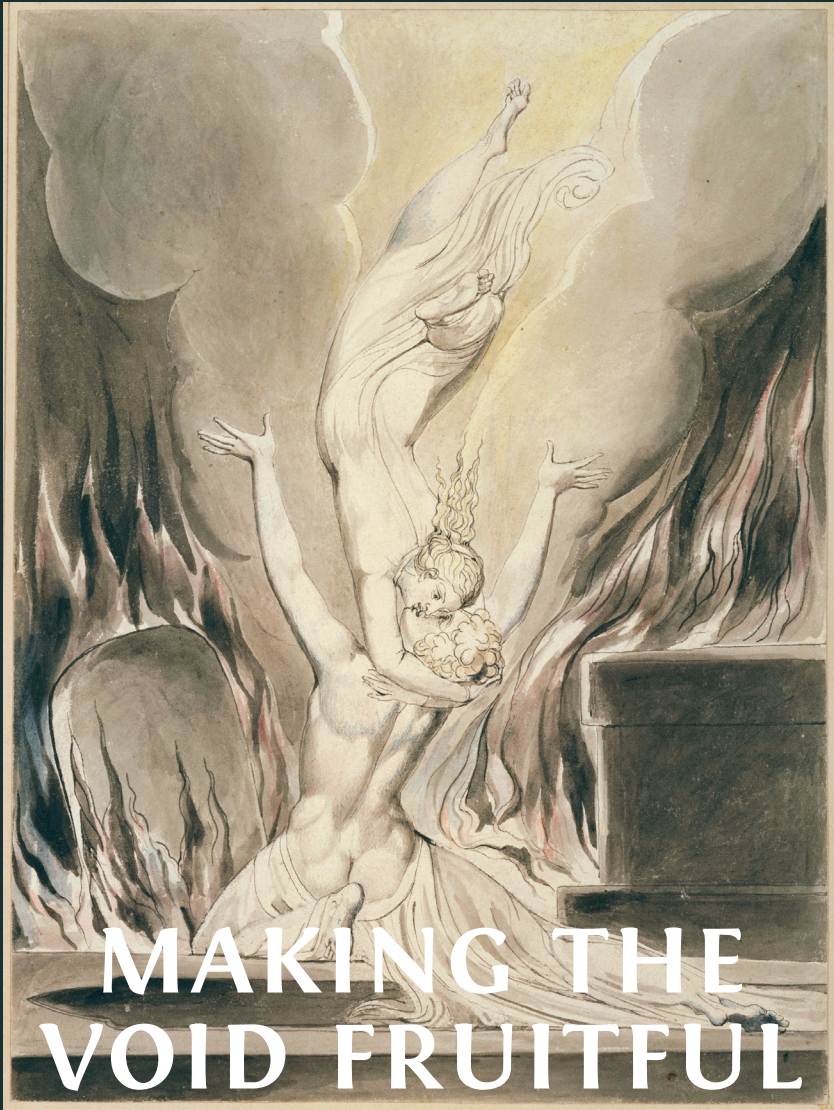


PATRICK J. KEANE



MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



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5. Gnosis and Self-Redemption

Gnosis takes many forms. I just noted what the visionary poet of 'The Second Coming' claims to 'know,' and the very different acknowledgment in the punctuation and in the drafts, where the role of seer is usurped by the rough beast itself, 'knowing its hour come round.' The annunciation to the Virgin Mary two thousand years earlier, though it resulted in the Incarnation, left Yeats's Magi, the star-led Seekers who had come to Bethlehem, 'unsatisfied' by the subsequent crucifixion on Calvary. Thus, they long—to quote the memorable final line of 'The Magi' (1913)—for another 'uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.' As with so many questers in Yeats, they would be disappointed by the coming, two thousand years later, of something bestial indeed but hardly what they hoped for. 'Leda and the Swan,' the fused sonnet (a Shakespearean octave and Petrarchan sestet) initiating the three-part cycle that ends with the rough beast slouching 'towards Bethlehem to be born,' also prefigures that mystery on the stable floor. Itself bestial, 'Leda and the Swan' signals and embodies the annunciation of the Classical era, and it, too, involves a sexual engendering accompanied by a hint of *gnosis*. Did Leda, raped by the swan-god Zeus, 'put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?' Here is another poem, like 'The Secret Rose' and 'The Second Coming,' ending in a question, the mystery-marker of the Sublime.

