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THE PATHS OF THE POET.
UNRAVELLING W. B. YEATS'S *PER AMICA SILENTIA LUNAE*¹

Much as the book has been in evidence among numerous critics, the present essay focuses exclusively on Yeats's famous *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), seeking to investigate the impulses of faith and irony that underpin its construction. The book is discussed on four levels: as a prose poem, a treatise on poetry, an account of Yeats's infatuation with Iseult Gonne and finally, as an elaboration of the theory of culture that Yeats pondered in his earlier critical and theoretical work. The readings overlap, as Yeats is shown to conceive of the life of the poet as a constant quest for self-reinvention that never gives up on the hope of its completion, at the same time remaining powerfully sceptical of the means to achieve that completion.

KEYWORDS: W. B. Yeats, essay, Irish poetry in English, biography, irony

Hardly a study of W. B. Yeats's work fails to take into account what some critics have celebrated as his most successful and arguably arcane book, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (henceforth cited in text as *PASL*); while Bloom calls it 'a masterpiece in the tradition of the marmoreal reverie' (Bloom 1970: 179), Brown emphasises 'its awestruck, almost weightless prose' (Brown 2001: 24). Much as the book has been in evidence for numerous critics, the present essay focuses solely on the two essays of *PASL*, seeking to investigate the impulses of faith and irony that underpin their construction. The book is discussed on several levels: as a prose poem, a treatise on poetry, an account of Yeats's infatuation with Iseult Gonne and finally, as an elaboration of the theory of culture that Yeats pondered in his earlier critical and theoretical work.

On 11 February 1917, Yeats made the first mention of his "philosophical essay" in a letter to Lady Gregory, and added that "Doing it is a kind of cleansing of the soul" (*InteLex* 3152). Throughout the period when it was being written, the essay was entitled "The Alphabet" (as he told Clement Shorter on 28 March [*InteLex*

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3204]),² and was meant to be “more or less supplementary (*sic*) to my terminal essays in [*Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*]” (*InteLex* 3209), the already submitted “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” and “Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-Lore” (both written in 1914). In his correspondence, Yeats refers to *PASL* more frequently than to any other of his essays, calling it “my ideas of religion” (*InteLex* 3214), “prose backing to my poetry” (*InteLex* 3214) and “an explanation of the religious convictions & philosophical speculations that I hope govern my life” (*InteLex* 3288). Eventually, the manuscript of *PASL* was completed on 9 May and the Prologue and Epilogue were added two days later; in the next months, Yeats worked on minor corrections and eventually the book came out on 18 January 1918 (Kelly 2003: 192). Only *A Vision* would be awarded as much attention and would be so directly associated with his poems.

PASL provides a summary of Yeats’s interests in folklore, mysticism and magic that he had nurtured since youth. Together with “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” and “Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-Lore,” *PASL* represents a theoretical backbone to his poetry, stories and articles on the faery lore and esoteric subjects. The first two essays bear some resemblance to the series of six articles that he published between January 1898 and April 1902, which were the direct result of his cooperation with Lady Gregory on collecting folklore. As early as December 1898, Yeats expressed his hope that their joint efforts would be published in a “big book of folklore” (Yeats 2004: 323) but the project was to come to fruition only in 1920 as *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. As a final statement on the subject, the two essays that comprise *PASL*, “Anima Homini” and “Anima Mundi,” constitute a meditation on man’s relation to the afterlife and the fate of the soul after the body dies. They take a number of insights as well as the inspired tone directly from Swedenborg.

As Yeats knew very well, Swedenborg divides the world into the transient earth and the eternal Heaven between which there are correspondences that he can now see and explain for the common man. The central place in Swedenborg’s formidable corpus is occupied by *Arcana Caelestia*, a commentary on the Bible that seeks to uncover the divine meanings encoded in the word of God. The duality of Heaven and earth is present in the Bible as well, for the language of the scriptures, although it seems to be a tongue spoken by people at one time in the past, is so structured as to give access to the truth that only God knows. *Arcana Caelestia* emphasises throughout that each symbol, image and allegory denote a certain set of meanings so that a fastidious reader like Swedenborg can collate and properly read them. Already at his point some differences between Swedenborg’s and Yeats’s

² The name was changed at a relatively late stage; Yeats reported to Lady Gregory on 28 June 1917, “I am calling my mystical essay ‘Per Amica Silentia Lunae’ (‘through the friendly silences of the moon’)” (*InteLex* 3271).

conceptions may be noted. Whereas for Swedenborg Heaven exists in complete separation from earth and only he was permitted to gain access to the Kingdom of God, Yeats says that the interchange between the two takes place and every creative individual can witness it. Moreover, the reading of the Bible with a view to delimiting the scope of meanings of its tropes is essentially a futile task for Yeats in that no one can exhaust the meanings of a symbol (see Yeats 2007: 109). Still, Swedenborg's belief that he was granted the permission to wander about the eternal realm appeals to Yeats, who in *PASL* wants to speak with equal authority, although he does not need God's intervention for that end. He need not be visited by an angel, for instead he has established a link with a daemon, or his anti-self by the name of Leo Africanus, who has revealed to him the supernatural truths about the soul's fate in the afterlife. The letters to and from Leo, written in 1915, provided Yeats with the material that, after some elaboration, was utilised in *PASL*, especially regarding the soul's progress to eventual rebirth.

