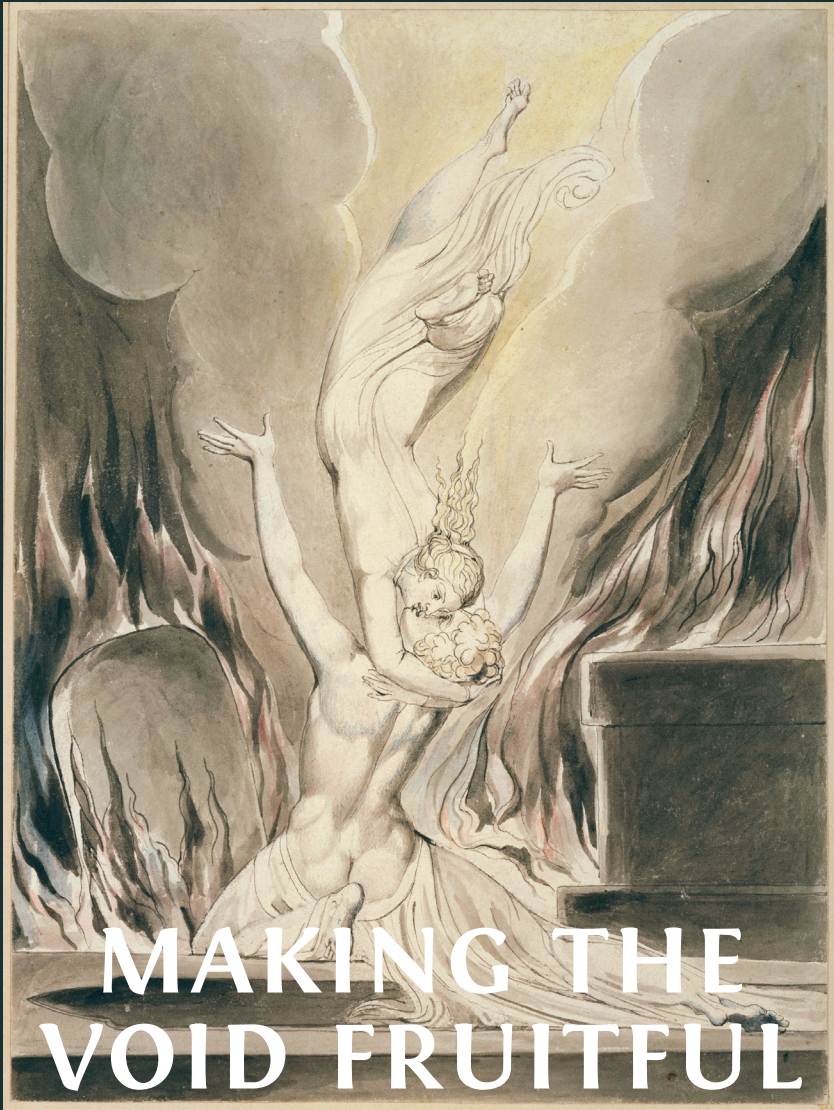


PATRICK J. KEANE



MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



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6. Sex, Philosophy, and the Occult

Despite Self's triumph in the 'Dialogue,' Yeats remained torn between what he called in 'Vacillation' (echoing Kant) 'the antinomies' of soul and body. As 'On Woman' alone would demonstrate, Yeats's occult speculations were always entangled in his emotional life. 'His aim,' to repeat Graham Hough's conclusion, 'was to redeem passion, not to transcend it, and a beatitude that has passed beyond the bounds of earthly love could not be his ideal goal.'¹ In the alembic of Yeats's paradoxical imagination, the search for hidden spiritual knowledge is often merged with *carnal* knowledge.

Autobiographically and symbolically, the object of desire was Maud Gonne: the never fully attainable Muse that haunts the life and work of the century's greatest love poet. But the beloved proves to be ultimately unattainable, even with physical consummation attained, as it was, in December 1908, with the elusive Maud. Yeats was both impressed and deeply moved by Dryden's translation (Vis, 214) of a famous passage of Lucretius, asserting that sexual union can never provide complete satisfaction.