There is, of course, *no* question about the brutality of the sudden rape, and the indifference of the God following the 'shudder in the loins,' which, impregnating Leda, completes Zeus's mission. For in fathering Helen of Troy, he also 'engenders there' the Trojan War (depicted in imagery at once military and sexual: 'The broken wall, the burning roof and tower') and its sequelae ('And Agamemnon dead'), initiating an historical cycle destined to last until, two thousand years later, another

lady, the Virgin Mary, would be visited by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove: another divine bird, his 'great wings beating about the room' in Yeats's 'The Mother of God.' (Before appearing in *The Tower*, 'Leda and the Swan' introduced the 'Dove or Swan' chapter of *A Vision*.) 'The Mother of God' (1931) is a dramatic monologue spoken by the terrified village girl singled out to bear 'the Heavens in my womb.' Mary's questions ('What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,/ This fallen star my milk sustains [...] ?') concern the central human / divine mystery. And the question raised at the end of 'Leda and the Swan' is not merely rhetorical. Did Leda, whose 'loosening thighs' (an echo of Sappho's famous 'limb-loosening Love'?) are rather tenderly 'caressed/ By the dark webs,' so intrigue the swan-god that he inadvertently held her just long enough ('Before the indifferent beak *could* let her drop') for her to participate momentarily in 'his knowledge,' the divine *gnosis* of Zeus?

§

Gnosis also figures in the cryptic poem, 'Fragments,' which features, like 'The Mother of God' and its more celebrated cousins, 'Leda and the Swan' and 'The Second Coming,' a strange birth, and a revelation derived from counter-Enlightenment intuition. Written between 1931 and 1933, but placed in later editions of *The Tower* (1928),¹ this epigrammatic poem is in two short sections, both of which require considerable unpacking. Here is the first part, a quatrain:

Locke sank into a swoon;
The Garden died;
God took the spinning-jenny
Out of his side.

In this parody of Genesis, the role of sleeping Adam, from whose rib God created Eve, is usurped by John Locke, whose empiricist

1 Yeats emphasized the connection among various miraculous births and rebirths. First appearing in the canon in the 1933 *Collected Poems*, 'Fragments' was, in the final collection, inserted in the 1928 *The Tower*, with Yeats carefully placing this poem about the birth of the spinning jenny immediately after the equally epigrammatic 'Two Songs from a Play' (*The Resurrection*) and just before 'Wisdom' (with its strange account of the begetting of Jesus) and that history-telescoping dramatization of another mythological begetting, the sonnet 'Leda and the Swan.'

epistemology and distinction between primary and secondary qualities seemed to Yeats, as to George Berkeley and Blake before him, to have fractured the organic unity of the living world, and thus destroyed not only nature but its archetype, the Edenic 'Garden.' That the resultant birth, of the 'spinning-jenny,' bears a woman's name accentuates the irony, and the horror. It was not altogether to the benefit of humanity and a sign of progress, Yeats once mordantly observed, for the home spinning-wheel and the distaff to have been replaced by the robotic looms and masculinized factories of the Industrial Revolution. Blake's god of the fallen world, Urizen, presides over an Enlightenment world-machine perceived as 'the Loom of Locke' washed by the 'Water-wheels of Newton,' all 'cruel Works' with 'cogs tyrannic' moving each other 'by compulsion' (*Jerusalem* Plate 15:15–19).

Yeats is never closer to Blake than in this first part of 'Fragments,' where he emulates not only his mentor's attack on Locke (and Newton), but also his genius for epigram and crystallization, Blake being 'perhaps the finest gnostic artist in English literature.' In Yeats's gnostic vision in 'Fragments' (I), which has been called 'certainly the shortest and perhaps not the least comprehensive history of modern civilization,' the Enlightenment is revealed as a nightmare for the creative imagination; and the monster that rides upon this spirit-sealing sleep of reason is the mechanistic conception of matter, indeed the whole mechanistic rather than organic way of thinking (a crucial contrast Yeats knew from Coleridge, who had borrowed it from A. W. Schlegel), here symbolized by the invention that epitomizes the Industrial Revolution.² Yeats replaces the divinely anesthetized flesh of Adam with Locke's imaginatively inert body (sunk into that fall into division Blake called 'Single Vision & Newton's sleep'), and substitutes for Eve, the beautiful embodiment of Adam's dream, a mechanical contraption, a patriarchal cog in the dark satanic mills of which it is proleptic.

But how does Yeats know all this, and know it to be the 'truth'? It wasn't only from absorbing Blake. Or only from reading Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925), a chapter of which, 'The Romantic Reaction,' Yeats synopsisized with a related variation on

2 For Blake's 'gnomic' genius, see Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 5. On Yeats's synopsis of modern civilization in 'Fragments,' see Douglas Bush, *Science and English Poetry*, 158.

the creation metaphor in the second chapter of Genesis, jotting in the margin: 'The dry rib (Pope) becomes Eve (Nature) with Wordsworth.'³ Yeats answers his own question in 'Fragments' (II), not, however, by turning to Wordsworth, whose French Revolution-centered books of *The Prelude* figure prominently in the evolution of 'The Second Coming,' but to the occult:

Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium's mouth.
Out of nothing it came,
Out of the forest loam,
Out of dark night where lay
The crowns of Ninevah.