ESSAY AS PROSE POEM

Despite his vast implementation of Swedenborg's ideas in "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" and "Witches and Wizards and Irish Folk-Lore," by 1914 Yeats had come to recognise a major flaw in Swedenborg of which Blake was free. Having recounted some of the mystic's feats in "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places," Yeats concludes, "And all this happened to a man without egotism, without drama, without a sense of the picturesque, and who wrote a dry language, lacking fire and emotion, and who to William Blake seemed but an arranger and putter away of the old Church, a Samson shorn by the churches, an author not of a book, but of an index" (Yeats 1994: 49). Yeats implies that Blake's visionary poems like *Milton* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* are closer to those Divine Essences than Swedenborg's dry prose, for they demonstrate a greater imaginative insight. According to Yeats, Swedenborg's insight is characterised by "superficiality," "sometimes incredulous, but always understanding, for his moral conceptions are simple, his technical terms continually repeated, and for the most part we need but turn for his 'correspondence,' his symbolism as we would say, to the index of his *Arcana Coelestia*" (Yeats 1994: 55). Swedenborg is found wanting because he cannot turn what he arguably saw into a subtle, speculative text, whether in prose or in verse. Rather, his evidence of the divine world must be taken literally and for faith and Yeats knows that this is too simplistic. He has the faith that the divine exists beyond and credits Swedenborg with having beheld it; but as to the actual record of that vision Yeats is sceptical. Unless the text is profoundly speculative, unless it employs abstruse images sung

into life in unhackneyed language, its content does not suffice as a true depiction of the supernatural.³ An account of a vision is not enough if it does not qualify as a good poetry or prose at the same time. The believer in Yeats is thus challenged by the ironist, who only credits an image as long as a better or more varied one has been composed.

Having criticised Swedenborg's inability to discover and phrase the eternal in the mundane, Yeats is determined not to repeat the same mistake in *PASL*. The structure of both essays is loose; the subsequent parts do not seek to elaborate the point made in the previous ones but start on a new idea that is explored eclectically but in no way fully. This is not to suggest that the essays are rambling but they do require a reading of a similar kind to that of Yeats's poems or his 1909 Journal. Images are gathered and propelled into motion and as they clash, setting up various constellations very much in Benjamin's way, meanings begin to unravel. The opening sections of "Anima Hominis" are a relatively straightforward case in point. In section I, after he has chastised himself for "overstating everything" and stooping to "crude allegories," Yeats suggests that in verse he may be able to identify his true convictions but he realises that he has deceived 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" (Yeats 1994: 4). Yeats interrogates himself and implies that the truth he has been after "must come from above and beyond me" but there is no certainty here.

³ Yeats repeatedly announces in reports of his visits to séances that he goes to see the mediums at work not only to corroborate some facts but to investigate their work. In 1914, he would have been particularly skeptical; in May, together with the member of the Society for Psychical Research Everard Feilding he had attended seances with Mme Juliette Bisson, "who specialized in theatrical effects (cabinets, ectoplasm, spirit photographs, nude materializations), but whose collaborations with a shady colleague ('Eva C') had recently been exposed as fakes" (Foster 2005: 517-18). Moreover, a few days later he set out with Maud Gonne and Feilding to Mirebeau in France "to investigate a miracle": "bleeding pictures in the sacristy of the local church had been producing drops of liquid blood, the roof of the church dripped with gore at the elevation of the Host, and miracles had taken place at a Calvary which the Abbe was building on a neighbouring hill." Soon the blood turned out not to be human (Foster 2005: 518). When Yeats, prompted by a series of visitations during seances awith various mediums, began writing his letter to "Leo Africanus," he recalled that the spirit told him that he was "overcautious & conscientious" (Yeats 2013: 311); later in the manuscript, Yeats gave another instant of his scepticism, after the first seances with Mrs Wriedt during which Leo made contact, Yeats "read in Chambers biographical dictionary about Leo Africanus & saw that beyond question the voice claimed to be his voice. I was not at all impressed & thought Mrs Wriedt who is perhaps a ventriloquist of some kind looks up guides for her visitors in Chambers when [she] knows nothing of their [dead] friends & relatives. In this chance she may have been in a hurry for plainly Leo Africanus a geographer & traveller is for me no likely guide." It was only when he looked up "a reference to the proceedings of the Hakluyt society at the end of the biography [and] discovered that Leo Africanus was a distinguished poet among the Moors" (Yeats 2013: 313-14) that he became convinced the spirit was a visitation from the otherworld.

