling line for fish. Catching nothing they turn out their pockets for money to buy what they have been unable to catch, only to find money as scarce as fish. The youthful Yeats was already in conflict with the practical attitude which disparages imaginative, artistic aims. His companions were ashamed to be out before dawn for no better purpose than to hear the cries of sea birds. "I had wanted the birds' cries," Yeats informs us, "for the poem that became fifteen years afterwards 'The Shadowy Waters,' and it had been full of observation had I been able to write it when I first planned it."<sup>2</sup>

On Yeats's own evidence, then, the play was in his mind for fifteen years before it was written, and in that time evolved into something different from its initial conception.

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<sup>2</sup>Autobiographies, pp. 73-74.

In accordance with the evidence cited in the foregoing paragraphs, this thesis will not attempt to follow a detailed chronological scheme. The plays Cathleen Ni Houlihan and The Shadowy Waters have been chosen for consideration in this chapter because both are early plays, and because there is a dramatic change in focus from one to the other. Whereas The Shadowy Waters focuses acutely on the unseen world, Cathleen Ni Houlihan is concerned more directly with the immediate, visible world of Yeats's Ireland. The two plays will be examined individually, in an attempt to see as clearly as possible what each has to say about the role of the poet. By the end of the analyses, certain comparisons and contrasts will have become apparent.

The setting of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the "interior of a cottage close to Killala, in 1798,"<sup>3</sup> is an indication of its theme, one could say of its propagandistic message and hence of its this-worldly focus. The Rebellion of '98 broke out on May 24, 1798. The setting therefore recalls the brutal conditions in Ireland during the late 1790's and the efforts of Wolfe Tone, Mapper Tandy and others to cast off, with the help of France, the oppression of English rule. Of this period in Ireland, Edmund Curtis writes:

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<sup>3</sup>The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 75. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references will be to this edition.

Floggings, burnings, tortures, the shooting and hanging of men, were now a fate that even the most innocent might fear from hordes of soldiery living at 'free quarters' and without control. No wonder that retaliation followed and that savagery and outrage on the military side was answered on that of the rebels.<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, the play does not dwell on the details of these brutalities, but to an audience of Yeats's countrymen it was hardly necessary to belabour the point.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan pictures Irish peasant life, and, although it depicts the narrow, materialistic motivations of that life, its prevailing attitude toward this unheroic materialism is humorously ironic rather than bitter. Although bitter in tone, the poem "September 1913" sums up the nature of the conflict in Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

What need you, being come to sense,  
 But fumble in a greasy till  
 And add the halfpence to the pence  
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
 You have dried the marrow from the bone?  
 For men were born to pray and save:  
 Pomantic Ireland's dead and gone.  
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
 The grey wing upon every tide;  
 For this that all that blood was shed,  
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
 And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
 All that delirium of the brave?

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<sup>4</sup>Edmund Curtis, A History of Ireland (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 341.

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.<sup>5</sup>

Cathleen Ni Houlihan, like the poem, contrasts domestic and economic concerns with romantic heroism of a bygone era. The heroic commitment is its theme. By its nature, such a theme is in opposition to the cautious, penny-pinching ways of Peter Gillane and his neighbours, and thus reflects what was for Yeats a perfectly consistent attitude toward materialistic considerations generally.

The economic concerns of the elder Gillanes are developed early in the play. Both their limited vision and their materialistic attitude are demonstrated in a conversation about Michael's wedding clothes.

You hadn't clothes like that when you married me,  
and no coat to put on of a Sunday more than any  
other day. (p. 75)

Peter's response--

That is true, indeed. We never thought a son of  
our own would be wearing a suit of that sort for  
his wedding, or have so good a place to bring a  
wife to. (p. 76)

--suggests the complacent mood of one who looks back on a life of fulfilment. He grows expansive as he examines

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<sup>5</sup>Collected Poems, pp. 120-121. Stanzas 1 and 3 are quoted.

Michael's money and recounts to his family the shrewd deal he has made with Delia Cahel's father to put this money into Michael's hands.

Yes, I made the bargain well for you, Michael. Old John Cahel would sooner have kept a share of this a while longer. 'Let me keep the half of it until the first boy is born,' says he. 'You will not,' says I. 'Whether there is or is not a boy, the whole hundred pounds must be in Michael's hands before he brings your daughter to the house.' The wife spoke to him then, and he gave in at the end. (p. 77)

Cathleen's entry into the play brings out the contrast to this smug materialism. Her songs, about violent death incurred in the defence of Ireland, challenge Peter Gillane's concept of life with its emphasis on comfort. Further, in her identification of who her "neighbours" are, she is clearly associated with the romance of Ireland's long struggle against foreign invaders--

. . . a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow. (p. 83)

Cathleen here makes reference to an historic occasion, the battle at Clontarf, on Good Friday of the year 1014. In this encounter the Irish forces under their king Brian successfully routed a large force which included two

thousand of "the pick of the Norse world of Scotland and Man."<sup>6</sup> However, Brian was killed. Cathleen's appeal, hinging on the blend of victory and death which is illustrated by this battle, is a reminder that Irish life can be ennobled and revitalized only through a total commitment to the cause of freedom that marked Irish life in the past. Cathleen's is clearly a highly romantic interpretation of Irish history.

As the analysis so far has suggested, poetic vision is identified with the heroic commitment and thus becomes the antagonist to the narrow materialism of the cottage dwellers. The play thus anticipates one aspect of the more comprehensive view of the poet's role as depicted in The King's Threshold. Seanchan, in squelching the Chamberlain's poetic pretensions, says,

. . . cry out that not a man alive  
 Would ride among the arrows with high heart  
 Or scatter with an open hand, had not  
 Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues.  
 (p. 127)

The person in Cathleen Ni Houlihan who commends "wasteful virtues" is Cathleen, and the antithesis of these virtues is centered in Peter Gillane, whose vision is limited to the immediate, material circumstances of his

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<sup>6</sup>Curtis, A History of Ireland, p. 29

life. It is his son Michael whose idealism responds to her vision of a renewed Ireland.

Michael's circumstances would seem to predispose him against an appeal that clearly leads to deprivation and death. His upbringing at the hands of Peter Gillane would certainly tend to make him believe that "men were born to pray and save."<sup>7</sup> That Michael, at the beginning of the play, is a cautious, compliant son is indicated by the fact that he carefully brings home the money from John Cahel for his father to count. Clearly, Michael is in the good graces of the priest, who

. . . was never better pleased to marry any two  
in his parish than myself and Delia Cahel.

(p. 76)

Also, he is engaged to be married to a girl with whom he is genuinely in love, as he indicates by his indifference to the economic aspects of the marriage that preoccupy his father. It is a measure of the poet's persuasive power that we should be convinced of Michael's love and prudence and yet accept his forsaking of parents and fiancée for the hardship and death which Cathleen's service promises.

Significant to this study is the uninhibited use Cathleen makes of her power. In her lack of uneasiness

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<sup>7</sup>See above, p. 31, footnote 5.

over responsibility for "the burying that shall be tomorrow" (p. 86), she parallels the militant mood of the audience that came to witness the initial performance of Cathleen Ni Houlihan in 1902. Norman Jeffares cites an eyewitness of that initial performance, in which Maud Gonne played the title role.

. . . Stephen Gwynn, writing years afterwards of the first production of this play, said that he had never seen an audience so moved, and that he had asked himself whether such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot.<sup>8</sup>

Tennyson's image of the poet as a lonely figure, weaving "a magic web with colors gay" clearly does not apply to Cathleen; she is at close quarters with "Camelot," and apparently suffering no harm to the "mirror" of her poetic sensibilities.<sup>9</sup> Because the play does not enquire into the implications of creative imagination thus applied directly to political affairs, it becomes a romantically militant appeal to action, and the poet's function within the play is, in large part, that of a propagandist for the cause of Irish nationalism.

Although religion is touched only lightly in Cath-

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<sup>8</sup> Norman Jeffares, "Yeats as Public Man," Poetry, XCVIII (July, 1961), 255.

<sup>9</sup> See above, p. 25, footnote 49.



leen Ni Houlihan, it is present in the form of a mild anti-clericalism. There are two points in the play where the poet's imagination comes into conflict with organized religion. The first of these is the priest's desire to see Michael and Delia married. A wish to see two young people of the parish happily married is not, on the face of it, the subject of a poet's criticism. However, this desire links the priest with the status quo and thus brings him into conflict with the poet's vision. The implication is that the Church, as part of the Establishment, is more interested in maintaining a cautious, docile way of life than in promoting a free Ireland.

A second point of conflict between Church and poet can be found in Cathleen's song. She promises immortality as Michael's reward for the sacrifice she is calling on him to make, and suggests that her reward is greater than the immortality that the Church offers (for a price); "Do not give money for prayers/ For the dead that shall die tomorrow," (p. 86), she sings. In effect, she is saying that the "wasteful virtues" (p. 127) lead to heroism, and that as heroes the dead will have a continuing place in the minds of successive generations of people they have helped to free.

In Cathleen Ni Houlihan, then, the poet functions as a direct force in society. Martin's statement in The Uni-

corn from the Stars, "My business is not reformation but revelation" (p. 378), is the reverse of Cathleen's assessment. Reformation is very much Cathleen's business. Irish society, plagued by "too many strangers in the house," (p. 81) can be freed only by her passionate message, since it alone can bring out the latent heroism that will put aside possessions, love and life itself rather than submit to foreign domination. Materialism and the church are seen as forces for the status quo; only the poet carries an idealistic social message.