In a 1931 conversation with John Sparrow, Fellow of All Souls' College, Oxford, Yeats cited and expanded on Lucretius' lines from the end of the long passage (1037–1191) on sexual love concluding Book IV of *De rerum natura*. In glossing Dryden's translation of the Roman poet, Yeats seems to echo the Gnostics' doubly radical dualism, a dualism between man and nature, but also between nature and the transmundane God. Yeats's citation and comment suggest that he is looking back to four of his own poems, three written in 1926/27, the fourth in 1931. Two, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and 'Among School Children,' are indisputably major. The other two, lesser lyrics but closely related to

1 Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 119.

those major texts, are 'Summer and Spring,' from Yeats's 'A Man Young and Old' sequence, and, the most splendid of the 'Crazy Jane' lyrics, the poignant yet triumphant 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman,' written in 1931, the same year as his conversation with John Sparrow. But here, finally, is what Yeats told Sparrow:

The finest description of sexual intercourse ever written was in John Dryden's translation of Lucretius, and it was justified; it was introduced to illustrate the difficulty of two becoming a unity: 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.' Sexual intercourse is an attempt to solve the eternal antinomy, doomed to failure because it takes place only on one side of the gulf. The gulf is that which separates the one and the many, or if you like, God and man.²

In 'Summer and Spring' (poem VIII of the autobiographical sequence in which the poet is masked as an anonymous 'Man Young and Old'), two lovers grown old reminisce 'under an old thorn tree.' When they talked of growing up, they: 'Knew that we'd halved a soul/ And fell the one in 'tother's arms/ That we might make it whole.' We recall, as we are meant to, 'Among School Children,' written in the same year. In transitioning from the first to the second stanza of this great poem, we shift abruptly from Yeats's external persona as senator and school inspector, 'a sixty-year-old smiling public man,' to the private, inner man, the poet himself reporting an incident Maud Gonne once related from her childhood:

I dream of a Ledaean body bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy—
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

In 'Summer and Spring' the lovers 'Knew that we'd halved a soul.' Though the blending of our two natures in 'Among School Children'

2 Cited by Brian Arkins, *Builders of My Soul*, 148, 52, 135. Yeats improves on Dryden, whose Lucretian lovers, in 'the raging foam of full desire,' twine 'thighs' and lovely limbs, yet couple 'In vain; they only cruze about the coast,/ For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost.'

is poignant, the tragedy lies in the qualifying 'seemed' and in the need 'to alter Plato's parable'—a 'Lucretian' alteration, since the merging is empathetic and partial (yolk and white remain separated even within the unity of the 'one shell') rather than the full sexual / emotional union of Aristophanes' haunting fable in Plato's *Symposium*. It is precisely this 'whole' union that the old man claims in 'His Memories' (poem VI of 'A Man Young and Old')³ and in 'Summer and Spring,' which concludes with a sexual variation on the Unity of Being symbolized by the dancer and 'great-rooted blossomer' of 'Among School Children': 'O what a bursting out there was,/ And what a blossoming,/ When we had all the summer-time/ And she had all the spring!'

But even here, despite that fecund blossoming, it is all memory and heartache. Two decades later, that night in December 1908, no matter how fleeting, remains paramount among the 'memories' of Yeats's 'Man Old.' In 'real life,' however, after their night of lovemaking in Paris, Maud had quickly put the relationship back on its old basis, a 'spiritual marriage,' informing Yeats in a morning-after note that she was praying he could overcome his 'physical desire' for her. In a journal entry the following month (21 January 1909), Yeats referred despairingly but realistically to the 'return' of Maud's 'old dread of physical love' (first confided to him in 1898), which has 'probably spoiled her life [...] I was never more deeply in love, but my desires must go elsewhere if I would escape their poison.' Hence, those 'others,' including Yeats's wife, destined to become 'friends,' or sexual partners, if never a fully satisfactory replacement for 'that one' (as he refers to her, namelessly and climactically in 'Friends').