These paragraphs are significantly less assertive than the speeches of “Ille” from “Ego Dominus Tuus,” the introductory poem of the book; whereas Yeats, like his “Ille,” knows that he “seeks an image, not a book,” throughout *PASL* tirelessly coining those images, he does not develop a single line of argument in opposition to a “Hic.” He rather relies on his language to evoke the divine truth that he wishes his reader to see more than understand. “Ego Dominus Tuus” is more of a commentary to the text of *PASL* than the other way round. The following two sections open with “when,” indicating an impressionistic remembering of his past friends: Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, William Morris and writers that he cherished: William Savage Landor and Keats; Dante is introduced in section IV that keeps little coherent continuity with the previous sections (apparently beginning a new point: “Some thirty years ago I read a prose allegory by Simeon Solomon” [Yeats 1994: 7]). This sequential evocation here recalls poetic summoning up of ghosts from the past in “All Souls’ Night” with its roll call: “Horton’s the first I call,” “On Florence Emery I call the next,” “I call MacGregor Mathers from his grave” (Yeats 1996: 228-29). The poem ends by implying that these names are chosen arbitrarily, for “What matter who it be, / So that his elements have grown so fine / The fume of muscatel / Can give his sharpened palate ecstasy” (Yeats 1996: 229). Yet when taken together, they are similar in that they all possess preternatural qualities: Horton “platonic love,” Emery pride of beauty, MacGregor tenacity. Similarly, in *PASL*, the line-up of characters represents the writers who wrote as though in opposition to their nature. Therefore Yeats calls up a many-faced image of the poet’s anti-self but he will not do so following a coherent argument.

Furthermore, the language of *PASL*, though the book primarily seeks to outline Yeats’s doctrines, in places employs images that symbolise rather than argue the ideas that Yeats wants to convey. Towards the end of section V of “Anima Hominis,” Yeats composes one of the more cryptic and captivating images of the essay, “I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell” (Yeats 1994: 9). He concludes here his pondering of faith and doubt:

We must not make a false by hiding from our thoughts the cause of doubt, for faith is the highest achievement of the human intellect, the only gift man can make to God, and therefore it must be offered in sincerity. Neither must we create, by hiding ugliness, a false beauty as our offering to the world. He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs[.]

(Yeats 1994: 9)

True beauty that captures the Divine Essence in a passionate image is only credible if a poet has embraced his anti-self and suffered through greatest of tragedies. The self is nothing, for it is only in tandem with the anti-self that the poet can uncover the real beauty, and thereby “find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful.” Yet the images that derive from the cooperation of the poet with his

anti-self have been appointed “a passing bell,” as no image captures the meaning fully. In “Anima Mundi,” Yeats argues that as his “fellow-scholars” discovered, “[images] had shown themselves to several minds, a fragment at a time, and had only shown their meaning when the puzzle picture had been put together” (Yeats 1994: 18). Images, like their special sub-category, symbols, need to be unravelled by several minds and even then will not yield all their meanings.

Thus the faith that the poet offers God in sincerity as well as the luminosity and fruitfulness he hopes to glimpse come at that fleeting instant when the image-maker plunges into acceptance of his image, even though he knows that the doubt, the ironic side of his nature, must presently creep in. Taking full stock of Yeats’s doubting, Daniel Albright comments on that remarkable sentence, “Every *image* arises out of a void; and every *image* will sink back into a void. An *image* is not immortal: it has a given life-span, and will inevitably recede into imagelessness, as the stuff of art disintegrates into the stuff of criticism and science” (Albright 1997: 34). What is striking is that the above-quoted sentence does not aim to summarise the point made through the paragraph but condenses the ideas in a spell-binding image that calls for unravelling. Bloom, fascinated by the sentence, notes that “when the poet has seen and foreseen the image of all he dreads, while still seeking the image of his desire to redress his essential poverty, then he will have his reward” (Bloom 1970: 181). For Bloom, the “essential poverty” is similar to Wallace Stevens’s “imaginative need,” as Yeats desires to counteract the death of visionary gleam (hence his repeated fears that he may be losing his poetic gift both in *PASL* and throughout his oeuvre). Yet the truth of poetic redress puts it all in doubt, for the poet will only ever “seek an image,” as “Ille” hints, never to find it for good.

Their insufficiency notwithstanding, images are the only way to know the divine essence, as “they had a relation to what one knew and yet were an extension of one’s knowledge” (Yeats 1994: 18). Thus the poet, on attaining that cursory revelation, feels sudden joy. The famous section XXI gives an account of such moments, “always unforeseen, [when] I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened a book of verse.” The idea was to return to Yeats years later in “Vacillation”: “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” (Yeats 1996: 251). This is a moment of joy antithetical to life’s normal condition which is hatred. In *PASL*, Yeats identifies this transience of joy as an impulse to continuous creativity, lest he should become another Wordsworth, “withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted,” and “climb to some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth, some bitter crust” (Yeats 1994: 16). Thus he returns to doubt that must undermine the faith as the poet is to continue to seek an image, never make a book. *PASL* indicates as much but requires the reader to peruse it like a poem, setting images beside images to arrange a structure of meaning that will inevitably in Yeats be underlain by doubt, a quintessential ironic fundament for the dome of faith.

TREATISE ON POETRY

Although its main preoccupation is the link between this world and the supernatural eternal realm, *PASL*, given its heavily metaphorical nature and impressionist structure, is also focused on the figure of the poet. Opening with the famous aphorism that “we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry,” Yeats moves on to argue that “unlike rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we [poets] sing amid our uncertainty” (Yeats 1994: 8). Rhetoricians who compel crowds’ acclaim represent propagandists speaking at political rallies, like the master speaker John F. Taylor, of whom Yeats wrote in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* that came out over a year before *PASL*, or journalists writing one-idea’d articles for newspapers, like D. P. Moran or Arthur Griffith. Their single-mindedness is juxtaposed with the poet’s intrinsic self-division, as Yeats returns to his life-long struggle with the assertive public man that enjoys an advantage over vacillating poets who, “not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lighting in the humility of the brutes” (Yeats 1994: 14). Here, poets are shown to be disconsolate questers after visionary gleam, jaded ironists who realise that their verses are condemned to inadequacy and so are ready to discard their latest poem if they can compose one more apt. They resemble those “pale unsatisfied ones” that “Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky,” “hoping to find once more, / Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied, / The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor” (Yeats 1996: 126); the magi here “are emblems” of artists and art that, as Purdy notes, bears a tonal and phraseological resemblance to Psalms (Purdy 1994: 72). Therefore, seeing them, Yeats sees himself as a questing poet full of doubt even though at the same time he adopts a deliberately Biblical style.