There is evidence that in Yeats's Ireland such a view of the poet's role was much more than wishful thinking. In his introduction to The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats, Donald R. Pearce provides evidence of the far-reaching effects Cathleen Ni Houlihan had on its initial audience.

His early plays . . . had had the effect of converting to the National movement certain young men, among them some poets and writers associated with the literary movement, who later died securing the political independence of their country from England in 1916. One of the members of the seven-man Supreme Council of the I.R.B., which had planned that famous Insurrection, tells me that he himself entered the political movement the day after he saw the opening performance of Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan in April, 1902, prior to which he "had never had a political thought."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats, Ed. Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1960), p. 15.

It need hardly be pointed out that Yeats very quickly became uncomfortable with such an activist view of the poet's role. His statement in "First Principles" about losing the power "to write movingly upon any theme" as the inevitable result of sustained overtly patriotic writing has already been quoted in Chapter I.<sup>11</sup> A more general but relevant comment appears in the records of the Senate of the Irish Free State. On June 7, 1923 Yeats rose to speak on the suggestion that "minors should not be permitted to go to cinemas unattended by adults."<sup>12</sup>

I would like to comfort the mind of the Senator who has just spoken, but I am afraid I shall not succeed. This is really an old problem--a problem that has troubled a great many writers and a great many artists. I remember myself--

. . . . .

A terrible responsibility has been thrust upon me. I merely rose to say that I thought I could comfort the mind of the Senator who proposed this amendment. Artists and writers for a very long time have been troubled at intervals by their work. I remember John Synge and myself both being considerably troubled when a man, who had drowned himself in the Liffey, was taken from the river. He had in his pocket a copy of Synge's play, "Riders to the Sea," which, you may remember, dealt with a drowned man. We know, of course, that Goethe was greatly troubled when a man was taken from the river, having drowned himself. The man had in his pocket a copy of "Werther," which is also about a man who had

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<sup>11</sup>See above, p. 4, footnote 5.

<sup>12</sup>Senate Speeches, p. 51.

drowned himself. It has again and again cropped up in the world that the arts do appeal to our imitative faculties. We comfort ourselves in the way Goethe comforted himself, that there must have been other men saved from suicide by having read "Werther." We see only the evil effect, greatly exaggerated in the papers, of these rather inferior forms of art which we are now discussing, but we have no means of reducing to statistics their other effects. I think you can leave the arts, superior or inferior, to the general conscience of mankind.<sup>13</sup>

Although arguing here for freedom of speech, the problem of an artist's responsibility to society for the consequences of his art is not an easy problem for Yeats. The speech, quoted in full above,<sup>14</sup> is remarkable for the forthright acknowledgement that the issue may well be one of life and death. His defence for artistic works which demonstrably have caused harm is that they have done more good than harm, although by its very nature this is a difficult proposition to prove empirically. It does not seem fanciful to suggest that beyond his references to Synge and Goethe there lurks a vision of the 1916 firing squads.

In conclusion, then, Cathleen Ni Houlihan is unique among the plays under discussion in its uncomplicated, romantically militant appeal to action. The poet's role in

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>14</sup>The ellipsis marks indicate an interruption over a question of procedure.

this play is not that of the disinterested seeker for truth and beauty, but rather of the participant and reformer who uses the craft and the deeper vision of the poet to reorder society.

Because The Shadowy Waters was frequently revised, it will be necessary to define at the outset which version of the play is to be analyzed. In general, this will be the 1911 version as we have it in Collected Plays. However, some reference will be made to revisions which occurred from 1900 to 1910.

These revisions, as S.B. Bushrui's valuable study shows,<sup>15</sup> are due to a reaction by Yeats toward his earlier romantic style. A number of concurrent personal experiences probably combined to bring about a reassessment of his view of art, and hence of his style. The shock of Maud Gonne's marriage in 1903, his experience as leader of the Irish Dramatic Movement, his fame within Ireland as the author of Cathleen Ni Houlihan were all powerful personal experiences. Small wonder that such dramatic manifestation of the power of the external world should bring about a profound inner reaction, and that in the production of art this reaction should be directed against the vague romanticism which characterizes much of his earlier work.

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<sup>15</sup>Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays, pp. 1-38.

A letter to A.E. about some poetry by friends of Russell illustrates the repugnance Yeats has come to feel toward all forms of exaggerated sentiment.

. . . the dominant mood in many of them is one I have fought in myself and put down. In my Land of Heart's Desire, and in some of my lyric verse of that time, there is an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly. The popularity of The Land of Heart's Desire seems to me to come not from its merits but because of this weakness. I have been fighting the prevailing decadence for years, and have just got it under foot in my own heart--it is sentiment and sentimental sadness, a womanish introspection . . . Yet this region of shadows is full of false images of the spirit and of the body . . . I am roused by it to a kind of frenzied hatred which is quite out of my control . . . We possess nothing but the will and we must never let the children of vague desires breathe upon it nor the waters of sentiment rust the terrible mirror of its blade. I fled from some of this new verse you have gathered as from much verse of our day, knowing that I fled that water and that breath . . .

PS. . . . Some day you will become aware as I have become of an uncontrollable shrinking from the shadows, for as I believe a mysterious command has gone out against them in the invisible world of [?] inner energies. Let us have no emotions, however abstract, in which there is not an athletic joy.<sup>16</sup>

The early version of The Shadowy Waters, like The Land of Heart's Desire, provided many "false images" for his "uncontrollable shrinking." Hence we have the revisions.

The tenor of these revisions is clearly shown by

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 20. Bushrui is quoting from The Letters of W.B. Yeats, Ed. Wade, pp. 434-435.

three parallel excerpts from the versions of 1900, 1906 and 1907--"the three main versions."<sup>17</sup>

## 1900

The Other Sailor. How many moons have died from  
the full moon  
When something that was bearded like a goat  
Walked on the waters and bid Forgael seek  
His heart's desire where the world dwindles out?

The Helmsman. Nine moons.

The Other Sailor. And from the harping of the fool?

The Helmsman. Three moons.

The Other Sailor. It were best to kill him, and  
choose out  
Another leader, and turn home again.

## 1906

1st Sailor. Has he not led us into these waste seas  
For long enough?

2nd Sailor. Aye, long and long enough.

1st Sailor. We have not come upon a shore or ship  
These dozen weeks.

## 1907

First Sailor. It is long enough, and too long, Forgael  
has been bringing us through the waste places of the  
great sea.<sup>18</sup>

Each successive revision makes the language of the sailors

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

more realistic and incisive. This effect is gained by deleting symbolic imagery and, in the version of 1907, verse form from their conversation.

The direction of the revisions is clear; Yeats is attempting to find in all emotions an "athletic"<sup>19</sup> joy, that is, a robustness of emotion associated with concrete images derived from sensory experience rather than with those which derive from romantic fancy. In a letter to John Quinn (1905) he wrote:

I believe more strongly every day that the element of strength in poetic language is common idiom, just as the element of strength in poetic construction is common passion.<sup>20</sup>

Yeats's changes in vision and style, then, reflect the inner struggle between the world of objective reality and the inner world of imagination. In the terminology of A Vision this is the tension between Creative Mind and Body of Fate.<sup>21</sup>

Of central relevance to this thesis is the degree of "dream-laden atmosphere" that remains after the process of deleting symbolism and ornamentation is complete. The theme

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<sup>19</sup>See above, p. 40, footnote 15.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted by Ellman in The Man And The Masks, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup>A Vision, p. 73.



of The Shadowy Waters has rightly been defined as "the love of man and woman, and also the love of a mysterious and fabulous 'Eden' lying beyond the limits of the world."<sup>22</sup> In the action of the play, it is Forgael's attempt to unite these two loves which alienates him from Aibric and the other sailors.

The setting of The Shadowy Waters is "the waste places of the great sea" (p. 147). Such a setting, in contrast to that of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, eliminates the familiar landscape of daily affairs (except for those whose calling is on board ship) and thus points the way to a symbolic interpretation. F.A.C. Wilson defines the setting as one which provides "an archetypal situation as the foundation of its plot."<sup>23</sup>

There are three movements within this single-act play. The first of these is the exposition of the basic situation (some five and a half pages in the text of Collected Plays) which leads to the appearance of the ship carrying Dectora. There is, secondly, the turmoil of the sea-fight, Aibric giving the order to attack. The fight is presented to the audience from the point of view of Forgael,

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<sup>22</sup>Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961), p. 36.

as he observes the souls of the dead in the form of man-headed birds rising and hovering above the mast. The third movement consists primarily of the confrontation between Forgael and Dectora, with the sense of conflict between them, when they first meet, heightened by Dectora's alliance with the sailors. Aibric's function in this part of the play, as earlier, is to tempt Forgael to forsake his quest; his is a temptation of some subtlety because of his genuine loyalty to Forgael. Within these three movements there is dramatized the inner conflict of a poet's mind.