Maud was aware that her status as an unattainable Muse-figure was not only a painful but productive source of the poet's creativity, but, ironically, a cause of happiness. 'Poets should never marry,' she repeatedly informed him in what became a Maud-mantra. 'The world should thank me for not marrying you' because 'you make such beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness.' Since Maud was unmarriageable

3 Aside from 'To a Young Girl' (1915), addressed to Iseult Gonne, 'His Memories' is the only poem where Yeats claims that his passion for Maud was sexually reciprocated. Readers used to the Maud / Helen association would know who 'The first of all the tribe' was who lay in the speaker's arms, 'And did such pleasure take—/ She who had brought great Hector down/ And put all Troy to wreck—/ That she cried into this ear,/ "Strike me if I shriek".'

and, ultimately, 'not kindred of his soul,' Yeats sought complete union (physical and spiritual) in memory, and in poetry, masked as a 'Man Young and Old'—or, empathetically switching genders in *Words for Music Perhaps*, as embodied in the vision of his 'Woman Young and Old' or of 'Crazy Jane.'

Partly based on an old, crazed Irish woman, Jane is not merely promiscuous. Yeats's occult experiences had led him to a belief in feminized, often sexualized, spirituality, early embodied in the beautiful, highly-sexed actress Florence Farr, one of the most gifted women visionaries of the Golden Dawn (and, briefly, his lover). Such female adepts, whose powers he admired and envied; women of 'second sight' (his own sister, 'Lily,' his uncle George Pollexfen's servant, Mary Battle); and his experiences at séances, where the mediums were almost invariably women: all convinced him of a female and erotic dimension in spirituality. The artistic result was the two powerful poetic sequences, 'A Woman Young and Old' and the 'Crazy Jane' poems. The third poem in the latter sequence, 'Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment,' begins with Jane insisting that 'Love,' to be satisfied, requires 'all'—by far the most frequent word in the vocabulary of Yeats and of Blake, for whom 'Less than All cannot satisfy Man.'

'Love is all
Unsatisfied
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul':
*And that is what Jane said.*⁴

It ends with Jane still holding forth, now emphasizing her version of *gnosis*, but one that would certainly resonate with most Gnostics. While mystical experience was possible during life, virtually all Gnostics believed that the true ascent, in which (in Jane's phrase) 'all could be known,' took place after death, with the return of the spirit to its divine origins, the spark of life redeemed and reunited with the One from which it had been severed and alienated by its immersion in the material, temporal world. For most of the 'Crazy Jane' sequence,

4 Italics in original. 'All' appears 1,019 times in Yeats's poetry, almost twice as frequently as the runner-up, 'old.' 'Less than All cannot satisfy Man' is the fifth axiom in Blake's 'There is NO Natural Religion' (b).

unconventional Jane, making the most of her time on earth, will take a decidedly unorthodox *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*. But here we find her, yearning for 'Time' to disappear and *gnosis* to be achieved, again with the emphasis on 'all':

'What can be shown?
What true love be?
All could be known or shown
If Time were but gone.'

Jane's male interlocutor—responding, 'That's certainly the case'—might be Yeats himself, who thought Lucretius remained justified in insisting on the 'failure,' in this life, to bridge 'the gulf,' the insuperable 'difficulty of two becoming a unity.'

The poem that immediately follows Jane's thoughts on the Day of Judgment, 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman,' responds more audaciously to the Lucretius- and Epicurus-based assertion that 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.' Writing on Lucretius in 1875, the Victorian essayist J. M. Symonds qualified what Dryden before him and Yeats after him designated a 'tragedy,' though Symonds goes on to emphasize, even more than Yeats, the Lucretian, Epicurean—and, I would add, Gnostic—bleakness and frustration of lovers whose immaterial souls are entrained in the flesh: 'There is something almost tragic,' writes a sympathetic but austere Symonds, 'in these sighs and pantings and pleasure-throes, and the incomplete fruition of souls pent up within their frames of flesh.'⁵ Symonds seems to reflect, along with the frustration described by Lucretius (and Platonism and Neoplatonism in general), the dualism of the Gnostics, concerned above all with freeing the spirit dwelling within the garment of flesh imprisoning the spark of life.