Is this mere occult mumbo-jumbo, intended to twist the tail of positivists and empiricists? Well, yes and no. But before coming to conclusions, let's pause to appreciate the wit of the three couplets, alive with reversals and allusions. Yeats's ironic reversal of the birth 'out of' the side of Locke takes the form of a counter-'truth,' born 'out of' (repeated four times in succession) a variety of sources. The anaphora is Whitmanian—'Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,/ Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,/ Out of the Ninth-month midnight.' And Whitman's poem-opening birth images may have suggested Yeats's equally fertile sources: the female 'medium's mouth,' the 'forest loam,' and 'dark night,' all in organic and fecund contrast to the mechanical, sterile 'birth' of the spinning jenny.

Yeats deliberately begins with what rationalists would dismiss as among the least reputable sources of truth: 'Out of a medium's mouth.' Even Madame Blavatsky, whose own experiments had been discredited, told Yeats, who reported it to John O'Leary in a May 1889 letter, that she 'hates spiritualism vehemently—says mediumship and insanity are the same thing' (L, 125). In 'Fragments'(II) Yeats is having some fun, but it is worth mentioning that the poem was written shortly after the first production of Yeats's dramatic ghost-play, *The Words upon the Window-pane*, which centers on a séance, climaxing with our shocked

3 Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog*, item 2258. And see 'Revolutions French and Russian: Burke, Wordsworth, and the Genesis of Yeats's "The Second Coming",' in my *Yeats's Interactions with Tradition*, 72–105.

recognition that the female medium is authentic. The one scholarly skeptical character attending the séance, a specialist in the life and work of Jonathan Swift, is refuted once the post-séance stage is bare except for the female medium, who is suddenly revealed, not to be faking it as he had been sure all along, but to be channeling the tormented ghost of Swift, and thus speaking the sort of spiritual truth Yeats, half-skeptic himself, sought all his life. 'All about us,' he concludes his Introduction to the play, 'there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred' (Ex, 369).

The second source is philosophically and theologically scandalous. Subverting the venerable axiom, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, employed by metaphysicians from Parmenides on and by theologians arguing for the necessary existence of God, Yeats boldly declares that the 'truth' revealed to him came 'Out of *nothing*,' only to instantly add details that deepen the mystery and sharpen his thrust against the Enlightenment. Coming 'Out of the forest loam,/ Out of dark night,' Yeats's 'truth' is generated from fecund earth, once more become 'sacred,' and teeming with inexplicable 'life,' replacing or restoring the 'Garden' earlier said to have 'died.' It also comes out of a mysterious, or occult, 'dark night.'

If the spinning jenny epitomizes the Industrial Revolution, Alexander Pope's intended epitaph for Isaac Newton epitomizes the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment: 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night,/ God said, *Let Newton be!* And all was light.' Pope's couplet, like Yeats's opening quatrain, plays off scripture, with Newton now assuming God's role as creator by verbal fiat: 'And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light' (Genesis 1:3). Pope avoids blasphemy; after all, it was *God* who said, 'Let Newton be!' Until the advent of the principal scientific genius of the European Enlightenment, the universe existed, but 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.' Adopting that darkness, and reversing the laws that prior to Newton 'lay hid in night,' Yeats tells us that his counter-Enlightenment truth came 'Out of dark *night* where *lay*,' not Nature's scientific laws, but 'The crowns of Ninevah.'

Why Ninevah in particular? For one thing, Yeats loved Arthur O'Shaughnessy's 'Ode' celebrating poets as music makers and prophets. The famous final stanza (and these are the lines Yeats always cited) begins: 'We, in the ages lying/ In the buried past of the earth,/ Built

Ninevah with our sighing,/ And Babel itself with our mirth.' When, in 'Fragments,' the golden crowns of Ninevah flame up 'Out of dark night,' what is evoked is more O'Shaughnessy's city of the poetic imagination than Ashurbanipal's capital, majestic as that may have been. Yeats was looking, not merely back to old Ninevah, but cyclically ahead, to the resuscitation of the ancient—a past buried, dark, chthonic, and, here, female. For, as Yeats seems to have known, the Assyrians named their capital city Nin-evah—after 'Holy Mother Eve': the Mother-womb, or Goddess of the Tree of Life in their mythology. Displaced by a machine in the withered garden of the first part of 'Fragments,' Eve, in a return of the repressed, is restored, re-surfacing in the final word of Part II, in the disguised but detectable form of the city named for her. Like 'the holy city of Byzantium,' Ninevah emerges as another Yeatsian variation on, or occult alteration of, the biblical *topos* of the lost Edenic garden become a city, which, in Romans, in Revelations, and in Blake is also a woman: the 'holy city, new Jerusalem,' adorned as the 'bride' of the Lamb of God. Recalling the role of *Sophia*, often opposed to the male *Logos* in esoteric tradition, including Gnosticism, one is reminded as well that *gnosis* is a Greek female noun.

