

Death as a Beautiful Occasion. The Dialectic of Imaginative Restitution in Yeats's "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli."

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Abstract

In the article I engage Harold Bloom's reading of the two late Yeats lyrics "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli" in order to investigate the peculiar construction of Yeats's figure of the poet, which Bloom only hints at. By investigating the dialectical transaction in the two poems between death as a principle of literal reductiveness and the lively openness of poetic fantasy, I would like to show that the two lyrics (which may be assumed to be generic of the later Yeats oeuvre) emphasise an anti-humanist curtailment of life in a systemic frame and, at the same time, reveal that this reduction paradoxically opens a path for poetic expression. Whereas Bloom's attention is directed to the poet-as-poet, Yeats's poems present poetry as antithetically bound up with bodily existence. With close attention to Bloom's reading of Yeats's poetry, I explore the idea of an acceptance of oncoming death understood as an impulse to poetic expression.

Keywords: Yeats, Bloom, romanticism, selfhood

Abstrakt

W niniejszym artykule poddaję analizie dwa późne wiersze W. B. Yeatsa, „Stożki” i „Lapis lazuli” w odniesieniu do krytyki Harolda Blooma. Aspektem tych wierszy, który zajmował mnie tu będzie szczególnie jest figura poety wewnątrz tekstu poetyckiego. Bloom

odnosi się do tej idei jedynie zdawkowo, a – jak sędzę – usytuowanie „jaźni tekstowej” wobec poety-autora wydaje się fundującym aspektem nie tylko wspomnianych wierszy, ale całej późnej poetyki Yeatsa. Odczytując kategorię śmierci jako drogę literalizacji języka skontrastowaną z metaforyczną witalnością języka wyobraźni, będę się starał ukazać, że dopiero dialektyczne złączenie tych wydawałoby się niewspółmiernych kategorii wyzwała w poecie siłę twórczą. Podczas gdy dla Blooma liczy się jedynie figura „poety wewnątrztekstualnego”, w niniejszym eseju uwaga skupi się na zależności między cieleśnym autorem, leciwym już Yeatsem a postacią „ja” lirycznego, które poeta ów projektuje w odpowiedzi na zew śmierci.

Słowa klucze: Yeats, Bloom, romantyzm, jaźń

The poetry of the last two decades of Yeats's life hardly needs defence. It has been agreed that the volumes since *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) show Yeats at his most powerful,¹ presenting some of the best poems in the language. Among critics of his later work, Harold Bloom sounds a solitary bell of dissatisfaction when he says of “The Gyres” that the poem “is not artistic freedom,” but rather that it settles on “the darkest of bondages to the idols of determinism” (Bloom 1970, 436). He lashes out with even greater indignation at “Lapis Lazuli,” noting that “inhumane nonsense is not always the best foundation for aesthetic judgment” (438). Of course, Bloom does find much to praise in some of the poems (particularly in the triad “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” “Vacillation” and “Man and the Echo”), but his criticism reveals more about what he desires in poetry than it does about Yeats's later poetry itself. In this article I focus on “The Gyres” and “Lapis Lazuli,” investigating the dialectical transaction between death as a principle of literal reductiveness and the lively openness of poetic fantasy. More particularly, taking Bloom's remarks on the two poems as a starting ground, I would like to show that the two lyrics (which may be assumed to be generic of the later Yeats oeuvre) emphasise a curtailment of life in a systemic frame and, at the same time, reveal that this reduction paradoxically opens a path for poetic expression. Whereas Bloom's attention is directed to the poet-as-poet, Yeats's poems present poetry as antithetically bound up with bodily existence.

¹ This is evident even if we consider R. F. Foster's biography of the poet. While part one takes the subtitle *The Apprentice Mage*, it is only part two that grants Yeats the status of *The Arch-Poet*.