Before birth, we are in what Platonic Shelley called in 'Adonais' the 'white radiance of eternity.' What makes us free, the Gnostics insisted, is the knowledge of who we were then, when we *were* 'in the light' of pre-natal innocence. Crazy Jane, returning to the One, 'Shall leap into the light lost/ In my mother's womb.' That Blakean infant joy marks the

⁵ 'Lucretius,' *Fortnightly Review* (1875); reprinted in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 12.

exuberant climax of her vision. But she had begun by asserting her own *gnosis*, shaped by earthly experience:

I know, although when looks meet
I tremble to the bone,
The more I leave the door unlatched
The sooner love is gone,
For love is but a skein unwound
Between the dark and dawn.

Her knowledge of the transience of sexual love has not driven Jane to abstinence, despite the hectoring of the Bishop (her antagonist in this sequence) that she should 'Live in a heavenly mansion,/ Not in some foul sty.' In that poem, 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop' (the sixth in the sequence), Jane tells the Bishop, a 'religious' Soul-spokesman nevertheless fixated on 'those breasts,' where *her* God—neither Jehovah nor Jesus, but Eros—has 'pitched' (temporarily set up as one would a tent) his mansion. It is not up among the stars as a 'heavenly mansion' (Yeats has the Bishop borrow that lofty sty-disdaining phrase from Urbino's Platonist, Pietro Bembo, and the Gospel of John, 14:2). Love's mansion is 'pitched' (with a probable pun on darkened), not up but down, *inter urinam et faeces*, 'in/ The place of excrement.' And her final words, definitely punning but serious news for the Bishop, are that 'Nothing can be sole, or whole/ That has not been rent': a sexual / spiritual variation (in keeping with 'Plato's parable') on the archetypal cycle of original unity, division, and reunification and completion.

Despite the graphic nature of her language in Poem VI, Jane is no more a simple materialist than is Augustine, or Swift, or Blake, an unlikely trinity whose shared excremental yet visionary vocabulary Yeats has her echo. What Jane insists on is the beauty of both the physical and the ideal world, with 'Love' the *tertium quid* mediating between them. 'Fair and foul are near of kin,/ And fair needs foul,' Jane tells the Bishop. Love is the 'great spirit' or 'daemon' celebrated by that Sophia-figure, Diotima, presented in the *Symposium* by Socrates, whose simplistic dualism between good and evil, 'fair' and 'foul,' she corrects ('Hush,' she quiets him in mid-argument) by presenting Love as 'a mean between them,' a yoker of apparent opposites, a creator of unity out of division. (*Symposium* 202–3).

Whatever its other parallels and sources, Jane's vision is also reflective of *some* aspects of Gnosticism, hostile to 'law,' especially law-orientated scripture, such as in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and the sort of puritanical strictures the Bishop wants to impose on Jane. Historical Gnosticism ran the ethical gamut from extreme asceticism to, at its most unconventional, robust promiscuity. The charges, by early Christian opponents, of Gnostic orgies were exaggerated (or at least unsupported by evidence). However, two Gnostic sects (the Carpocratians and the Cainites) held that, in order to be freed from the Archons, the world-creating angels who would 'enslave' them, men and women had to 'experience everything.' To 'escape from the power' of the Archons, Carpocrates said, one 'must pass from body to body until he has experience of every kind of action which can be practiced in this world, and when nothing is any longer wanting to him, then his liberated soul should soar upwards to that God who is above' the Archons. By 'fulfilling and accomplishing what is requisite,' the liberated soul will be saved, 'no longer imprisoned in the body.'⁶ This is certainly in accord with Jane's notably embodied theory of illumination through a sexual liberation that is ultimately spiritual and salvific:

A lonely ghost the ghost is
That to God shall come;
I—love's skein upon the ground,
My body in the tomb—
Shall leap into the light lost
In my mother's womb.