Undoubtedly there is an element of the autobiographical in this dramatization. Richard Ellmann sums up this element thus:

The Shadowy Waters, begun in 1885 and started over in 1894 after Yeats had seen Axel, was formed, as he said, largely out of 'certain visionary experiences.' The plot shows a fundamental uncertainty in his mind during the 'nineties. For years he had sought to persuade Maud Gonne to renounce her political activities and pursue with him the reality beyond the veil, where love transcends itself and 'is made/ Imperishable fire under the boughs/ Of chrysoberyl and beryl and chrysolite,/ And chrysoprase and ruby and sardonyx.' The difficulty of finishing the play, which was not published till 1900, was the difficulty of knowing what he meant. He wanted his beloved in the flesh, but felt that a love so overpowering and noble as his must have some loftier goal. For this reason he had worked with her upon the Irish order, seeking to attain with her the inner reality and to make their minds one, and hoping vaguely and vainly that their bodies would become one in the process. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, handling a similar problem, had solved it by having his lovers kill themselves rather than spoil by consum-

mation their perfect passion. Yeats hedged by sending off Forgael and Dectora on a ship which might lead to death but would probably bear them, clasped in one another's arms, to the world where appearances were true.<sup>24</sup>

The implications of the love story, however, exceed the personal relationship between Yeats and Maud Gonne, this being rather the raw material for the play--to put it another way, the play presents a universal theme, that of the quest for a transcendent, perfect, spiritual love between man and woman. Forgael longs for the realization of such a love, which his intuition tells him exists somewhere, and is prepared to leave the world entirely (as he finally does) in order to find it. Aibric argues that he should

Be satisfied to live like other men,  
And drive impossible dreams away. The world  
Has beautiful women to please every man.  
(p. 151)

Forgael answers,

But he that gets their love after the fashion  
Loves in brief longing and deceiving hope  
And bodily tenderness, and finds that even  
The bed of love, that in the imagination  
Had seemed to be the giver of all peace,  
Is no more than a wine-cup in the tasting,  
And as soon finished. (p. 151)

He bases his quest on the belief that

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<sup>24</sup>Ellmann, The Man And The Masks, p. 134.

What the world's million lips are thirsting for  
Must be substantial somewhere. (p. 151)

Forgael's search is directly at odds with that of the sailors, as the expository section of the play reveals. We are informed of their aims at the outset of the play.

Second Sailor. We did not meet with a ship to make a prey of these eight weeks, or any shore or island to plunder or to harry. It is a hard thing, age to be coming on me, and I not to get the chance of doing a robbery that would enable me to live quiet and honest to the end of my lifetime. (p. 147)

The speech reflects the sailors' complacent materialism and complete innocence of moral sensitivity. Since their single aim is to become rich, it is surprising to find them in the service of Forgael at all. The play does attempt to provide a realistic basis for what is essentially a dramatic necessity--the necessity of dialogue which spells out the attitudes which alienate the poet (Forgael) from society. The sailors' service to Forgael is motivated purely by temporal self-interest.

Aibric. Silence! for you have taken Forgael's pay.

First Sailor. Little pay we have had this twelvemonth. We would never have turned against him if he had brought us, as he promised, into seas that would be thick with ships. That was the bargain. (p. 149)

The sailors' motivations are thus adequately accounted for, but the suggestion that Forgael has voluntarily made

them his companions on an actual sea voyage is less credible. The entire action of the play, culminating in the cut rope which sets Forgael and Dectora adrift, suggests that the poetic and romantic temperament is associated with society's restless economic struggles only through necessity. That an imaginative dreamer like Forgael would hire men of these sailors' mentality, promising them rich booty, with the express aim of searching for a magic realm where dreams become reality is, in context of this play, not a credible motive. Neither are the last words on the subject very helpful--

"The Ever-living have kept my bargain; they have paid you on the nail" (p. 152). The whole attempt to ground the play in objective reality simply emphasizes its dream atmosphere. Perhaps The Shadowy Waters is thus weakened as a play, but the uneasy coexistence of spirit and matter is clearly set forth.

The sailors' comments on Forgael's central theme of love further emphasize the alienation of one from the other. The First Sailor's complaint,

What is the use of knocking about and fighting as  
 we do unless we get the chance to drink more wine  
 and kiss more women than lasting peaceable men  
 through their long lifetime? (p. 149)

is more decorous, but just as barren of spiritual connotation as his comment in the 1907 revision--

I am so lecherous with abstinence  
 I'd give the profit of nine voyages  
 For that red Moll that had but the one eye.<sup>25</sup>

The exposition section, then, clarifies two things: Forgael's attempt to realize the ideal love which he has glimpsed in his imagination, and the conflict between Forgael and the representatives of the society of which he is also a part. It also introduces a number of symbols that are important to an understanding of what is happening in the play; these are: the ship, the sea, the birds and the harp.

The first two of these symbols, as part of the setting, establish the archetypal situation. F.A.C. Wilson, showing that the symbolism of Yeats generally depends heavily on traditional Platonism, defines the sea as a symbol for the material world.<sup>26</sup> To this definition Bushrui adds a quotation from The Wind among the Reeds: "the sea represents . . . 'the drifting bitterness of life.'" Forgael's, and later Dectora's, ship is "an image of the soul of man."<sup>27</sup> As the play opens Forgael, in a troubled sleep and surrounded by hostile "comrades," represents the sub-

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted by Bushrui in Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup>Wilson, Yeats and Tradition, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup>Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 9.

jective "antithetical" mind which is "emotional and aesthetic,"<sup>28</sup> turned inward upon itself. In his longing for the harmony and unity of an ideal love, he forms a highly romantic image, an image of the artist in isolation. Frank Kermode's description of such isolation applies perfectly to Forgael.

The faces of men pass before him as in a speculum; but he is attached to them by no common tie of sympathy or suffering. He is thrown back into himself and his own thoughts. He lives in the solitude of his own breast, without wife or child or friend or enemy in the whole world. His is the solitude of the soul, not of woods or trees or mountains--but the desert of society--the waste and oblivion of the heart. He is himself alone.<sup>29</sup>

Closely allied to Forgael is the harp, the "magical power of poetry,"<sup>30</sup> which serves as a symbol of the creative imagination. The functioning of the harp is associated with the full moon, hence--assuming that we have here the rudiments of the system later developed in A Vision--with the subjectivity of the fifteenth phase of the moon.

Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,  
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,  
To die into the labyrinth of itself!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A Vision, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Kermode, Romantic Image, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, Yeats and Tradition, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> A Vision, p. 60.

Even the sailors, exemplifying as they do the primary, objective qualities of society, are moved by the power of the harp to glimpse the visionary world.

First Sailor. Do you remember that galley we sank at the time of the full moon?

Second Sailor. I do. We were becalmed the same night, and he sat up there playing that old harp of his until the moon had set.

First Sailor. I was sleeping up there by the bulwark, and when I woke in the sound of the harp a change came over my eyes, and I could see very strange things. The dead were floating upon the sea yet, and it seemed as if the life that went out of every one of them had turned to the shape of a man-headed bird--grey they were, and they rose up of a sudden and called out with voices like our own, and flew away singing to the west. Words like this they were singing: 'Happiness beyond measure, happiness where the sun dies'.

Second Sailor. I understand well what they are doing. My mother used to be talking of birds of the sort. They are sent by the lasting watchers to lead men away from this world and its women to some place of shining women that cast no shadow, having lived before the making of the earth. But I have no mind to go following him to that place.

First Sailor. Let us creep up to him and kill him in his sleep. (pp. 148-149)

Their fleeting look at the visionary world leaves them with respect for the power of the harp, but without any love for what it represents--"I would have made an end of him [Forgael] long ago, but that I was in dread of his harp" (p. 149). It is ironic that the sailors should be the medium through which the nature of the man-headed birds is



explained. Under the magic spell of the harp (of creative imagination exercised by the poet) they also have seen what Forgael sees, the souls of the dead rise bird-like from their bodies and fly, in an ecstasy of joy, into the west.

However, the sailors are not committed to the quest for the beatific vision, and therefore it is left for Forgael to show the significance of the birds. He calls them his "only pilots" (p. 150). It is significant that the sole guide for Forgael amidst his uncharted seas should be the disembodied souls of the dead. Being pure spirit, and having severed all links with the material world, they foreshadow Forgael's own withdrawal from the world. Forgael's desire to follow the birds into the west, the place of "fading and dreaming things,"<sup>32</sup> is more than a death wish. The issue here is rather the desire to experience the intersection of the temporal by the eternal. Thus Forgael asserts that he alone "of all living men" (p. 151) will find "the reality that makes our passion" (p. 151). Later, answering Dectora's indignant outburst,

My husband and my king died at my feet  
And yet you talk of love (p. 157)

he says,

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted by V.K. Narayana Menon in The Development of W.B. Yeats (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd), p. 32.

The movement of time  
 Is shaken in these seas, and what one does  
 One moment has no might upon the moment  
 That follows after. (p. 157)

Structurally, the central section of the play, the sea-battle, serves as a bridge between exposition and resolution. The action takes place off stage, and the audience, depending on Forgael's comments for knowledge of what is happening, is made aware of the violence through his lengthy description of the human-headed birds rising from their bodies and hovering above the mast. Their cries are a confused welter of phrases, leaving their message mysterious to the mind of Forgael. They do not light the "torch inside his head/ That makes all clear" (p. 152), but in their circular flight they introduce Dectora by making her the center of the circle. At first Forgael accepts her reluctantly, failing to recognize her as "that shadowless unearthly woman/ At the world's end" (p. 154). However, since the guidance of the birds is clear he woos and finally charms her.