At his most winning, Yeats reminds us of Hamlet's rejoinder to his skeptical and scholastic friend: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' But we are right to be wary when Yeats crosses the threshold into the occult. Though concurring in, in fact shaping, Yeats's cavalier dismissal of Locke and Newton as Enlightenment icons, Blake would be appalled by his disciple's delving into the occult darkness. Though Yeats tended to mystify him and turn him into an occultist, Blake in fact condemned the heathen 'God of this World & the Goddess Nature/ Mystery, Babylon the Great' (*Jerusalem* Plate 93: 22–25). But what Blake rejects here are the very things his prodigal son celebrates as the matrix of vision: the forest loam and the mysterious dark night where lay the crowns of ancient Ninevah, repository of Assyro-Babylonian mythology.

Of course, Yeats's recourse to the occult is one measure of the intensity of his need to expedite what he called in that earlier-cited 1892 letter to John O'Leary 'the revolt of the soul against the intellect' (L, 211). That is, somewhat reductively, a description of the Romantic revolution, the noble attempt to beat back, through restored wonder at a re-enchanted

nature and the transformative power of the creative imagination, the passivity of mind and mechanistic materialism that had reigned (Yeats insists in introducing his 1936 anthology of modern poetry) since ‘the end of the seventeenth century’ down to the present. With, he emphasizes—as had Alfred North Whitehead, though his Romantic hero was Wordsworth rather than Blake or Shelley—the exception of the period beginning at the end of the eighteenth century and ending with the death of Byron: that is to say, the ‘brief period’ of the Romantic revolt, a span ‘wherein imprisoned man beat upon the door.’⁴

That compelling metaphor was repeated that November in ‘An Acre of Grass,’ a companion of ‘What Then?,’ in which Yeats prays to be granted the creative ‘frenzy’ and ‘old man’s eagle mind’ he had been reading of at just this time in Nietzsche’s *Daybreak* (§347, §575). He also specifically invokes ‘That William Blake/ Who beat upon the wall/ Till truth obeyed his call’—a ‘truth’ related to, but not identical to, the ‘truth’ Yeats claimed in ‘Fragments’ (II) came to him ‘Out of’ counter-Enlightenment sources both Romantic and, most dubiously, out of a mysterious ‘dark night’ whose counter-Enlightenment *frisson* will be offset for many readers by resistance to the dangerously irrational aspect of the occult. And yet, to again quote Heaney on Yeats’s power and appeal, ‘true poetry’ had to be more than the ‘artful expression of daylight opinion and conviction; it had to emerge from a deeper consciousness of things,’ evoking ‘the mystery which lies all about us, out of which we have come and into which we shall return.’ Reading Yeats, Heaney remarked in a private letter to Joseph Hassett, ‘every time you part the drapes and enter into that inner chamber of his, you realize you’ve only been surfacing an external, daylight world, while the real thing has been going on in the poetry sanctum.’

§

Though, as we shall see in Part Two, Yeats was alternately fascinated and fearful of the creative yet potentially maddening power of a lunar Muse, night was not normally privileged over day in Yeats’s thinking. Blake and Nietzsche, his great mentors, were both celebrants of ‘daybreak,’

4 Yeats, ‘Introduction’ in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, xxvi-vii. In Whitehead’s account of the ‘Romantic Reaction,’ the principal figure was Wordsworth, influenced by Coleridge on imagination and organicism.

of Blake's 'glad day.' In 1902, enthralled by his 'excited' reading of Nietzsche, Yeats drew in the margin of page 122 of an anthology of 'choice' selections (*Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet and Prophet*) given to him as a gift by John Quinn, a diagram crucial to understanding much if not all of his subsequent thought and work. Annotating primarily *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Yeats grouped under the heading 'NIGHT': 'Socrates' (as presented by Plato), 'Christ,' and 'one god'—symbolizing what he would later call the *primary*: the 'denial of self, the soul turned toward spirit seeking knowledge.' And, under 'DAY': 'Homer' and 'many gods'—symbolizing the *antithetical* 'affirmation of self, the soul turned from spirit to be its mask & instrument when it seeks life.' 'Plato versus Homer': *that*, proclaimed Nietzsche in the *Genealogy* (III.25), 'is the complete, the genuine antagonism—there the sincerest advocate of the "Beyond," the greatest slanderer of life, here the distinctive deifier, the *golden nature*' (italics in original). Reminiscent of Madame Blavatsky's alternating 'days and nights of Brahma,' that diagrammatical skeleton is fleshed out in the pull between eternity and the temporal from such early poems as 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time' to the late 'What Then?,' where the achievements of earthly life are countered by the Otherworldly singing of 'Plato's ghost.' The tension is embodied in Yeats's own chosen exemplar in 'Vacillation'—'Homer is my example and his unchristened heart'—and made tangible in Self's choice, in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' of Sato's sword wound in silken 'embroidery' of 'Heart's purple': 'all these I set/ For emblems of the day against the tower/ Emblematical of the night.' And yet that sword is also described as a 'consecrated blade,' and 'Unspotted by the centuries.' Ultimately, it is the emblem of a life-seeking poet who, without 'denial of self,' attempts to transcend the antithesis set up a quarter-century earlier in that Nietzsche anthology, usurping Soul's role by also being oriented 'toward spirit seeking knowledge,' or *gnosis*.