Once more, faith is here checked with bitter irony, as Yeats invokes a figure of the poet happy in his gloomy admission of failure; he thus recalls the speaker of “The Cold Heaven” who “took all the blame out of all sense and reason, / Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro, / Riddled with light” (Yeats 1996: 125). Taking out of blame reverts to “casting out [of] remorse” of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (Yeats 1996: 236) but whereas in the later poem, freeing the conscience leads to sudden joy, like in section IV of “Vacillation,” in “The Cold Heaven” the joy is mixed with despair. In *PASL*, the interweaving of exultation and decrepitude represents an inherent emotional state of the poet as a person striving for vision. This vision, however, does not depend on him but his anti-self, referred to variously as the Daemon or Daimon. Yeats starts by making a general statement on the nature of man’s connection with the anti-self:

[T]he Daemon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daemon feed the hunger in one another’s hearts. Because the ghost is simple, the man

heterogeneous and confused, they are but knit together when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads, and of that only.

(Yeats 1994: 11)

Although Yeats suggests that each man has his Daemon, as the passage unfolds it begins to transpire that in fact the Daemon comes only to the artist who strives to find a mask that would be furthest from his natural self, “A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn [...] an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named ‘himself’” (Yeats 1999: 336). Yeats shrouds incredible candidness in an idiom of mystery because writing only of one’s deficiencies and fears, poets are impelled to shoulder what is most vulnerable in them; and it is when this vulnerability is exposed in verse that they must retain their heroic stance and mock the weaknesses that others would endeavour to keep secret; as he wonders in his Journal, “Is not beauty a victory over oneself?” (Yeats 1973: 157). Assuming the mask is therefore crucial, for it helps to “impose a discipline upon ourselves” and so attain to “active virtue” which, “as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask” (Yeats 1994: 10) which the poet “finds [...] in disappointment” (Yeats 1994: 12). However, no sentimentality is allowed, for the anti-self, as Yeats recalls having written in the Journal, “comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality” (Yeats 1994: 8; Yeats 1973: 151).

As it is delineated in *PASL* and in the Journal, the anti-self is especially relevant for the poet because it represents the principle of constant change. By setting the poet always to “the hardest work among those not impossible” (Yeats 1994: 11), the Daemon ensures that the poet’s quest for self-completion is deferred indefinitely and that “one is never a unity, a personality,” at least until one finds “the energy to assume the mask of some other self,” for “all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed [...]” (Yeats 1973: 190-91).⁴ Thus *PASL*, with its impressionist construction and fragmentary poem-like imagery that demand the reader’s participation in the creation of meaning, enacts the poet’s struggle with the anti-self. While the poet as man perseveres in searching for the appropriate mask, the Daemon varies the tasks so that whenever the poet thinks that he is close to completeness,⁵ a new challenge

⁴ This statement from the Journal entry dated for 18 March 1909 emphasises that the self continuously struggles for its definition with the anti-self and never wins any sort of completeness. The phrasing of his idea will repeat in “A General Introduction for My Work,” where Yeats seems to give up on the auto-creative understanding of the artistic self that is now “something intended, complete” (Yeats 1994: 204). Like most his ironic notions, the idea of permanent self-creation comes from J. B. Yeats, who warned his son that “you are haunted by the Goethe idea, interpreted by Dowden, that a man can be a complete man. It is a chimera – a man can only be a specialist” (Yeats 1999: 70).

⁵ Yeats’s anxiety of self-incompleteness increased after he met Gonne; in the *Autobiography*, he said ruefully, “She was complete; I was not” (Yeats 1973: 63). He never pronounced himself an ended construct, even in “A General Introduction for My Work,” as soon as he says poets are “re-born as

is thrown. This is never a total fragmentation, to which man is prone, as Yeats argues in *Hodos Chameliontos*, but an intentional swerving, or veering, towards a new self-definition. Bloom hints at that incessant self-fashioning when he observes that “the *daemon* must be held off (he cannot be overcome) though the poet’s true originality,⁶ which is the strong poet’s creative misinterpretation of his strongest precursor” (in the case of Yeats it is Blake and Shelley).⁷ For Bloom, the anti-self is a composite figure of the poet’s precursors, as a result he may be read as a figure impersonating the deadly influence that stifles expression unless the budding poet can muster the imaginative strength to perpetually stand up to him.