The union of Forgael and Dectora begins as conflict; first there is the sea-battle which brings her to him, and then the conflict between them as Dectora demands revenge for her slain husband and Forgael speaks in philosophical terms about the ultimate uselessness of attempting to "weigh and measure all these waste seas" (p. 155), that is, to

search for meaning in the material world. The most important of worldly affairs, he says, are nothing more than "dust on the moth's wings" (p. 155).

Yeats attempted to explain the symbolic meaning of the union between Forgael and Dectora in a programme-note for the Abbey Theatre production of The Shadowy Waters in 1905.

The main story expresses the desire for a perfect and eternal union that comes to all lovers, the desire of love to 'drown in its own shadow'. But it has also other meanings. Forgael seeks death; Dectora has always sought life; and in some way the uniting of her vivid force with his abyss-seeking desire for the waters of Death makes a perfect humanity. Of course, in another sense, these two are simply man and woman, the reason and the will, as Swedenborg puts it. The second flaming up of the harp may mean the coming of a more supernatural passion, when Dectora accepts the death-desiring destiny. Yet in one sense, and precisely because she accepts it, this destiny is not death; for she, the living will, accompanies Forgael, the mind, through the gates of the unknown world. Perhaps it is a mystical interpretation of the resurrection of the body.<sup>33</sup>

The central point in this explanation is that Dectora represents an opposite quality from that of Forgael--will against reason, death against life. It is the harp, symbol of the creative imagination, which brings them into harmony.

In attempting to understand what happens in the lat-

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<sup>33</sup>Quoted by Bushrui in Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 2.

ter part of the play it may be helpful to center attention on two of the symbols--the rope and the golden net--that are introduced in this part. Bushrui has pointed out that the rope symbolizes human needs, desires, frailties and weaknesses.<sup>34</sup> The great golden net, on the other hand, symbolizes eternal unity and love, as the last speech of the play seems to spell out.

Forgael [gathering Dectora's hair about him].

Beloved, having dragged the net about us,  
 And knitted mesh to mesh, we grow immortal;  
 And that old harp awakens of itself  
 To cry aloud to the grey birds, and dreams,  
 That have had dreams for father, live in us.  
 (p. 167)

The passage presents an image of the imagination in a visionary state, that state to which being cut off from the world of action has fitted the poetic mind. The result of such isolation from the world has been defined thus:

To be cut off from life and action, in one way or another, is necessary as a preparation for the 'vision'. Some difference in the artist gives him access to this--an enormous privilege, involving joy (which acquires an almost technical sense as a necessary concomitant of the full exercise of the mind in the act of imagination).<sup>35</sup>

When Dectora first arrives, the rope fastens her ship to Forgael's; after the rope is cut it is the golden net

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>Kermode, Romantic Image, p. 6.

that holds them together. The first bond is associated with conflict, the second with love and harmony, with "joy."

The transition from one bond to the other is effected by the power of the harp, the instrument by which Forgael becomes a magician. All difficulties fade before his magic powers, as the sailors' threats turn to songs about "brown ale and yellow" (p. 159) and Dectora is charmed into accepting as her lover the man responsible for her husband's death. In doing so she "accepts the death-desiring destiny"<sup>36</sup> of Forgael, an action that symbolizes the union of opposites and a resulting new state of being. Dectora describes this state when she refuses to hear Forgael's confession of having tricked her with a magic spell.

What do I care,  
Now that my body has begun to dream,  
And you have grown to be a burning coal  
In the imagination and intellect? (p. 163)

In their final union they experience a new intensity of life. In this state the rope is not an appropriate symbol because their union is no longer grounded in the desires and weaknesses of ordinary human association. The rope is therefore severed. The cutting of the rope sets them adrift--perhaps to the realm of absolute reality of which

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<sup>36</sup>See above, p. 52, footnote 32.

earthly existence is only the shadow, perhaps to death.

This ambiguous ending is clearly in contrast with the triumphant note on which Cathleen Ni Houlihan ends. The success of Cathleen's appeal to Irish youth carries with it a buoyant expectation of freedom, but it involves death and broken hopes as well; Delia's tears are an emotional counter-weight to the cheers that penetrate from beyond the cottage, thus emphasizing the cost of Michael's commitment. In both plays, the working of the poet's imagination is associated with death, but there is a contrast in the feeling about death that each play projects. In The Shadowy Waters the feeling is vaguely unhappy; in Cathleen Ni Houlihan there is an exuberance that transcends pain.

Thus, in Cathleen Ni Houlihan the poet finds ecstasy in spite of death. In commenting on this tension between death and exultation Seanchan, in The King's Threshold, affirms that it is the unique function of the poet to maintain such a tension.

And I would have all know that when all falls  
 In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,  
 Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,  
 The victim's joy among the holy flame,  
 God's laughter at the shattering of the world.  
 (p. 114)

This attitude toward death recurs also in the lyric poetry. "The Rose Tree," for example, affirms that blood is the price of freedom, that the "Rose Tree" can only grow strong

if it is watered with blood--"There's nothing but our own red blood/ Can make a right Rose Tree."<sup>37</sup> "The Gyres" from "Last Poems" (1936-1939) emphasizes more clearly the paradox of tragic joy--

Irrational streams of blood are staining earth;  
Empedocles has thrown all things about;  
Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;  
We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.<sup>38</sup>

The Shadowy Waters, in contrast to Cathleen Ni Houlihan, does not project any well-defined tragic joy. The fate of Forgael and Dectora is too obscure, and their response as they drift away to their fate is too dream-like to convince an audience of tragic implications.

Other differences between these two plays can be listed. Although both are symbolic plays, the weight of symbolism in The Shadowy Waters is much greater, even in the final version. It is in part the sheer weight of symbolism which takes from its structure the clean, uncomplicated line of development that marks Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

Also, The Shadowy Waters represents a deeper and more agonizing internal dialogue. A single vivid dream was the inspiration for writing Cathleen Ni Houlihan,<sup>39</sup> whereas years

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<sup>37</sup>Collected Poems, p. 206.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>39</sup>See above, p. 4, footnote 5.

of introspection went into the making of The Shadowy Waters. "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry,"<sup>40</sup> Yeats has written. It would be an exaggeration to characterize Cathleen Ni Houlihan as pure rhetoric, but, in its forthright involvement with political activism, that is its tendency. The Shadowy Waters, on the other hand, has nothing of the rhetorical about it. It is an internal dialogue that attempts to clarify the position of the imaginative artist. Contrary to Yeats's words in his essay "The Moods," that "everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means,"<sup>41</sup> this play finds that these are rather things to be escaped.

Finally, then, the poet's role in Cathleen Ni Houlihan is that of the reformer, placing his talents at the disposal of his country's needs, without probing deeply into the implications of his vision. In The Shadowy Waters the poet's role is that of the recluse from society, whose task is to become a seer. He does not concern himself directly with political matters, but, in lonely isolation, probes the essential nature of poetic sensibility.

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<sup>40</sup>See above, p. 4, footnote 6.

<sup>41</sup>See above, p. 12, footnote 23.



Clearly, such probing is difficult material to stage and, in spite of the revisions, The Shadowy Waters did not become a successful stage play. Cathleen Ni Houlihan, however, with its clear development and exciting call for action was entirely successful on the stage. We have already noted that Stephen Gwynn's feeling concerning the intensity of the audience reaction to the first performance was "whether such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot."<sup>42</sup> We have also noted evidence that one of the members of the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. which planned the 1916 Rebellion joined the political movement immediately after seeing that performance.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, it was the success of Cathleen Ni Houlihan (as well as the overt results of other writings) that troubled Yeats to the end of his life, as one of his last lyric poems, "The Man and the Echo," reveals.

Did that play of mine send out  
 Certain men the English shot?  
 Did words of mine put too great strain  
 On that woman's reeling brain?  
 Could my spoken words have checked  
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>See above, p. 35, footnote 8.

<sup>43</sup>See above, p. 37, footnote 10.

<sup>44</sup>Collected Poems, p. 393.

It is evident that the relationship between art and action was for Yeats a profound and recurring problem.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE COUNTESS CATHLEEN, THE KING'S THRESHOLD, THE UNICORN FROM THE STARS

If we think of the five plays under analysis in this thesis as points on an objective-subjective spectrum, the plays studied in Chapter II occupy the two outer positions, and the remaining three find their places between them. In each of the three plays to be discussed in this chapter, vision and objective reality are joined in direct conflict; however, each play shows the conflict from a different point of view.

Thus, in The Countess Cathleen Yeats shows a keen awareness of the suffering and loss of dignity imposed by poverty, without, however, revealing any identification of poetic vision with the needs of society, as he does in Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Rather, the poet in The Countess Cathleen (Aleel) declares himself exempt from the urgent needs of peasant Ireland.

Let Him that made mankind, the angels and devils  
And dearth and plenty, mend what He has made,  
For when we labour in vain and eye still sees,  
Heart breaks in vain. (p. 26)

The play thus incorporates a tenet that Yeats has frequently stated in prose, as, for example, in the essay, "J.M. Synge and Ireland."

To speak of one's emotions without fear or moral ambition, to come out from under the shadow of other men's minds, to forget their needs, to be utterly oneself, that is all the muses care for.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, it might be noted, applies also to the attitude of the poet in The King's Threshold, with this difference: Seanchan desires to fulfill a formative role within society, whereas Aleel has no such desire. In The Unicorn from the Stars, Martin's early commitment to violent action (as an adherent of Cathleen Ni Houlihan) gives way under the stress of the results of those actions and further spiritual enlightenment to an attitude very close to that of the above quotation.