'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' is in many ways Yeats's central poem since its ramifications reach before and after, and it features perhaps the greatest of Yeats's fused symbols: the 'ancient blade' (a 1920 gift from Japanese admirer, Junzo Sato) scabbarded and bound in complementary 'female' embroidery. That sword and winding silk are not only 'emblems of the day against the tower/ Emblematical of the night.' Fusing East and West, the sacred and profane, war and love, the phallic and the vaginal,

the sheathed and silk-wound sword becomes Yeats's symbol of gyring life, set against the vertical ascent urged by the Neoplatonic Soul. What Neoplatonists and Gnostics put asunder, body and spirit, Yeats unites. And yet, as we will see, Self's final act of self-redemption, magnificent but heretical, is as Gnostic as it is Nietzschean.

In the opening movement of the poem, the half in which there is still a semblance of actual dialogue, hectoring Soul repeatedly demands that Self 'fix' every thought 'upon' the One, 'upon' the steep ascent, 'upon' the occult Pole Star, 'upon' the spiritual quarter where all thought is done. But the recalcitrant Self remains diverted by the Many, by earthly multiplicity, by the sword wound in embroidery replicating the windings of mortal nature. In unpublished notes, Yeats describes 'Dialogue' as 'a variation on Macrobius' (the 'learned astrologer' of 'Chosen,' the central poem of 'A Woman Young and Old'). Yeats had been directed by a friend (Frank P. Sturm) to Macrobius's Neoplatonic *Commentary* on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. In Cicero's text (*De re publica*, Book 6:17–20), despite the admonition of Scipio's ghostly ancestor, 'Why not *fix* your attention *upon* the heavens and condemn what is mortal?' young Scipio admits he 'kept turning' his 'eyes back to earth.' According to Macrobius, Scipio 'looked about him everywhere with wonder. Hereupon his grandfather's admonitions recalled him to the upper realms.' Though the *agon* between the Yeatsian Self and Soul is identical to that between young Scipio and his grandfather's spirit, the Soul in Yeats's poem proves a much less successful spiritual guide than that ghost.⁵

Turning a largely deaf ear to Soul's advocacy of the upward path, Self (revealingly called 'Me' in the poem's drafts) has preferred to focus downward on life, brooding on the blade upon his knees with its tattered but still protective wrapping of 'Heart's purple,' Tower and Winding Stair writ small. Its 'flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn/ From some court-lady's dress and round/ The wooden scabbard bound and wound' makes the double icon 'emblematical' not only of 'love and war,' but of the ever-circling gyre: the eternal, and archetypally female, spiral. When Soul's paradoxically physical tongue is turned to stone

5 For these unpublished notes, connecting Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and Macrobius's *Commentary* with Balzac's Swedenborgian novel *Séraphita*, see my *Yeats's Interactions with Tradition*, 142–47.

with the realization that, according to his own austere doctrine, 'only the dead can be forgiven,' Self takes over the poem. He goes on to win his way, despite difficulty, to a *self-redemptive* affirmation of life.

Self begins his peroration defiantly: 'A living man is blind and drinks his drop./ What matter if the ditches are impure?' This 'variation' on Neoplatonism, privileging life's filthy downflow, or 'defluction,' over the Plotinian pure fountain of emanation, is followed by an even more defiant rhetorical question: 'What matter if I live it all once more?' 'Was *that* life?' asks Nietzsche's Zarathustra. 'Well then! Once more!'⁶ But Self's grandiose and premature gesture is instantly undercut by the litany of grief that Nietzschean Recurrence, the exact repetition of the events of one's life, would entail—from the 'toil of growing up,' through the 'ignominy of boyhood' and the 'distress' of 'changing into a man,' to the 'pain' of the 'unfinished man' having to confront 'his own clumsiness,' then the 'finished man,' old and 'among his enemies.' Despite the Self's bravado, it is in danger of being shaped, deformed, by what Hegel and, later, feminist critics have emphasized as the judgmental Gaze of Others. Soul's tongue may have turned to stone, but malignant *ocular* forces have palpable designs upon the assaulted Self:

How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?

The triple repetition of 'shape' is significant. For this malicious imposition would involve, as Yeats says in 'Ancestral Houses' (the 1921 opening poem of his sequence 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'), the loss of the ability to 'choose whatever shape [one] wills,' and (echoing Browning's arrogant Duke, who 'choose[s] never to stoop') to 'never stoop to a mechanical/ Or servile shape, at others' beck and call.' As the aristocratic language of 'Ancestral Houses' makes clear, this is Yeats's rejection of 'slave morality' in favor of Nietzschean 'master morality.' In the 'Dialogue,' master morality takes the apolitical and far more appealing form of self-redemptive autonomy, but not without a struggle.