If the anti-self is taken as a principle of change in the form of precursory poet(s), then the Anima Mundi, the “great pool or garden” of all images that exist, represents the poetic tradition of all ages. All “mental images and apparition (and I see no reason to distinguish) are forms existing in the general vehicle of Anima Mundi” (Yeats 1994: 22) and so images that come to the poet are always rooted in that general storehouse. To conceive of Anima Mundi as the repository of poetic images would make it correlate to Eliot’s idea of tradition as “a simultaneous order” of “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” (Eliot 1974: 49). But whereas for Eliot this order is, “if ever so slightly, altered” by the “supervention of novelty,” by “the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art” (Eliot 1974: 50), for Yeats the Anima Mundi includes more than just literature, as it comprises all images that have ever and will ever exist. Still, the comparison is instructive in that both Yeats and Eliot accept that, as Eliot puts it, “the dead writers’ [...] are that which we know.” However, Yeats lays the emphasis on “the dead,” without necessarily limiting his choice to writers. Nevertheless, in both Yeats and Eliot this “tradition” is that which allows poets to be poets (“beyond [the] twenty-fifth

an idea,” he goes on to imply a certain degree of continuous re-fashioning, as the poet “is part of his own phantasmagoria” (Yeats 1994: 204).

⁶ Although Bloom never discusses it, the notion of originality, as Yeats develops it in *PASL*, bears a strong resemblance to Bloom’s theory of influence: “It is not permitted to a man, who takes up pen or chisel, to seek originality, for passion is his only business, and he cannot but mould or sing after a new fashion because no disaster is like another” (Yeats 1994: 14). Thus the artist works necessarily in a certain tradition, for Yeats it is the tradition of passion, for Bloom of the Romantic Sublime but both seem to imply the same continuity of theme.

⁷ Bloom, Yeats, 182. Bloom regards the Daemon as an enemy of the poet who “is interested only in our disaster,” which is not necessarily so granted what Leo Africanus tells Yeats about the nature of the connection: “We are the unconscious as you say or as I prefer to say the animal spirits freed from the will, & moulded by the images of Spiritus Mundi. I know all & all but all you know, we have turned over the same books – I have shared in your joys & sorrows & yet it is only because I am your opposite, your antithesis because I am in all things furthest from your intellect & your will, that I alone am your Interlocutor” (Yeats 2013: 334). It seems that the antithetical nature of the Daemon is necessitated by his knowledge that only contraries can yield artistic production, the evil intention is never stated as clearly as Bloom seems to suggest. Then again, early in the automatic script George Yeats stressed that Leo was a frustrator (Yeats 1992: 56). The sleep session of 18 October 1921 would have made Leo into an enemy of a Bloomian kind, for he is “an enemy of ideas alone” (Yeats 1992a: 100).

year”), although for Eliot, this leads to “a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot 1974: 52) and for Yeats, it necessitates the creation of a personality. Interestingly, Eliot seems to bring out the meaning of tradition that Yeats invokes in “Magic,” when he explains the nature of the great memory, the precursor of Anima Mundi, “Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonder, a caller-up of angels and devils” (Yeats 1999: 39). The great memory is enriched by the poet’s work but this potential is lost in *PASL*, partly due to an extension of the idea of Anima Mundi compared to the earlier formulation (Anima Mundi has it all and knows it all) and partly, as it seems, due to the fact that originality, the creativity of an artist, is replaced by idea that the poet always evokes the theme of passionate ideal (Yeats 1994: 14).⁸ On the one hand, therefore, the Anima Mundi represents the emporium of imagination that poets have created over the centuries and the later lyricists might utilise for their own purposes; on the other, it symbolises man’s image-making capacity, the inner emotional and intellectual freedom to endow descriptions of people and actions with subtle and varied meanings.

Bloom asserts that Yeats “wishes us to believe that we communicate with anima mundi through the famous and passionate dead, but what he means is precisely what the fiercely skeptical Shelley meant by survival of Keats in *Adonais*”: “the ‘passionate dead’ live only in our imagination, and their dream is only of our life.” If the poet is understood as the stumbling heir of uncertainty and the anti-self as the poetic precursor, or the strongest imagination that the budding lyricist knows, then the Anima Mundi is the storehouse from which the youngling can draw in order to overcome his daemonic adversary. This is, however, impossible, hence the tragedy but the struggle itself allows the young poet a chance to win for himself a moment of passionate intensity that comes close to Pater’s celebration of art and poetry in his Preface to *The Renaissance*:

We have an interval and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among ‘the children of this world,’ in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us.

(Pater 1980: 190)

⁸ Longebach has suggested that the dialectic of the “permanent” and the “changing,” which Eliot observes in his review of *The Cutting of an Agate*, resembles “the interaction of the ‘Anima Homini’ with the ‘Anima Mundi’” so that “it is finally Yeats’s rhetoric – not his subject matter – to which the Eliot of ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ objects” (Longebach 1987: 44). However, “the interaction” that Longebach mentions is more properly conceived of as one-way transition, as images flow from the Anima Mundi to the Anima Homini. The converse movement is given little support in *PASL*.

The *Anima Homini* may “sing amid uncertainty” but the prize is the quickening into life at a moment when tragedy is felt most strongly. *PASL* itself is just such a transitory triumph over the inclement circumstances of life; Brown observes that “as his personal life became intensely problematic and old age began surreptitiously to encroach with its fears of creative and sexual impotence, Yeats produced perhaps his finest single prose work” (Brown 238). The poet’s self-exposure to his worst fears is thus the platform for the most intense appreciation of life.