The King's Threshold provides a clear picture of the poet in conflict with society. More than any of the other plays under consideration, it details the forces within society hostile to the functioning of the poet as a member of that society. The Countess Cathleen, for example, focuses on one aspect of society--the unjust economic squeeze applied to the poor by merchants who enrich themselves at the cost of starvation and loss of human dignity to the ordinary peasant--and shows the gulf between that unpleasant objective reality and the subjective life of the poet. In The King's Threshold Seanchan, in his insistence on retain-

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<sup>1</sup>Essays (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 421.

ing "the poets' right,/ Established at the establishment of the world" (pp. 108-109) is confronted by the whole gamut of society, from beggars to princesses and king.

In The Unicorn from the Stars Yeats re-examines the question of the poet's place in society, finding some qualifications necessary. This play, concentrating as it does on the nature of vision and showing that action based on an incomplete subjective message can be disastrous, is not so confident about the poet's role as Cathleen Ni Houlihan or The King's Threshold. Although, like The Shadowy Waters, The Unicorn from the Stars concentrates on the nature of vision, it stands on the realistic base of Thomas Hearne's coach-building business and a countryside filled with poor and squabbling peasants. Through this realism and through its focus on a particular problem it escapes the vague other-worldly atmosphere of The Shadowy Waters. The Unicorn from the Stars is perhaps closest to The Countess Cathleen because, like that play, it stresses the realistic aspects of poverty and in its basic conflict clearly balances dream against responsibility.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the three remaining plays, it is necessary to qualify our comparison of the plays under discussion with points on a spectrum. The analogy is helpful only to a degree because the plays are not so restricted in scope as such an analogy would imply.

The King's Threshold is close to The Shadowy Waters in its stress on the poet as a man set apart from this life. However, in its detailing of the forces within society and in the clear message of the poet's role in an ideal society--one that is still to come--it tends toward the image of the poet reflected in Cathleen Ni Houlihan. We could say that The Shadowy Waters occupies a central position, drawing together the opposing objective and subjective roles of the poet.

The Countess Cathleen is the earliest of Yeats's published plays; its date in Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats is given as 1892, a dating which Peter Ure terms "seriously misleading pedantry."<sup>2</sup> He points out that although the play was first completed in 1891, it underwent four major revisions--in 1895, 1901, 1912 and 1919--and he shows that these revisions substantially altered the original conception of the play.<sup>3</sup> The tenor of these revisions is worth noting because their effect has been to emphasize the conflict between reality and vision.

Yeats drew material for his first writing of the play from "The Countess Kathleen O'Shea," a story he found

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<sup>2</sup>Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13. The chapter "A Counter-Truth" (pp. 9-30) provides a detailed account of the revisions of the play.

in a collection of Irish stories entitled Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry.<sup>4</sup>

In both "The Countess Kathleen O'Shea" and in the first version of The Countess Cathleen (1891) the action simply traces the conflict between the saintly Cathleen and the demon merchants who traffic in the souls of starving peasants. Cathleen plans to use her wealth to save the peasants, but is frustrated in these plans when the merchants seize her and steal her wealth. She thereupon sells her soul for a very high price, thus rescuing a famished Ireland from the clutches of the demons.

As already indicated, the first version of Yeats's play followed the source material much more closely than does the final revision of the Collected Plays. The focus there was on the struggle between Cathleen and the mer-

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<sup>4</sup>An interesting sketch regarding the source of The Countess Cathleen is given by David R. Clark in a footnote to his essay "Vision and Revision: Yeats's The Countess Cathleen," The World of W.B. Yeats, p. 159, footnote 3.

Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry (London: Walter Scott, 1888), 232-235. Yeats had found the story "in what professed to be a collection of Irish folklore in an Irish newspaper." Poems (1901), 295. By 1895, he had learned that the story was of recent introduction. Poems (1895), 282. But not until 1901 was he able to note the source, Les Matinées de Timothée Trimm by Léo Lespès. Poems (1901), 295. Yeats never admitted the irony in the fact that his intensely national drama had cosmopolitanism to thank for its genesis.

chants; the struggle, however, is not solely for the souls of the peasants. It is also a conflict between poetic vision and society.

In each version this conflict is present, but the effect of repeated revision has been to put greater stress on the question of the poet's responsibility for ills within society. In the context of this play the poet will be identified with vision, while society, which is in a state of need, will be identified with responsibility. In Yeats the Playwright Peter Ure has pointed out the struggle between vision and responsibility as something central also to the first version;<sup>5</sup> but this struggle goes on within the soul of Cathleen. The point to be stressed here is that even in the first version, where Yeats held quite close to his source material, he did not exclude personal utterance. Then, as he revised the play, the personal struggle became more clearly the central conflict.

Through the four revisions Yeats arrived at the version of the play as we have it in the Collected Plays. The significant change is the introduction of Aleel, the poet. Thus, whereas the play at first was mainly a dramatization of source material, it later became strongly autobiographical. The original Cathleen was modelled on Kathleen O'Shea

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<sup>5</sup>Ure, Yeats the Playwright, p. 19.



of the legend; the later heroine has taken on qualities of Maud Gonne, especially in her choice of philanthropy over the poet and his love.

But the introduction of Aleel is not merely to introduce a strongly autobiographical element as an end in itself. Aleel's presence enables Yeats to dramatize the struggle between vision and responsibility, which is also the struggle between "the loud questions" and "the reveries that incline the imagination to the lasting work of literature."<sup>6</sup> What was originally a struggle within the soul of Cathleen has become a conflict between Cathleen and Aleel. Hence we have a Cathleen who is strangely passive in her encounters with the demon merchants, behaviour which is certainly in contrast to that in the original legend and in the first version of the play, where Cathleen engages in a desperate physical struggle to save her treasure. In the final version the real focus of conflict is the issue between herself and Aleel. They are now the antagonists.

Early in the play, Cathleen is committed to neither Aleel (vision) nor the peasant cause (responsibility). She has, indeed, in acts of charity given away the last of the money she carried with her (as well as the purse), but when Shemus mutters contemptuously at Aleel's music, she comes

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<sup>6</sup> "First Principles," pp. 141-142.

to the poet's defence:

Ah, do not blame the finger on the string;  
 The doctors bid me fly the unlucky times  
 And find distraction for my thoughts, or else  
 Pine to my grave. (p. 8)

The issue at stake is clearly a choice between escape into the world of dream represented by Aleel, or a life of sacrifice in accepting the present reality of starving peasants, a choice which Cathleen has not yet made. Yeats has worded the issue thus:

It is the soul of one that loves Ireland . . .  
 plunging into unrest, seeming to lose itself, to  
 bargain itself away to the very wickedness of the  
 world, and to surrender what is eternal for what  
 is temporary . . . <sup>7</sup>

The plunge into unrest comes somewhat later in the play, but Scene I draws very clearly the antagonism between Aleel and Shemus and shows that the two cannot be harmonized.

The early part of Scene II develops the opposite qualities of Cathleen's and Aleel's characters in terms of the phases of the moon, thus clearly introducing Yeats's Great Wheel and its attendant concept of the objective-subjective antithesis. Aleel has been called "a complete and successful symbol of subjective life, . . . bearer of

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

the 'unchristened heart'."<sup>8</sup> Scene II supports such a designation. Here we see Aleel discussing ideal love, seeking to strike a spark within Cathleen. He is associated with the full moon, and therefore with complete subjectivity on Yeats's Great Wheel.

A man, they say,  
Loved Maeve the Queen of all the invisible host,  
And died of his love nine centuries ago.  
And now, when the moon's riding at the full,  
She leaves her dancers lonely and lies there  
Upon that level place, and for three days  
Stretches and sighs and wets her long pale cheeks.  
(p. 17)

Since the man died of his love nine hundred years ago and the moon is now at the full, it is clear that he had the misfortune to love Maeve during a phase in which she could not return his love. It is also clear that the man and Queen Maeve are in fact Aleel and Cathleen, or at least are antithetical in the same way. When Cona, the voice of unimaginative, practical common sense (associated with the early objective phases of the moon) breaks up Aleel's talk by pointing out Cathleen's house to her just as they are about to go right by it, Aleel bursts out with

A curse upon it for a meddling house!  
Had it but stayed away I would have known  
What Queen Maeve thinks on when the moon is pinched.  
(p. 18)

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<sup>8</sup>Ure, Yeats the Playwright, p. 25.

Aleel; then, associated with the full moon, draws inward and away from the realities of famine and languishing peasant souls, while Cathleen, at the first crescent, gives herself to what is external. "From this day for ever/ I'll have no joy or sorrow of my own," (p. 23), are her words. Later she dismisses Aleel together with his enticements to leave the ravages of sinister forces loosed by starvation and greed and escape into ". . . the sounds of music and the light/ Of waters, till the evil days are done" (p. 25). The two choices open to Cathleen are a projection of Yeats's inner conflict between reality and dream. In choosing to involve herself with the external reality, Cathleen brings into completion what Yeats describes as a secondary meaning present in his mind as he wrote the play.