6 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' III.2:1; in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 269. Italics in original.

The centrality of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' is enhanced by its repercussions elsewhere in Yeats's own work and by its absorption of so many influences outside the Yeatsian canon. Aside from the Body / Soul debate-tradition, from Cicero to Milton and Marvell, and the combat between Nietzsche on the one hand and Neoplatonism on the other, this Yeatsian *psychomachia* incorporates other poems in the Romantic tradition. Among them is another Robert Browning poem, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,' which supplies those 'malicious eyes' that cast upon Self a distorting lie so powerful that he temporarily falls victim to it, and Blake's remarkably feminist text, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.⁷ Self's eventual victory, like Oothoon's in *Visions*, is over severe moralism, the reduction of the body to a defiled object. In Yeats's case, Self's victory is a triumph over his own Neoplatonism. Gnosticism, too, seeks liberation from the body, but the heterodox Gnostic emphasis on self-redemption makes it compatible with Blake, Nietzsche, and Yeats. 'Dialogue' represents Nietzschean *Selbstüberwindung*, creative 'self-overcoming,' for, as Yeats said in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 'we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry' (Myth, 331).

Since this 'Dialogue' is a quarrel with himself, the spiritual tradition is not simply dismissed, here any more than in the 'Crazy Jane' or 'A Woman Young and Old' sequences. For Yeats, the world of experience, however dark the declivities into which the generated soul may drop, is never utterly divorced from the world of light and grace. The water imagery branching through Self's peroration subsumes pure fountain and impure ditches. There is a continuum. The Plotinian fountain cascades down from the divine One through mind or intellect (*nous*) to the lower depths. As long, says Plotinus, as *nous* maintains its contemplative

7 In the opening stanza of Browning's quest-poem, Childe Roland first thought was that he was being 'lied' to by that sadistic cripple, 'with *malicious eye*/ Askance to watch the working of *his lie*/ *On mine*.' (The earlier allusion, to Browning's Duke, refers of course to 'My Last Duchess.') Even closer to Self's temporarily mistaken belief that that 'defiling' shape 'cast upon' him by mirroring eyes 'must be *his shape*' is the initially deluded, masochistic cry of Blake's Oothoon (2:36-39) for her '*defiled bosom*' to be rent away so that she 'may *reflect*/' The image' of the very man (the moralistic sadist, Theotormon, who, having raped her, now brands her 'harlot') whose 'loved' but unloving 'eyes' have cast upon her this 'defiled' shape—one of Blake's, now Yeats's, grimmest ironies. But both—Oothoon and the Yeatsian Self—recover.

gaze on the divine 'Father,' it retains God's likeness (*Enneads* 5.2.4). But, writes Macrobius (*Commentary* 1.14.4), by increasingly 'diverting its attention,' the soul, though itself incorporeal, 'degenerates into the fabric of bodies.'

Viewed from Soul's perspective, Self is a falling off from higher Soul. When the attention, supposed to be fixed on things above, is diverted below—down to the blade on his knees wound in tattered silk and, further downward, to life's 'impure' ditches—Self has indeed degenerated into the 'fabric,' the tattered embroidery, of bodies. And yet, as usual in later Yeats, that degradation is also a triumph, couched in terms modulating from stoic contentment through fierce embrace to a casting out of remorse, leading to self-forgiveness and redemption:

I am content to live it all again
 And yet again, if it be life to pitch
 Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
 A blind man battering blind men;
 Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
 The folly that man does
 Or must suffer, if he woos
 A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

I am content to follow to its source
 Every event in action or in thought;
 Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot!
 When such as I cast out remorse
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast
 We must laugh and we must sing,
 We are blest by everything,
 Everything we look upon is blest.

Following everything to the 'source' *within*, Self spurns Soul's tongue-numbing Neoplatonic doctrine that 'only the dead can be forgiven.' Instead, having pitched with vitalistic relish into life's filthy frogspawn, Self audaciously (or blasphemously) claims the power to forgive *himself*. In a similar act of self-determination, Self 'cast[s] out' remorse, reversing the defiling image earlier 'cast upon' him by the 'mirror of malicious eyes.' The sweetness that 'flows into' the self-forgiving breast redeems the frogspawn of the blind man's ditch and even that 'most fecund ditch of all,' the painful but productive folly that is the bitter-sweet fruit of

unrequited love. (There is no need to name that 'proud woman not kindred of his soul.')