But were I left to lie alone
In an empty bed,
The skein so bound us ghost to ghost
When he turned his head
Passing on the road that night,
Mine must walk when dead.

6 The Carpocratian doctrine is synopsized and condemned in *Adversus Haereses* (§2952) by the Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus, whose work has been invaluable to scholars studying the beliefs of various Gnostic sects. Yeats did not read the Bishop's attack on heresies, but he did (as Warwick Gould recently reminded me in an email) read G. R. S. Mead's *Simon Magus: An Essay* (1892), which draws on Irenaeus for a story in *The Adoration of the Magi*.

Most readers of Yeats, even most Yeatsian scholars familiar with the finale of the *Enneads* of his beloved Plotinus, misread the central and crucial stanza, a misreading based on an understandably negative response, when the word is taken out of context, to the adjective 'lonely.' It is in fact an ultimate affirmation. Jane will come to God as a 'lonely ghost,' the climax of her 'flight of the alone to the Alone.' These, the final words of the *Enneads*, are also memorably recalled by Yeats's friend Lionel Johnson at the climax of 'The Dark Angel,' a poem Yeats rightly admired: 'Lonely unto the lone I go,/ Divine to the Divinity.'⁷

Jane's transcendence is earned not (to echo the final stanza of 'Among School Children') through a body-bruising, soul-pleasuring abstinence, but (since nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent) by utterly unwinding, through experience, what Blake called (in *The Gates of Paradise* and elsewhere) 'the sexual Garments.' Though 'love is but a skein unwound/ Between the dark and dawn,' if left *unwound*, it would bind her to the earth, condemning her ghost, like that of her true lover, Jack, to 'walk when dead.' That skein fully unwound, we are to go to our graves (to borrow a phrase of Milton, but hardly his meaning), 'all passion spent.' Yeats told an interviewer at this time, 'If you don't express yourself, you walk after you're dead. The great thing is to go empty to your grave.'⁸

In order to liberate the soul, escaping the Archons who would enslave us, we must, Carpocratian Gnostics insisted, exhaust earthly 'experience.' In a letter of January 1932, Yeats confided to Olivia Shakespear, 'I shall be a sinful man to the end, and think upon my death-bed of all the nights I wasted in my youth' (L, 790). He was writing to the one woman on earth best equipped to know what he meant by nights wasted in his youth; he had been a virgin until, at the age of thirty-one, Olivia had relieved him of that burden. Yeats was also fond of a passage from Blake's *Vision of the Last Judgment*: two sentences which, with their emphasis on both the

7 My one ally on this point is Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, who accurately notes that Jane claims 'that unsatisfied desire binds us to the earth; the exhaustion of desire through its fulfillment is the precondition for union with the divine.' She follows Yeats in enlisting Aquinas in the political fight against Irish puritanism. In his Senate speech against Catholic censorship, Yeats had cunningly cited the Thomistic formulation, "*anima est in toto corpore*" [the soul inhabits all parts of the body.] See Cullingford, 'Yeats and Gender,' in Howes and Kelly, 182.

8 W. B. Yeats: *Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Mikhail, 2:203.

'realities of intellect' and the need for the passions to 'emanate' in a way alien to Plotinus, would appeal to some Gnostics: 'Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed and governed their passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which the passions emanate uncurbed in their eternal glory' (E&I, 137–38).⁹