('It is the soul of one that loves Ireland,' I thought, 'plunging into unrest, seeming to lose itself, to bargain itself away to the very wickedness of the world, and to surrender what is eternal for what is temporary,' . . . )<sup>9</sup>

In the final scene vision is triumphant, but not before the ugliest and crassest of commercialism has had its turn--the souls of peasants are bought for cash, and finally that of Cathleen herself is evaluated in terms of gold (five hundred thousand crowns as against one thousand for an old

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<sup>9</sup>See above, p. 69, footnote 7.

peasant woman against whom "little is set down") (p.41). The role of Aleel in this scene is certainly significant in terms of our thesis. Before Cathleen offers her soul to the merchants Aleel has already offered his. But, as an aesthetic visionary, he is not attempting to raise money for a cause, but simply attempting to throw his soul away in despair over the loss of Cathleen. When the merchant says, "Begone from me,/ I may not touch it" (p. 40), he recognizes the power of the subjective state. He has full power over the peasant world, symbolically associated at the outset of the play with bats' wings, a man with "a wall of flesh" (p. 4) for a face, and horned owls with human faces, symbolism which should be compared to Robartes' answer to Aherne's question in "The Phases of the Moon," "And what of those/ That the last servile crescent has set free?"

Because all dark, like those that are all light,  
 They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,  
 Crying to one another like the bats;  
 And having no desire they cannot tell  
 What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph  
 At the perfection of one's own obedience;  
 And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;  
 Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,  
 Insipid as the dough before it is baked,  
 They change their bodies at a word.<sup>10</sup>

The real world of poverty and unreflecting greed exemplified

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<sup>10</sup> Collected Poems, p. 187.

by Shemus and Teigue is beyond "the last servile crescent." Cathleen joins that world in her saintliness and thus falls under the power of the demon merchants.

Aleel, at the fifteenth phase--and therefore also detached from human life, since "there's no human life at the full or the dark"<sup>11</sup>--manifests his superior power. It is Aleel who interprets what is happening to the soul of Cathleen as the demons take possession, and then in the midst of his vision is able to force the angel itself to speak the message that Cathleen is entering peace, since "The Light of Lights/ Looks always on the motive, not the deed." In the midst of his defeat, Aleel triumphs.

In The King's Threshold the poet Seanchan confronts all the major forces of society--"Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law" (p. 109), King and commoners, all hostile or, at best, without fully understanding his claim. The poet's "free, self-delighting intellect which knows that pain is the cost of its joy"<sup>12</sup> is seen in a state of tension with a society that has only one specific request to make of the poet, namely, that he accept a secondary place among his contemporaries. Beyond this, society is willing to accept any entertainment he has to give, so long

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>12</sup>Kermode, Romantic Image, p. 26.

as he does not claim to be a conveyer of truth.

In the essay "Ireland and the Arts" Yeats makes the point, which is also developed in The King's Threshold, that the poet should not deliberately seek popularity, and quotes with approval Edwin Ellis when he says,

'It is not the business of a poet to make himself understood, but it is the business of the people to understand him. That they are at last compelled to do so is the proof of his authority.'<sup>13</sup>

To this Yeats adds,

. . . if you take from art its martyrdom, you will take from it its glory. It might still reflect the passing modes of mankind, but it would cease to reflect the face of God.<sup>14</sup>

Implicit in these statements is the conviction that the poet occupies, by the very nature of his gifts and calling, a primary and exalted place among his contemporaries. It follows that the insistence of society on an inferior role for poetry and for the contemplative life generally is a kind of spiritual suicide. Thus, the tragedy in The King's Threshold is not so much that Seanchan dies, but that with the poet and all that he stands for removed from society,

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<sup>13</sup>"Ireland and the Arts," Essays and Introductions, p. 207.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 207-208.

there is no force left to protect it from spiritual deformity. The kind of poetry the Chamberlain professes (with due humility) to write is cut off from the real source of poetic vision, and therefore is ineffectual; it reflects merely "the passing modes of mankind," not "the face of God."

At the heart of this view of the supreme value of poetry is the conviction that society is the incarnation of dreams that have their origin in Anima Mundi, the Great Memory.

The more a poet rids his verses of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his verse resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable. He becomes, as all the great mystics have believed, a vessel of the creative power of God . . . .<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in answer to the question "What evil thing will come upon the world/ If the Arts perish?" Seanchan elicits from the Oldest Pupil the answer,

If the Arts should perish,  
The world that lacked them would be like a woman  
That, looking on the cloven lips of a hare,  
Brings forth a hare-lipped child. (p. 112)

It is therefore clear that the grounds on which the

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<sup>15</sup>"The Return of Ulysses," Essays and Introductions, pp. 201-202.



poet insists on having his place "where there is the most honour" (p. 109) is the power he has to create and maintain a healthy society. Yeats here is very close to a theme Wordsworth discusses in the Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800).

He [the poet] is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.<sup>16</sup>

Yeats, no doubt, wrote The King's Threshold with Ireland rather than "the vast empire of human society" in the forefront of his mind, but the issue is the same, ultimately, for a national and for a world community. Both poets are in effect saying that "where there is no vision, the people perish,"<sup>17</sup> and that it is the poet to whom the vision is entrusted.

In The King's Threshold, then, we see the poet as a man set apart by society, offering a strong defence of his role within that society. The play, therefore, brings together the two opposing emphases developed in Chapter II of

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<sup>16</sup>The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 938-939.

<sup>17</sup>Proverbs 29:18.

this study.

There is good reason to believe that the strong defence of the poet in The King's Threshold derives its emphasis in large part from Yeats's experiences as leader of a national theatre movement, which began officially with the manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897<sup>18</sup> and culminated in the work of the Abbey Theatre. Ann Saddlemyer and S.B. Bushrui provide good detailed accounts of Yeats's involvement with the movement and his struggles to create a literary as well as a national theatre.<sup>19</sup> Bushrui cites a note to The King's Threshold of 1906 in which Yeats acknowledges the relationship between the theme of the play and the social conditions which he confronted at the time.

It was written when our Society was having a hard fight for the recognition of pure art in a community of which one half was buried in the practical affairs of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Yeats can be taken as the prototype for Seanchan, and the play can be read as an expression of Yeats's convictions about the place of art in society.

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<sup>18</sup>See above, p. 21, footnote 40.

<sup>19</sup>Saddlemyer, "'Worn Out With Dreams': Dublin's Abbey Theatre," The World of W.B. Yeats, pp. 104-132; Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays, pp. 106-108.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted by Bushrui in Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 108.

Seanchan, like Yeats, finds that "it is hard to write without the sympathy of one's friends."<sup>21</sup> At least for a time, even those to whom Seanchan is personally close are at odds with his heroic commitment to art. Yeats, it seems, is applying in his own context the words of Jesus to the crowds of people who followed him for a time--"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."<sup>22</sup> As a disciple of art, Seanchan rejects the love of Fedelm, in what is the most moving incident of the play, and embraces martyrdom.

The tragic determinism of events within the play is set by the antecedent action of Seanchan's demotion from his place at court. Thus, at the center of the conflict stand Seanchan and the King, the poet and the highest political power of the realm. The King, a pragmatic politician operating on the assumption that politics is the art of the possible, is here challenged by the idealist who will not compromise or negotiate his principles. Seanchan is taking the position that Yeats himself took in relation to the ultra-nationalists within the theatre movement (whose ranks included Maud Gonne) and against the press and general pub-

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<sup>21</sup>See above, p. 24, footnote 47.

<sup>22</sup>St. Luke 14:26.

lic in the uproar over Synge's Playboy of the Western World. He is upholding the principle that art takes precedence over patriotism. This is precisely what Yeats did when--together with Lady Gregory, Miss Horniman, Synge and the Fay brothers--he fought to build an art theatre against the efforts of various nationalist groups to turn the theatre into a weapon of propaganda against English rule.

There is the further parallel that both Yeats and Seanchan reveal sensitivity to the call of nationality, and both are subjected to the problem of divided loyalties. Among the many examples that could be chosen from Yeats's prose to illustrate his feelings, his reply to Miss Horniman's offer of a position in her repertory theatre in Manchester is a concise statement of his nationalism.

I am not young enough to change my nationality--it would really amount to that . . . . I understand my own race and in all my work, lyric or dramatic I have thought of it. If the theatre [the Abbey Theatre] fails I may or may not write plays,--there is always lyric poetry to return to--but I shall write for my own people--whether in love or hate of them matters little--probably I shall not know which it is.<sup>23</sup>

Seanchan, as we have already seen, is also involved with the question of allegiance to his country. His opposition to the King and his concern for the welfare of generations yet

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<sup>23</sup>Quoted by Saddlemyer in "Worn Out With Dreams," p. 123.

unborn make his nationalism a love-hate relationship such as Yeats describes in his letter to Miss Horniman. In effect the play, as well as the letter, is saying that antagonism between nation and poet is a probable, but not necessary, state of affairs.