That sweet in-flow also displaces the infusion (*infundere*: 'to pour in') of Christian grace through divine forgiveness. Despite the repeated 'must' ('We must laugh and we must sing'), it is a claim to autonomy at once redemptive and heretical, and a fusion of Yeats's two principal precursors. 'Nietzsche completes Blake, and has the same roots,' Yeats claimed (L, 379). If, as he also rightly said, Blake's central doctrine is a Christ-like 'forgiveness of sins,' the sweetness that flows into the suffering but *self-forgiving* 'breast' (in which Blake also said 'all deities reside') allies the Romantic poet with Nietzsche. He had been preceded by the German Inner Light theologians, but it took Nietzsche, son and grandson of Protestant ministers, to most radically transvalue the Augustinian doctrine that man can only be redeemed by divine power and grace, a foretaste of predestination made even more uncompromising in the strict Protestant doctrine of the salvation of the Elect as an unmerited gift of God. One must find one's *own* 'grace,' countered Nietzsche in *Daybreak*, a book studied by Yeats. In Nietzsche's words, he who has 'definitively *conquered himself*, henceforth regards it as his own privilege to punish himself, to pardon himself'—or, as rephrased by Yeats, 'forgive myself the lot.' We must cast out remorse and cease to despise ourselves: 'Then you will,' says Nietzsche, 'no longer have any need of your god, and the whole drama of Fall and Redemption will be played out to the end in you yourselves!'⁸

But, as I earlier suggested, this is as Gnostic as it is Nietzschean. The most formidable of the historical Gnostics, Valentinus, claimed that the person who received *gnosis* could purge *himself* of the ignorance associated with matter. He describes the process in the 'Gospel of Truth,' a Valentinian text unearthed at Nag Hammadi in 1945. In stark contrast with the orthodox Christian doctrine of salvation through the grace of God, Valentinus declared that 'It is within Unity that each one will attain himself; within *gnosis* he will purify himself from multiplicity into Unity, consuming matter within himself like a fire, and darkness by light, death by life.' Here, and elsewhere in Gnostic literature, salvation

8 Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (§437, §79), 186–87, 48. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 11, Blake insists that in setting up a religious 'system' presided over by a 'Priesthood,' men and women "forgot that All deities reside in the human breast."

is defined, as it is in Romanticism (from which Gnosticism occasionally seems less a deviation than a precursor), as an escape *into* the self, where, through introspective private vision, we find true knowledge, *gnosis*. The spiritual quest tends to be solitary. When Sturge Moore, who was designing the book cover for the volume containing 'Byzantium,' asked if the poet saw 'all humanity riding on the back of a huge dolphin,' Yeats responded, 'One dolphin, one man' (LTSM, 165). There is no real need for any Other; the individual who has attained *gnosis* is the whole and sole agent of redemption. (It should be added that Yeats valued community. In 'What Then?' he cherished 'Friends that have been friends indeed.' He loved the women celebrated in 'Friends,' and meant it when he ended 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited,' after reflecting with emotion on the dead companions whose portraits hung there: 'Think where man's glory most begins and ends,/ And say my glory was I had such friends.')

In the now-celebrated Gospel of Thomas, the most audaciously heterodox of the Nag Hammadi texts, the Gnostic Jesus of Thomas tells us, 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am.' The central teaching is redemption from within: 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.' If Emerson, prophet of self-reliance, hadn't been speaking more than a century before the Gospel of Thomas had been rediscovered, he might have been accused of plagiarizing from it in his Divinity School Address, the bombshell he exploded at Harvard in 1838. Reflecting the spiritual and Romantic concept of divinity within, Emerson celebrated Jesus not as the Lord, but as the religious thinker who first realized that 'God incarnates himself in man.' He informed the shocked ministers and thrilled graduating students in the audience: 'That is always best which gives me to myself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen.' As heterodox as Thomas's, Emerson's Jesus is imagined saying, in 'a jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think"'.⁹

9 Emerson: *Essays and Lectures*, 81. The Divinity School Address controversy shook New England. Condemned as a 'pagan,' an 'infidel,' and a 'cloven-hoofed' pantheist

Despite such assertions of autonomy and of heretical (high Romantic or Gnostic) self-redemption, Yeats never fully appreciated Emerson. But he echoed the American sage's best-known essay, 'Self-Reliance,' in describing, in 'A Prayer for my Daughter,' the radically innocent soul as 'self-delighting,/ Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,' and he embraced Emerson's most ardent European disciple, Nietzsche, with whose thought the Irish poet always associated Blake. It is primarily under the twin auspices of Blake and Nietzsche that the Self of 'Dialogue' finds the bliss traditionally reserved for those who follow the ascending path. Recovering radical innocence, the battered but ultimately childlike Self of 'Dialogue' concludes, 'We must laugh and we must sing,/ We are blessed by everything,/ Everything we look upon is blest.' Though recalling King Lear's projection of happiness with Cordelia ('we'll sing like birds i' the cage'; we'll 'live, and pray, and sing, and laugh'), and the blessing of the water-snakes by Coleridge's Mariner, the more thematic echo is of Oothoon's final affirmation in *Visions*, addressed to everything we bless and are blest by: 'sing your infant joy!/ Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!' Of that Blakean 'praise of life, "all that lives is holy"', Yeats noted that 'Nietzsche had it doubtless at the moment he imagined the "Superman" as a child,' referring both to Zarathustra's third and final metamorphosis of the spirit (as an 'innocent child,' that 'sacred Yes' to life) and to Nietzsche's evocation, in *The Gay Science*, of 'a second innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.' This childlike second innocence has a Gnostic parallel (the *Logos* dramatically revealed itself to Valentinus in the form of 'a child'); but it would have tallied for Yeats with the final stage of the Blakean dialectical progression from 'Innocence' through 'Experience' to a higher or 'Organiz'd Innocence,' what the American Romantic poet Hart Crane, having read both Blake and Nietzsche, would later call 'an improved infancy.'¹⁰