EXPLORING DIMENSIONS OF LOVE: ISEULT GONNE

The creative and sexual anxieties that Brown points to lead the way to another level at which *PASL* operates, as the anti-self, the daemon, is identified not only with the poet’s enemy that incessantly tests his ability to remake his mask but also, in section VIII, with sweetheart (Yeats 1994: 11-12). This strikes a resonant note with Yeats’s life. He began writing “The Alphabet” around seven months after a visit to the village of Passy in Normandy, France, where he stayed at Maud Gonne’s. Soon after his arrival in late June, he proposed to Gonne and was rejected once more, which precipitated his affection for the young Iseult. He proposed on 12 August and again all to no avail. In the meantime, he enjoyed regular conversations with Iseult and two days after his proposal was declined, he wrote revealingly to Lady Gregory:

My own relation with her is now perfectly candid. She is really a child & when she trusts trusts comple[te]ly. She has told me that when she was in Dublin four years ago – the time you met her – she wished to marry me (‘You were the only person of my own race I had met’ she means the only person of culture) & that she had this wish for two years. She has shown me in her dairy such sentences as ‘I have an affection for him; he has, I think, an affection for me’ (I had given her books since she was a child) and a record of a conversation, in which I said I would like, if I married, to live in some out of the way place like Bayeux in an old house. She took this quite seriously & chose the house at Bayeux. This thought lasted two years, & then she made up her mind she was not in love, & that perhaps she would fall in love with some-one of her own age. I need hardly say that I told her that she might marry me if she would & that there were exceptional cases where even 30 years difference would not prevent happiness. We discussed it nearly without emotion as we might any other problem – her usual analysis – ‘Ah if you were only a young boy’ she said & I left it there.

(*InteLex* 3017)

Yeats tries to show a fatherly fondness for Iseult as he depicts her both as a doting daughter and a young girl in the first throes of love. In fact, it is more she and her affection that lie at the core of his own love for her, which seems as if he is trying to excuse himself and his fascination with Iseult to Lady Gregory and maintain the innocent air that he spoke of in the letter of 18 July, noting that

Iseult looks on him as “an elderly family friend” (*InteLex* 3005). Also, he appears to be seeking confirmation that their relationship is normal, even mature despite the age difference. Though he claims that he ‘left’ the marriage prospect, he does not seem to have given up on his plans; Iseult wrote to her cousin Thora Pilcher that Yeats “lost no appetite” (Gonne 2003: 56).⁹

However, earlier, in the letter of 14 August, Yeats observes that “to look at her dancing on the shore at the edge of the sea or coming in with her arms full of flowers you would think her the most joyous of creatures. And yet she is very unhappy – dying of selfanalysis. Everything becomes food for an accusation of sin. Last night we had a painful scene. ‘I hear a voice always’ she said ‘saying “worthless, worthless, worthless”” (*InteLex* 3017). The image of Iseult dancing finds her in a moment of passionate absorption that Yeats recorded in “To a Child Dancing in the Wind” written almost four years before. At the moment of the poem’s composition, in December 1912, Iseult was 18 and oblivious to the “The monstrous crying of wind” (Yeats 1996: 122). In “Two Years Later,” she still believes that “all the world’s a friend” (Yeats 1996: 122). By then, as Hassett has suggested, Yeats begins to “construct Iseult into his Muse” (Hassett 2010: 107) but the letter evokes yet another aspect of their relationship. As the poems indicate, over the years Iseult had been a carefree girl, much engrossed in her actions, an image of her that re-surfaced in “Long-Legged Fly”: “She thinks, part woman, three parts a child, / That nobody looks; her feet / Practise a tinker shuffle / Picked up on the street” (Yeats 1996: 339), yet by 1916, with the experience of World War I¹⁰ and the preoccupations of life with the restless Maud Gonne, she seems to have developed an oversensitive “Vision of Evil,” as Yeats called a sense of life’s tragedy. As she had already proved her literary skill to Yeats (though not to others, as her translation never reached completion), translating bits from the French Catholic poets and Tagore, the fact that her constant anxiety over sin was offset by her proneness to absorption in an artistic act must have implied for Yeats a degree of creative conflict between her daily self and her Daemon. Thus in *PASL*, Yeats seems to be accounting for the source of creativity in as much in himself as in Iseult, a “Dear fellow-artist” (Yeats 1996: 139).

The Prologue to *PASL* recounts an episode that happened during one of the many conversations between July and August 1916. “Minoulooshe,” one of the cats that lived with the Gones, disappeared after a bird and “for a long time we called him endearing names in vain.” The paragraph exudes an air of intimacy and secrecy of the “conversation, often interrupted before, upon certain thoughts so long habitual

⁹ Yeats did acknowledge failure of his wooing on 18 August, when he confided in Lady Gregory that “as father, but as father only I have been a great success” (*InteLex* 3019).