The Gnostic Carpocrates would endorse *that* vision of the Last Judgment. Whatever he might have thought of Crazy Jane's promiscuous theology, Blake, though aware of the limitations of sexuality, saw no puritanical line demarcating the human heart and loins from the human head and spirit. Yeats, who habitually couples Blake with Nietzsche, cited with approval the latter's 'doctrine' that 'we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things' (E&I, 389). As Nietzsche insisted in an epigram (§75) in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 'the kind and degree of a man's sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit.' What Yeats described, in the title of a bold 1926 article defending life and art against religious censorship, as 'The Need for Audacity of Thought,' took the form of an increasingly candid celebration of the body. Already present in the 'Solomon and Sheba,' 'A Man Young and Old,' 'A Woman Young and Old,' and 'Crazy Jane' sequences, that candor dominates his final years. Ribh, the unorthodox monk of 'Supernatural Songs,' tells us in the opening poem of that sequence that 'Natural and Supernatural with the selfsame ring are wed,' and reads his 'holy book' in the incandescent Swedenborgian light shed by the sexual 'intercourse of angels.' The graphically sexual 'Three Bushes' sequence was co-written with Dorothy Wellesley, and it was she who best characterized Yeats in old age: 'Sex, philosophy and the occult preoccupy him. He strangely intermingles the three' (LDW, 374).

That intermingling is also prominent in 'A Woman Young and Old,' the eleven-poem sequence written between 1926 and 1929. In the alluring 'Before the World was Made,' which, following the framing 'Father and Child,' is the first poem in her own voice, the young woman applying

9 Blake goes on to excoriate those who, lacking passion and intellect, spend their lives 'curbing and governing other peoples.' He is thinking of 'the modern church,' which 'crucifies' the 'true' imaginative Christ 'upside down.' Yeats's Bishop leaps to mind.

her make-up mixes the sensuous with the spiritual, the aesthetically erotic with Neoplatonic philosophy:

If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.

What if I look upon a man
As though on my beloved,
And my blood be cold the while
And my heart unmoved?
Why should he think me cruel
Or that he is betrayed?
I'd have him love the thing that was
Before the world was made.

In Yeats's gender-crossing empathy and in the alembic of his lyricism, an apparently self-centered coquette and budding *femme fatale* is transformed into a heroic quester for her archetype in eternity. Any potential lover courts her at his peril, if, failing to see beyond the surface, he is not equal to her challenge: a task ironically made more difficult by her own attempt to align mask and spiritual reality through beauty-enhancing artifice. Though she lures him on with brightened eyes and crimsoned lips, her blood will remain cold, her heart unmoved, unless he is able to love the eerie, non-sensuous 'thing that was/ Before the world was made'—a Neoplatonizing allusion to God being 'still where he was before the world was made,' a description by John Donne, whose work Yeats was reading intensely at this time.¹⁰

Donne also figures in 'Chosen,' the sixth and central lyric of this concentrically structured sequence. The flanking poems provide context. In 'Parting,' the Romeo-and-Juliet-like *aubade* that immediately follows 'Chosen,' the young woman claims that the light they see 'is from the moon' and the song she and her lover hear that of the nightingale.

10 *John Donne: The Sermons*. In Sermon 23, Donne observes that, having planted Adam in Paradise, God remained unmoved, 'still where he was before the world was made.'

When he points out that it is the dawn-announcing lark and, indeed, that 'Daylight already flies/ From mountain crest to crest,' she ends the debate by making him an offer he cannot refuse: let the bird 'sing on,/ I offer to love's play/ My dark declivities.' In 'Chosen,' the now-mature woman also struggles 'with the horror of daybreak'; but she chooses, along with 'the lot of love,' an esoteric concept to celebrate that serene post-coital moment when she and her lover seemed to exchange hearts. If questioned on

my utmost pleasure with a man
By some new-married bride, I take
That moment for a theme
Where his heart my heart did seem
And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where—wrote a learned astrologer—
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.

Though Yeats, as in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' plays a variation on his esoteric source (the Neoplatonic *Commentary on Cicero's Somnium Scipionis* by the Latin encyclopedist Macrobius), readers oblivious to astrology can still perceive the sexual analogue to this transformation of the whirling zodiacal gyre of the poem's opening stanza into the motionless 'sphere'—symbol of perfection not only for Yeats's 'learned astrologer,' Macrobius, but for more prominent thinkers, among them Parmenides and Plato, whose Myth of Er and its 'lottery' in the final sections of *The Republic* (619–620), is the source of the phrase 'the lot of love.'