who had defiled the citadel of Unitarianism, Emerson was ostracized from his alma mater for thirty years. On Thomas's 'bringing-forth' passages, see Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 49, 32. On the affinity between Gnostic Thomas and the Romantics, see Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, 260.

- 10 *King Lear* V.iii,11–12. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 8:9–10. 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' (*The Portable Nietzsche*, 139); *The Gay Science*, Preface. Yeats, 1909 Diary (Au, 474–75). Blake's higher 'innocence' and Nietzsche's 'second innocence' are captured in Crane's 'an improved infancy' (from his poem 'Passage').

Whatever its myriad sources and analogues, Yeats's alteration of the orthodox spiritual tradition in the 'Dialogue' completes Blake, for whom cyclicism was the ultimate nightmare, with that Nietzsche whose exuberant Zarathustra jumps 'with both feet' into the 'golden-emerald delight' of self-redemption and Eternal Recurrence, exultantly embraced as the ultimate affirmation of life in the 'Yes and Amen Song' that concludes Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

In laughter all that is evil comes together, but is pronounced *holy* and *absolved by its own bliss*; and if this is my *alpha* and *omega*, that all that is heavy and grave should become light, all that is body, dancer, all that is spirit, bird—and verily that *is* my alpha and omega: oh, how should I not lust after eternity and the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence? (III.16:6, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 342)

We might say that Zarathustra here also 'jumps' into a cluster of images and motifs we would call Yeatsian, remembering, along with Self's laughing, singing self-absolution, 'Among School Children,' where 'body is not bruised to pleasure soul,' and we no longer 'know/ The dancer from the dance'; the natural and golden birds of the Byzantium poems; and the final transfiguration of Yeats's central hero, both in *The Death of Cuchulain* and 'Cuchulain Comforted,' into a singing bird. In 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' the Yeatsian-Nietzschean Self, commandeering the spiritual vocabulary Soul would monopolize, affirms Eternal Recurrence, the labyrinth of human life with all its tangled antinomies of joy and suffering. (As we will see in Part Two, in 'On Woman,' written a dozen years earlier, Yeats, echoing *The Gay Science* §341, had embraced the joy and despair of Nietzschean Recurrence precisely *because*, brought 'to birth again,' he could 'find what once I had': that 'one/ Perverse creature of chance,' the fatal beloved not kindred of his soul.) In subverting the debate-tradition, Yeats leaves Soul with a petrified tongue, and gives Self a final chant that is among the most rhapsodic in that whole tradition of secularized supernaturalism Yeats inherited from the Romantic poets and from Nietzsche. In a related if somewhat lower register, it is also the vision of Crazy Jane and the Woman Young and Old.

Of course, as even the stanza-form they share in the 'Dialogue' suggests, Self and Soul are aspects of the one man, and, as Yeats jotted in his 1930 diary, 'Man can only love Unity of Being.' The internal 'opponent' with whom we debate 'must be shown for a part of our

greater expression' (E&I, 362). This resembles the Valentinian Unity 'each one will attain himself,' overcoming 'multiplicity.' Yeats's friend, AE (George Russell), to whom he sent a copy of the 1929 edition of *The Winding Stair*, said that of the poems in that volume he liked 'best' of all 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul.' Acknowledging his friend's gift, he wrote, 'I am on the side of Soul, but know that its companion has its own eternal claim, and perhaps when you side with the Self it is only a motion to that fusion of opposites which is the end of wisdom.'¹¹ Having astutely synopsized the central Yeatsian dialectic, Russell was tentatively noting its reflection in the poem's impulse, beneath the manifest debate of opposites, toward fusion. We seem to achieve fusion in the secular beatitude of Self's final chant. But Yeats was not AE, the 'saint,' as Mrs. Yeats described him, to her husband's 'poet,'¹² and the poet in Yeats, the Self, gives us—in the whole of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and particularly in this magnificent final affirmation—an overcoming of Christian and Neoplatonic dualism and defilement of the body by way of a heterodox, 'heretical' self-blessing at once Blakean, Nietzschean, and Gnostic.

11 *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Finneran, et al., 2:560.

12 Yeats quotes George in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, written after Russell's death in July, 1935: 'My wife said the other night, "AE" was the nearest thing to a saint you and I will ever meet. You are a better poet but no saint. I suppose one has to choose' (L, 838).