In the action of The King's Threshold this antagonism, which is certainly real, is developed through several characters beside the King. One of these is the Chamberlain. He functions as a mouthpiece for the King; on behalf of the King he urges the Monk and the Soldier to persuade Seanchan to eat, and personally remonstrates with him to break his fast for the sake of law and order. The King's concern for the safety of his throne is echoed in the Chamberlain's words:

Well, you must be contented, for your work  
 Has roused the common sort against the King,  
 And stolen his authority. The State  
 Is like some orderly and reverend house  
 Wherein, the master being dead of a sudden,  
 The servants quarrel where they have a mind to,  
 And pilfer here and there. (p. 109)

Seanchan does not immediately reply to this charge, except to reiterate his demand that the poet's ancient right be restored. In his refusal to talk things over reasonably Seanchan illustrates the conflict between the tinctures described in A Vision--"The antithetical tincture is emotional and aesthetic whereas the primary tincture is

reasonable and moral."<sup>24</sup> From the point of view of the Chamberlain, Seanchan is lacking in both reasonable and moral qualities; from his own point of view he is defending emotional and aesthetic values. Although Seanchan refuses to debate the morality of his values, his justification for considering them more important than society as it is constituted is to be seen in his general defence of poetry, which is, in essence, that the contemplative life is an essential ingredient in a strong society.

The Soldier and the Mayor of Kinvara are two contrasting characters who, in their own individual ways, stand "in the King's place" (p. 119), thus helping to fill out the picture of society in conflict with aesthetic values.

The Soldier displays the arrogance of one who values physical power above every other consideration. Arrogance is suggested by the tone of his first speech:

I will not interfere, and if he starve  
 For being obstinate and stiff in the neck,  
 'Tis but good riddance. (p. 124)

Arrogance and a predilection for violence are further shown in his threatening words:

Snuff it, old hedgehog, and unroll yourself!

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<sup>24</sup> A Vision, p. 73.

But if I were the King, I'd make you do it  
 With wisps of lighted straw. (p. 125)

Seanchan's spirited reply prompts the Soldier to draw his sword--on an unarmed, starving opponent. This action illustrates the cowardice that underlies his ill-tempered words, and provides a focus for Seanchan's assertion of the poet's power to make men brave:

. . . not a man alive  
 Would ride among the arrows with high heart,  
 Or scatter with an open hand, had not  
 Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues. (p. 127)

Like the heroine in Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the poet in The King's Threshold promotes the heroism which one associates with violent actions, but in The King's Threshold this heroism is specifically differentiated from the ugliness of violence for its own sake. The same theme is treated in "Under Ben Bulben":

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,  
 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'  
 Know that when all words are said  
 And a man is fighting mad,  
 Something drops from eyes long blind,  
 He completes his partial mind,  
 For an instant stands at ease,  
 Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.  
 Even the wisest man grows tense  
 With some sort of violence  
 Before he can accomplish fate,  
 Know his work or choose his mate.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Collected Poems, p. 399.

Yeats clearly feels that violence is an essential aspect of life and a way to self-discovery. It is this subjective aspect of violence that Seanchan upholds, so that, in the words of the lyric poem "Paudeen,"

. . . on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,  
There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,  
A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.<sup>26</sup>

The Mayor's obsequious character provides a satirical edge to the poet's rejection of the kind of materialism which in Cathleen Ni Houlihan is represented by Peter Gil-  
lane. The Mayor seems to see in Seanchan the means by which the King can be persuaded to give his town the grazing land they want. He cannot fathom any issue more weighty than the honour and enrichment of Kinvara; beside that, Seanchan's quarrel with the King is "a matter of mere sentiment" (p. 117).

The Mayor's narrow, stupid patriotism is also treated satirically. His lavish praise of the King's virtues--for refraining from sadism--is ridiculous.

He might, if he'd a mind to it,  
Be digging out our tongues,  
Or dragging out our hair,  
. . . . .

But for the kindness and the softness  
that is in him. (p. 120)

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 122.



The ugliness of senseless brute force which the Mayor injects into the play is, as we have seen, further developed by the Soldier's altercation with Seanchan. It comes to its climactic point near the end of the play when the King, asserting his power to force Seanchan to his will, brings in the pupils with halters around their necks. Such images of violence throughout the play serve to emphasize the spiritual deformity of the society that rejects the poet's imagination.

One of the most striking encounters the play provides is that between poet and Church, whose representative in the play is the Monk. Long before The King's Threshold was first published in 1904, Yeats had met considerable opposition from ecclesiastical sources in his struggles on behalf of a literary theatre. The 1899 performance of The Countess Cathleen, for example, had brought charges of heresy from church leaders. The plays we have already discussed reflect to some extent Yeats's attitude to ecclesiastical hostility toward his art. There are, for example, the oblique anti-clerical references in Cathleen Ni Houlihan.<sup>27</sup> The Countess Cathleen, which employs orthodox Christian concepts, stops short of a commitment to orthodox Christianity. In fact, Aleel is specifically associated with druidism by Cathleen

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<sup>27</sup>See above, p. 36.

when she rejects his attempt to divert her from her self-imposed responsibilities. Aleel claims to have been sent by an angelic being who appeared to him in a dream, walking in fire and surrounded by birds. Cathleen's answer is,

No, not angelical, but of the old gods,  
 Who wander about the world to waken the heart--  
 The passionate proud heart--that all the angels,  
 Leaving nine heavens empty, would rock to sleep.  
 (p. 27)

Significantly, Cathleen does not say that the angels desire to destroy "the passionate proud heart," something the Monk in The King's Threshold does wish for. Such an attempted harmonization is anti-clerical, since it is clearly at odds with the ecclesiastical view that the Church is the sole recipient of divine revelation. The clash between poet and Monk in The King's Threshold is the most forthright statement of the preeminence of the poet's vision in what was a continuing theme in Yeats's thought. "The Fiddler of Dooney" (1899) reveals a similar relationship between cleric and poet--

I passed my brother and cousin:  
 They read in their books of prayer;  
 I read in my book of songs  
 I bought at the Sligo fair.

When we come at the end of time  
 To Peter sitting in state,

He will smile on the three old spirits,  
But call me first through the gate . . . . 28

For Yeats, it is the poet with his joy in life, rather than the Church with its curbs on life, who is in harmony with spiritual reality. It is the purpose of vision to call out in joy "when all falls/ In ruin" (p. 114), and this is accomplished by the poet rather than by the cleric; therefore, Yeats gives first place at St. Peter's gate to the poet. In the play the supremacy of the poet is clearly implied by the terms in which Seanchan taunts the Monk, whom he in effect accuses of perverting his calling for the sake of the King's money and the luxurious life he enjoys at court.

Has that wild God of yours, that was so wild  
When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,  
Grown any tamer? He gave you all much trouble.

. . . . .

Have you persuaded him  
To chirp between two dishes when the King  
Sits down to table? (p. 129)

The point is further emphasized in Seanchan's stinging attack on what he clearly regards as a union of political convenience between Church and state--

I'd know if you have taught him [God] to eat bread  
From the King's hand, and perch upon his finger.

I think he perches on the King's strong hand,  
 But it may be that he is still too wild.  
 You must not weary in your work; a king  
 Is often weary, and he needs a God  
 To be a comfort to him. A little God,  
 With comfortable feathers, and bright eyes.  
 (pp. 129-130)

Seanchan, forcibly holding on to the Monk's clothing during this outburst, is delivering a savage rejoinder to the Monk's charge that the poet's unbridled imagination will destroy law and order within society. Both action and words are far removed from the dreary, passive behaviour of Forgael in The Shadowy Waters. Although, like Forgael, Seanchan claims to be a man set apart from this world, he maintains a tension between the visible world which he is in and the invisible world which he is of.

The Monk's feelings against Seanchan are harsher than the Chamberlain's, as his reply to the Chamberlain's request that he urge Seanchan to eat illustrates.

Certainly I will not.  
 I've made too many homilies, wherein  
 The wanton imagination of the poets  
 Has been condemned, to be his flatterer.  
 If pride and disobedience are unpunished  
 Who will obey? (p. 123)

The speech, at first glance, seems to balance personal animosity--indicated in the Monk's refusal to plead with Seanchan--with concern for the safety of society. However, Seanchan's attack on the Monk clarifies the Monk's hypocrisy. The Monk tacitly admits the charge of hypocrisy in

his failure to find even one word of rebuttal.

Seanchan's savage irony, perfectly incorporated into the fabric of the play, carries strong overtones of Yeats's personal feelings, as indicated, for example, by his prose statements on the same subject. One such statement, cited in Chapter I of this study, gives us Yeats's criticism of a bishop who had warned his people against "the degrading passion of love"--"one can only suppose that, being ignorant of a chief glory of his Church, he has never understood that his new puritanism is but an English cuckoo."<sup>29</sup> "Samhain: 1903" offers further criticism by Yeats of clerics' narrow appreciation of life:

The priest, trained to keep his mind on the strength of his Church and the weakness of his congregation, would have all mankind painted with a halo or with horns. Literature is nothing to him . . . .<sup>30</sup>

Yeats is attacking clerics for the same reason that he attacks extreme nationalists who would put patriotism above every other consideration--they are hostile to the imaginative artist. The fact that the Monk talks of imagination only to denounce it as "wanton" links him, in the terminology of A Vision, with the "primary tincture" and

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<sup>29</sup>See above, p. 24, footnote 46.

<sup>30</sup>Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays, p. 92.

hence places him in opposition to the "antithetical" man, Seanchan. The metaphor which compares the Monk's God to a domesticated bird "with comfortable feathers" (p. 130), with which Seanchan taunts the Monk, expresses Yeats's distaste for a divine institution that is oriented toward "outward things and events rather than to inward thought,"<sup>31</sup> and which sees grave dangers in the poet's "free, self-delighting intellect"<sup>32</sup> but apparently none in an alliance with temporal power and the consequent involvement in its politics. Seanchan thus condemns the Monk for giving vision a role secondary to that of temporal affairs.