But why delve into this arcana at all? Because Yeats took it seriously and, at the same time, with the jocoseriousness that allowed him to yoke seeming opposites. After amusing Olivia Shakespear by distilling all that was worthy of attention to two topics: 'sex and the dead' (L, 730), he confided to her in his very next letter that perusing Blake's Dante designs captured 'my own mood between spiritual excitement, and the sexual torture and the knowledge that they are somehow inseparable!' (L, 731). In 'Parting,' the woman is erotically playful; in 'Consolation,' the poem immediately preceding 'Chosen,' she stands orthodox spiritual doctrine on its head with a *felix culpa* variation emphasizing the intensification of erotic pleasure by the awareness of sex as forbidden fruit. She acknowledges 'wisdom' in what is said by the 'sages,' referring to Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus and Christian Neoplatonists like Augustine, with his obsessive emphasis on original sin. But, adopting

the Yeatsian *agon* between 'wisdom' and 'ecstasy,' she has news for those who would bruise the body to pleasure soul. She tells her lover, 'lay down that head/ Till I have told the sages/ Where man is comforted.'

How could passion run so deep
 Had I never thought
 That the crime of being born
 Blackens all our lot?
 But where the crime's committed
 The crime can be forgot.

It would not have occurred to Augustine, for all the sexual experience of his youth, that the lot-blackening crime he was convinced we inherited at birth could be so pleasurably forgotten: returning to the scene of the crime by re-entering a woman's 'dark declivities.'

In 'Chosen,' Yeats has his protagonist memorialize her moment of 'utmost pleasure with a man' in arcane language nuanced by what I hear as a note of urbanity. To have her answer the new-married bride with *no* saving urbanity would be to parody the role famously assigned by Dryden to Donne, who (as we saw in discussing 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer'), even in his 'amorous' poems, 'perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love.' To capture that post-orgasmic euphoria in which she and her lover were 'both adrift' on a 'miraculous stream,' Yeats's woman cites an abstruse text. In doing so, she mimics the simultaneous detachment and participation of a pedantic scholar. One assumes that the 'new-married bride' questioning the older woman on her utmost sexual pleasure has not come fresh from a perusal of *A Vision*, nor of Macrobius, nor of John Donne—the stanza, meter, and astronomical imagery of whose 'Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day' Yeats adapted for 'Chosen.' This is the 'just finished' poem Yeats mentions in his 21 February 1926 letter (L, 710) to Donne scholar H. J. C. Grierson, in which he refers to Donne's 'Nocturnall' as a passionate and 'intoxicating' poem, which it is, and 'proof that he was the Countess of Bedford's lover,' which, despite Yeats's revealing insistence, it most certainly is not.

In two late poems, Yeats pushes audacity of thought to the limit. Yeatsian physicality and revulsion from the abstract are at their most blasphemously sensationalistic in the quatrain whose titular 'Stick of Incense' is revealed to be that of St. Joseph, who 'thought the world would melt,' but, probing the 'virgin womb' of Mary, 'liked the way his

finger smelt.' Yeats is less sacrilegious than insouciant in 'News for the Delphic Oracle.' Even in this poem's predecessor, 'The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus' (1931), Yeats had altered the Oracle's report, as given in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, which Yeats had read in both the Thomas Taylor and Stephen MacKenna translations. Porphyry describes clear-eyed Plotinus swimming through the sea of generation to reach the Platonic Choir of Love. Characteristically, *antithetical* Yeats devoted his most sharply memorable line to the temporary obliteration of Plotinus's spiritual vision: 'Salt blood blocks his eyes.' In the poem written seven years later, Plotinus has arrived, 'salt flakes on his breast,/ And having stretched and yawned awhile/ Lay sighing' like the rest of the 'golden codgers.' Yeats mocks his own early pastorals, ending in a salty, sexual tumult that makes even the dolphin-torn finale of 'Byzantium' seem tame by comparison:

Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum
Flash fishlike,
Nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.