¹⁰ Maud Gonne wrote to Yeats of the nightmare of the Argelis field hospital, where she, Iseult and Seagan volunteered to help the wounded soldiers, “It may distract [Iseult] from writing but on the other hand it brings her into contact with real life” (Gonne and Yeats 1993: 302).

that I may be permitted to call them my convictions” (Yeats 1994: 1). When Yeats asks that “Maurice” “Read it some day when ‘Minoulooshe’ is asleep,” the following texts assumes an undertone of a personal address. In the light of this personalisation, the implication that man pursue the Daimon like a lover his sweetheart turns Iseult into more than just a possible lover but the source of the poet’s inspiration. As Hassett usefully notes, “Desire for his muse is a necessary precursor to the influx of inspiration from great memory – the Anima Mundi of the second of *Per Amica*’s essays – but the desire must lead to weariness rather than satisfaction” (Hassett 2010: 121) Thus the two essays, as they develop the theory of the anti-self and the Anima Mundi to which the poet has access only through the mask of tragedy, are underlain with implications of courting and seduction. The last section of *PASL* addresses the problem of poetic inspiration that has run throughout the two essays, “I wonder will I take to [my ‘barbaric words’] once more, [...] or now that I shall in a little be growing old, to some kind of simple piety like that of an old woman” (Yeats 1994: 32). The “barbarous words” can return to him only if he re-enters the strife with his daemon and this implies a rekindling of sexual passion. Therefore *PASL*, in spite of all its esoteric and abstruse imagery, would seem to be a convoluted love-letter to Iseult, telling her that his inspiration is inextricably intertwined with his love for her. However, the “barbarous words” evoke also the “barbarous tongue” of “Two Years Later,” where it is what leaves the poet and his beloved apart, “But I am old and you are young, / And I speak a barbarous tongue” (Yeats 1996: 123). If he takes to his “barbarous words,” the gap between them will only widen.

The Epilogue to *PASL* is markedly different from the Prologue in that the seductive note is gone. Yeats speaks like an elderly sage to a budding poetess. He claims that her fascination with the Catholic poets resembles his own with the Symbolists in the 1890s, with the difference that for her heroes, like for Claudel, “It was no longer the soul, self-moving and self-teaching – the magical soul – but Mother France and Mother Church” (Yeats 1994: 33). It seems that having codified his knowledge, what he had learnt from Leo Africanus and from others over years of séances as well as from his own reading in the National Museum has made him into a Michael Robartes figure, who by the end of *PASL* speaks to his dancer, “I have principles to prove me right;” to which the fickle dancer answers, “They say such different things at school” (Yeats 1996: 176) and “leaves it there.” But Yeats realises that though finality of the poet’s tribulations may be a beguiling notion, the daemon “brings man again and again to the place of choice, heightening temptation that he choice may be as final as possible, imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever among works not impossible is the most final” (Yeats 1994: 28). The quest after the sweetheart, after the daemon, knows no end, which brings up the strange feeling of tragic joy at the failure of that quest. Yeats was to learn towards the end of 1917 that failure is only the beginning of a new struggle, perhaps a new revelation.

AN ANTITHETICAL MOMENT

PASL functions at many levels and it brings together a lot of various paths that Yeats embarked on between the late 1880s and 1916. Folklore, mysticism, symbolism and personal life intertwine in it to produce an eclectic mosaic that is strung between the belief in that “thought, that in it bound / I need no other thing” (Yeats 1996: 230) and the recurrent suggestion that at no point is that thought complete or can be separated from the language in which it is cast. Thus Yeats the believer and Yeats the ironist coalesce through the pages of *PASL* and, in section XVII of ‘Anima Mundi,’ so does his vision of the nation:

Each Daemon is drawn to whatever man or, if its nature is more general, to whatever nation it most differs from, and it shapes into its own image the antithetical dream of man or nation. The Jews had already shown by the precious metals, by the ostentatious wealth of Solomon’s temple, the passion that has made them money-lenders of the modern world. If they had not been rapacious, lustful, narrow, and persecuting beyond the people of their time, the incarnation had been impossible; but it was an intellectual impulse from the Condition of Fire that shaped their antithetical self into that of the classic world. So always it is an impulse from some Daemon that gives to our vague, unsatisfied desire, beauty, a meaning, and a form all can accept.

(Yeats 1994: 29)

Despite its clichéd anti-Semitic remark, the section seeks to transpose the insight into man’s relation with the daemon onto the entire nation. Although society-building is mentioned only once, in section XVII, Yeats has by then elaborated his scheme of anti-self so meticulously that once he suggests that an entire nation may be shaped by the pursuit of the antithetical mask, his entire idea of culture is affected.

In the light of his theory of the national anti-self, a most cowardly and plebeian people become a material for heroism. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Yeats had grown ever more sceptical of the Irish people. They were prone to dogmatism and narrow-mindedness regarding the arts, as his early dealings with Charles Gavan Duffy and more contemporary battle for Hugh Lane’s pictures made it clear; their morality was unimaginatively Catholic and ossified, as he learnt during the controversies over *The Countess Kathleen* and *The Playboy of the Western World* (though he stated that he won the fight for Synge’s play, the ostracism that the Abbey suffered would make this victory far from obvious); it was this morality that motivated their political ideas, as it transpired from the Parnell affair. The poems collected in *Responsibilities* span the period between 1907 and 1914¹¹ and record Yeats’s bitter disillusionment with the Irish intellect;