The Unicorn from the Stars, the final play to be considered, serves to round out this study of the poet's role in society. The play focuses specifically on the problem of violent social ferment and its relation to the visionary's subjective apprehension of reality. It is the only play of the five which probes into the adequacy of the poet's vision as a basis for action. In effect, it poses as a real, and even urgent, question whether Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Seanchan are justified in their relatively indifferent attitude toward public order and safety when their vision of reality may be only partial. The key words--"My

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<sup>31</sup>A Vision, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup>See above, p. 2, footnote 2.

business is not reformation but revelation" (p. 378)--spoken, near the end of the play, by Martin Hearne, the visionary in The Unicorn from the Stars, affirm in unequivocal terms that there must be a separation between poet and the work of the actual organising of society. This affirmation comes, however, only after Martin Hearne has engaged in a violent revolution against the British and has come to see the futility of his efforts.

The play, then, examines two related questions: whether the poet's vision gives him possession of unqualified truth and whether a violent reordering of society based on a partial apprehension of reality is justified. The relationship between poetic vision and truth is clarified in large part by a detailing of three levels of vision.

The first of these levels is suggested by Father John's words--"I think Andrew told me it was a dream of Martin's that led to the making of the coach" (p. 330). On this level vision is operating to practical, temporal ends which are in keeping with the values of Thomas Hearne, who is totally absorbed in building coaches and in training his nephew to become a coachbuilder. He has no use for dreams or trances--

. . . work must go on and coachbuilding must go on, and they will not go on the time there is too much attention given to dreams. A dream is a sort of shadow, no profit in it to any one at all. A coach, now, is a real thing and a thing that will

last for generations and be made use of to the last, and maybe turn to be a hen-roost at its latter end. (pp. 329-330)

While Thomas Hearne is saying these words, his nephew has already moved beyond the kind of dreams that create coaches. According to Father John, he has gone "where all have gone for supreme truth" (p. 329). When Martin awakens from the trance he emerges with something less than "supreme" truth. What he brings back with him is a partially remembered vision, composed mostly of an image of unicorns trampling grapes in a vineyard. His meeting with the thieving Johnny Bocach brings back more details of his vision:

I saw a bright many-changing figure; it was holding up a shining vessel . . . then the vessel fell and was broken with a great crash; then I saw the unicorns trampling it. They were breaking the world to pieces--when I saw the cracks coming I shouted for joy! And I heard the command, 'Destroy, destroy, destruction is the life-giver! destroy!' (pp. 345-346)

On the basis of this vision Martin, bent on destroying the old order, becomes the leader of a civil war.

In the midst of this disorder he goes off into trance again. He awakens with the realization that he has misunderstood the previous vision.

I thought the battle was here, and that the joy was to be found here on earth, that all one had to do was to bring again the old wild earth of the stories--but no, it is not here; we shall not come to that joy, that battle, till we have put out the



senses, everything that can be seen and handled,  
 as I put out this candle. . . . I saw in a broken  
 vision, but now all is clear to me. Where there  
 is nothing, where there is nothing--there is God!  
 (pp. 381-382)

Vision thus becomes a highly personal matter, in which the individual achieves the highest level of insight of which he is capable; but the belief that a person can apprehend truth in such a way as to give him a panacea for the ills of society is completely negated.

The error of Martin's indulgence in revolutionary activity is emphasized further by the realistic details which describe the wantonness of Martin's new associates. Martin's idealistic aim of giving "all men high hearts that they may all understand" (p. 346) goes astray. The petty thieving of the beggars becomes wholesale looting, and the "high hearts" are achieved through drunkenness, as Andrew's report makes clear.

You bade me to lift their hearts and I did lift  
 them. There is not one among them but will have  
 his head like a blazing tar-barrel before morning.  
 What did your friend the beggar say? The juice  
 of the grey barley, he said. (p. 351)

The results of Martin's militant romanticism are thieving, drunkenness, and the pointless destruction of fine buildings. Seanchan's confident belief in the poet's rightful place as a molder of society is severely modified by Martin's attempt at society-building.

In The Unicorn from the Stars Yeats is clearly expressing worries about responsibility for the overt results of the written word. We have seen Stephen Gwynn's concern regarding the effect of Cathleen Ni Houlihan on its Irish audience,<sup>33</sup> and also in his speech to fellow senators, Yeats's justification for artistic freedom.<sup>34</sup> Further, in "The Man and the Echo," we have seen Yeats's expression of concern for the probable link between performances of Cathleen Ni Houlihan and the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Rebellion.<sup>35</sup> This poem is also in keeping with the theme of The Unicorn from the Stars; particularly so is a segment of the first stanza.

All that I have said and done,  
 Now that I am old and ill,  
 Turns into a question till  
 I lie awake night after night  
 And never get the answers right.  
 Did that play of mine send out  
 Certain men the English shot?  
 Did words of mine put too great strain  
 On that woman's reeling brain?  
 Could my spoken words have checked  
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?  
 And all seems evil until I  
 Sleepless would lie down and die.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>See above, p. 35, footnote 8.

<sup>34</sup>See above, pp. 38-39, footnote 13.

<sup>35</sup>See above, p. 60, footnote 44.

<sup>36</sup>Collected Poems, p. 393.

The poem was written near the end of Yeats's life, whereas the play in its present form (in Collected Plays) was written in 1908.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that the inner conflict Yeats felt between creative imagination and its implications in social and political action was never fully resolved. The spinning gyres, image of contraries in constant tension, represent his resolution of the problem.

The Unicorn from the Stars, taken by itself, does not seem to maintain such a tension. Martin is killed and, just before his death, he suggests that truth, "God," is discoverable only with the complete silencing of the senses (p. 382). Such a dismissal of the world of sense impression leaves the poet and his duty of revelation completely separate from society. The resolution of The Unicorn from the Stars, therefore, goes somewhat beyond what Yeats has said earlier in "The Moods" (1895):

. . . argument, theory, erudition, observation, are merely what Blake called 'little devils who fight for themselves,' illusions of our visible passing life, who must be made serve the moods, or we have no part in eternity. Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Ure, Yeats the Playwright, p. 133.

<sup>38</sup>Essays and Introductions, p. 195.

The Unicorn from the Stars is not, as we have seen, an isolated statement about the difficult relationship between society and the contemplative life of the poet. In relation to the other four plays of this study, The Unicorn from the Stars extends a problem with which each is concerned, emphasizing the danger to the contemplative life that becomes drawn into the world of action.

## CONCLUSION

The five plays of this study reflect something of the difficulties inherent in literary nationalism, difficulties which affected Yeats's personal life and his art. His dual commitment--to subjective vision and to the needs of Ireland--forced him to examine the relationship between poetry and the nation, which was also the relationship between the subjective and objective worlds, and hence to seek a reconciliation of opposite forces. Clearly, in his search for truth Yeats was strongly affected by the presence of these opposites, and ultimately his concept of truth embodied the recognition that in human experience truth is never a completed entity. His well-known statement that man cannot know truth but that he can embody it affirms the inadequacy of discursive thought. The statement is thus in harmony with the resolution of The Unicorn from the Stars, in which Martin's attempt to rationalize vision involves him in disastrous error.

The statement is also in harmony with Seanchan's concept of the place of creative imagination in society. As a poet Seanchan incorporates both "the soul of the world" and "the soul of man,"<sup>1</sup> and in so doing he embodies

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<sup>1</sup>See above, p. 14, footnote 27.

truth. It is because he harmonizes the external and internal worlds that he clashes with the various members of society, each of whom would make of one narrow insight the whole truth. The Mayor sees the prosperity and honour of his village at the center of truth, as the Soldier sees violence. To the Monk a cautious preservation of the status quo is the highest good. In each case truth is conceived of as something complete and rationally definable. Seanchan does not ally himself with any of these because he is both "out of life" (p. 125) and at the same time a shaper and preserver of life. He embodies truth in balancing "the invisible life" with "that which can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over."<sup>2</sup>

In the poem "Vacillation" the embodiment of truth is associated with joy, which man can experience in the midst of life's paradoxes:

Between extremities  
 Man runs his course;  
 A brand, or flaming breath,  
 Comes to destroy  
 All those antinomies  
 Of day and night;  
 The body calls it death,  
 The heart remorse.  
 But if these be right  
 What is joy?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See above, p. 94, footnote 38.

<sup>3</sup>Collected Poems, p. 282.

The whole poem is an exposition of the antinomies that encompass human experience. Section IV, with its description of transcendental joy, is the central part of the poem:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
 I sat, a solitary man,  
 In a crowded London shop,  
 An open book and empty cup  
 On the marble table-top.  
 While on the shop and street I gazed  
 My body of a sudden blazed;  
 And twenty minutes more or less  
 It seemed, so great my happiness,  
 That I was blessed and could bless.<sup>4</sup>

The experience described here parallels Seanchan's affirmation that ". . . when all falls/ In ruin, poetry calls out in joy" (p. 114).

Both poetry and plays reflect the subjective-objective conflict which Yeats experienced, and both incorporate his conclusion that through reason man cannot attain to truth. However, through the imaginative faculty, through art, he can discover as reality the beauty, goodness and unity which goes beyond intellectual research.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>5</sup>See above, p. 10, footnote 20.

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