This orgiastic scene would be 'News' indeed, not only for the Delphic Oracle and the 'sages standing in God's holy fire' in 'Sailing to Byzantium,' but for the John Milton of the Nativity Ode. The 'Delphic Oracle' poem's opening lines were scribbled in a copy of Milton's poems, with Yeats's 'sighing' wind and water echoing the suspended calm of wind and water in the Nativity Ode. In revisiting Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity,' Yeats had been preceded by Blake, in *Europe: A Prophecy*, and Coleridge, in *Religious Musings* (both 1794), and, a quarter-century later, closer in time and theme, in the 'Ode to Psyche.' Though Keats's warm sexual union of Eros and Psyche is a far cry from the orgiastic doings in the 'Delphic Oracle' poem, those copulating nymphs and satyrs suggest that Yeats may be recalling the excited questions in the 'Grecian Urn' ode: 'What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?/ What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?/ What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?'

To return to Milton's ode: the great Puritan's fatal news for Apollo, driven from his shrine on 'the steep of Delphos,' is that he, Pan, and the other pagan deities are to be replaced by the newborn infant Jesus. Though Yeats includes in his pagan paradise the 'Innocents' slaughtered

by Herod in his attempt to kill infant Jesus, a focus on Christ would not do for *antithetical* Yeats. At the end as at the beginning, in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, a palpably sexual paganism is preferred to Christianity. Yeats's example, 'Homer and his unchristened heart,' is companion to Sophocles' *antithetical* Oedipus, who—Yeats reminds us in the Introduction to *A Vision*, alluding to Oedipus' wondrous end at Colonus—'sank down body and soul into the earth': an earth, Yeats adds to the Greek text, 'riven by love,' in contrast to *primary* Christ who, 'crucified standing up, went into the abstract sky soul and body' (Vis, 27–28).

That preference, the chthonic, earthy *down* over the abstract heavenly *up*, is echoed in the 'Delphic Oracle' poem: 'Down the mountain walls/ From where Pan's cavern is/ Intolerable music falls.' Yeats replaces Milton's 'Pan'—the newborn infant Jesus, his birth accompanied by 'musick sweet'—with the lusty, half-goatish pagan Pan and the fallen but resonant *basso profundo* attending caverned Pan and the copulating nymphs and satyrs: sensual music 'intolerable' to spiritual orthodoxy, Neoplatonic or Christian or both.¹¹

In this witty and exuberant poem—part parody of Neoplatonism and of Christian Milton, part mischievous potpourri of mythological personages—Yeats almost debases love to lust. *Almost*, for the Choir, wading in 'some cliff-sheltered bay,' sings of Love, and we are told of Peleus, Thetis' husband, that, gazing on her 'delicate' limbs, 'Love has blinded him with tears.' But it is Thetis' 'belly' that listens to that sexual music. Despite the Neoplatonic sources of his vision of the Isles of the Blest, Yeats emphasizes, not transcendent serenity beyond desire but a generative fecundity that would make Milton's or even Swedenborg's copulating angels blush—to say nothing of the virginal sibyl at the shrine of Apollo, the titular recipient of 'news' actually intended for Plotinus and Porphyry. And, since the infant in Thetis' belly is fetal Achilles, we have another iteration of Yeats's Nietzschean motto: 'Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.'

11 In the first edition of *A Vision*, Yeats described the 'sacred and profane' as having 'fallen apart in the hymn "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity",' making Milton's mythology 'an artificial ornament,' whereas 'no great Italian artist' of the Renaissance 'saw any difference between them, and when difference came, as it did with Titian, it was God and the Angels that seemed artificial.' *A Vision* (1925), 205. Yeats's partial parody of Milton's ode was first noted by Daniel Albright, *The Myth against Myth*, 122–23. According to Albright, George gave her husband's annotated copy of Milton to Richard Ellmann as a gift.