¹¹ The bulk date back to 1912-1914, except “On Those that Hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World’” that accompanies the Journal entry for 5 April 1909 and “An Appointment” that “was written in Coole Park in 1907 or 1908” (Jeffares 1968: 147). They are informed by two major disillusionments

in the Journal entry that later became “On Those that Hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World,’” Yeats vented his loathing of what he considered the Irish lower-middle class, “The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland – the lower-middle class from whom the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for the last ten years – have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent to the removal of the genitals” (Yeats 1973: 176).¹² In a note to a series of poems from *Responsibilities* that were collected in October 1913 under the telling title *Poems written in Discouragement*, Yeats identifies the three controversies – the fall of Parnell, the dispute over *The Playboy* and the Dublin Corporation’s “refusal of building for Sir Hugh Lane’s famous collection of pictures” – as having most “stirred his imagination” (Yeats 1996: 457). He then concludes that ‘these controversies, political, literary, and artistic, have showed that neither religion nor politics can of itself create minds with enough receptivity to become wise, or just and generous enough to make a nation’ (Yeats 1996: 458). Given this rancour against Ireland and the half-regretful, half-hateful injunction that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” as her men “have dried the marrow from the bone” (Yeats 1996: 108), the Easter Rebellion proved a shock difficult to reconcile with his earlier appraisal.

His early perception of the Rising, like that of many others, including his family (see Foster 2005: 45), was ambiguous, as he admitted in a letter to his sister, Lolly, “the whole thing bewilders me” (*InteLex* 2935). It was not until the vengeful trials of the rebels began that he came to some resolution about the Rising, “terrible beauty has been born again,” but remained “very despondent about the future” (Yeats 1954: 613). That mixed response to the Rising is brilliantly played out in “Easter 1916” that meanders between extolment of the rebels’ sacrifice and condemnation of their heartless and, by inference, thoughtless, act. However, it is important that the poem focuses not so much on the general rebirth of the Irish but specifically on the transformation of the least heroic ones: with the exception of Markiewicz, he is dealing with middle-class members. Fixed in the calcified mind frame, “Coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk among grey / Eighteenth-century houses,” they deserve “a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words” (Yeats 1996: 180) from the lofty poet, singer of the heroic ideal. At the beginning of the poem they are the perfect embodiments of his idea of the city middle-class but this changes, with the transformative power coming not from within them but from some external source, which is emphasised by the passive voice. Lloyd sees this depiction of the change in the rebels as disturbing for Yeats, for “this transformation takes place not through the intermediary of poetry but in consequence of violence itself” betraying

with Ireland that Yeats felt: the attack on *The Playboy* and failure to appoint Hugh Lane Curator of the National Museum in Dublin in favour of Count Plunkett.

¹² In a letter to Lady Gregory, he “compared Griffith and his like to the Eunuchs in Rickett’s picture watching Don Juan riding through hell” (Yeats 1954: 525).

“the secondariness of poetic reflection to a process of transformation which has completed itself, impersonally, as it were” (Lloyd 1993: 69). However, when seen through the idea of *PASL*, the natural lack of the heroic impulse makes the future rebels perfectly suited to become heroes; the burden of stanzas one, two and four therefore sounds more like an incredulous celebration than a tacit admission of failure of his poetry. In line with his antithetical theory of nation, Yeats stresses in “The Statues,” a late poem preoccupied with transformations of cultural ideals, that “When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side, / What stalked through the Post Office?” (Yeats 1996: 337). Cuchulain stands here for the passionate action, the emotional ideal most distant from the Irish people and so most likely to be given to them by the daemon.

Moreover, “the repetition of the phrase ‘polite meaningless words’” suggests “that urban life is, to a large degree, characterized by a form of verbal intercourse that is conventional and superficial” (Armstrong 2013: 98). This is coupled with Yeats’s criticism of “opinion” that in the poem is evoked by the stone (see Foster 2005: 61) with its implicit charge against “mechanical refrains” and “rhetorical repetition” that characterised Young Ireland ballads (Longley 1996: 213). Thus Yeats diagnoses the fall of the oral culture in Ireland, which, as he claimed in “Poetry and Tradition” many years earlier, was once the cornerstone of its imaginative power. Referring to Bakhtin’s idea of primary and secondary speech genres, Armstrong observes that in “Easter 1916,” “art is absorbing the practice of a more everyday form of speech” as the poet ventriloquises the mother: “our part / To murmur name upon name / As a mother names her child” (Yeats 1996: 181). Thus the transformation of the unprepossessing citizens grows to mythical proportions, “evoking not only Ovidian metamorphoses, but also the alterations described in the popular legends of an oral Irish tradition” (Armstrong 2013: 100, 101) and theorised by Yeats in “Witches and Wizards in Irish Folk-Lore” under the idea of “transformation or projection of the sidereal body of witch or wizard’ whereby once a soul ‘escapes from the natural body, though but for a moment, it passes into the body of air and can transform itself as it please” (Yeats 1994: 76). In view of his theories best phrased in *PASL*, the rebellion followed a pre-defined antithetical logic that might owe something to Yeats’s own heroic poetry and drama that sang themselves into the popular consciousness. What is more, since the very nature of the daemon’s tasks for the self or the nation dictates that no successful completion is final, Ireland is revealed to be susceptible of further moulding. If the people assumed the heroic mask once, they may well do so again. It all depends on the power of the image to be instilled in the national imagination. Thus poetry once more is claimed as the power capable of moulding the nation. The faith in its imagistic power is indubitable through *PASL*, even as this power is shown to depend on an endless recreation of its initial impulse.

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