Yeats's notion of antithetical is defined by Bloom as "anti-natural" in a sense that is close to Wordsworth and even more pertinent to Shelley's "Alastor," where "the Poet's quest is again clearly set against the context of nature, for nothing natural can ever fulfill him" (Bloom 1970, 21). At the outset of his career, Bloom hints at what he will later call an "internalisation of the quest romance" when he asserts that Shelley's peculiar strength lies in his constant attempts to breathe life into an otherwise inanimate nature. In his first book, he uses Martin Buber's notion of the "I-Thou" relation to put forward his understanding of Shelley's achievement. Discussing the famous hymn "Mont Blanc," Bloom states that the persona "knows that Mont Blanc is part of the 'inanimate cold world' until he himself makes it something that lives in his own life" (Bloom 1959, 18). Thus the poet must turn the "It" that nature is into a "Thou" which will in return ensure that he achieves a full life, becoming an "I" that speaks to the "Thou." In this early formulation Bloom lays the foundations for his general idea of the Romantic poem: "it is ... a vision, a way of seeing, and of living" (Bloom *The Visionary Company* xxiii). It is poetic mythmaking as presupposed by Shelley that allows man to become the Blakean true Man, the Imagination; by contrast, one who encounters nature as a fixed space in which man is plunged becomes a "Selfhood" that "confronts no Thou's, but only experiences It's" (Bloom 1959, 112), thereby losing its humanity.

Bloom thus characterises man as an imaginative quester for greater vision than has so far been possible. This goal informs *The Anxiety of Influence* in that the ephebe's struggle with precursors becomes a fight to overcome existent modes of poetic fantasy. However, what is at stake in this battle with precursors is more than just creative originality; it is the ability to live one's life without being caught in any (somebody else's) system. This Blakean notion opens the path for Bloom to appreciate poetry as a life-affirming force.

In her very strong explication of Bloom's theoretical works, Agata Bielik-Robson suggests that his genealogy of the human subject is organised around the dictum of "more life." She takes this idea from an allegorical reading of Jacob's struggle with the angel, which, for her, is an archetypal *agon* with the overwhelming reality principle that is underlain by the Heideggerian "ownmost potentiality of being," death. Jacob wins but comes out maimed, thus paying the price for gaining a new life on his own terms.² Bielik-Robson argues that Bloom offers a Hebrew-derived vision of man that counterposes an inherently Western "logocentric ego."

² For the analysis of Jacob's winning the blessing see Bloom and Rosenberg (210) and Bielik-Robson (8–9).

The ego of the logocentric order is not implicated in the world, is not identical to the speaking subject, who lives in this world, but lies deeper than the speech act, in a transcendental realm of *beyond* where it cannot be touched by the contingencies of life: it can either rest totally outside or be destroyed by the exposition to the *flux*. But once we begin to conceive “the pursuit of meaning”, which is the ego’s part, in terms not of logos but of *davhar*, the stakes of the narcissistic game will appear in a different, in fact precisely reverse, light: not so much a totalitarian triumph of the subject over unruly reality, but a successful defense against totalitarian reality which threatens to engulf, unify, and reduce the unruliness and difference of the singular self [...]. The ego of *davhar*, in stark contrast to the ego of *logos*, does not seek triumph over reality, but merely a defense against reality as a reductive force; it does not wish to preside over the ego-centered order imposed on the manifold of sensations, it merely wants to cut into the order of things which threaten to destroy its precarious singularity (Bielik-Robson 2011, 216–217).

The ego of logos is here treated as characteristic of the Western metaphysics. Bielik-Robson ingeniously argues that the line of hermeneutics that flowers in Heidegger, reaching structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers and culminating in Derrida, is still obsessed with explicating the nature of reality. Deconstruction does not part with this idea, but by seeking out aporetic moments within the space of writing, it arrives at a point where the real in itself is to be understood as an aporetic realm, if a realm nonetheless. In this way, all logos-orientated philosophies terminate in an inevitable reductiveness, and the modern ego is plunged into a horizon of imaginative nullity. Here Bloom’s point developed in *Shelley’s Mythmaking*, although not cited by Bielik-Robson, can be applied. If reality remains an “It” (an ontic realm wherein Being is hidden or an aporetic field of writing), the self cannot become an “I,” but is ossified and cannot serve as a legitimate metaphysical category. The subject disappears, “language-as-Demiurge replacing the self-as-Abyss” (Bloom 1982, 19).

Against such a vision of the death of the self, Bielik-Robson pitches Bloom’s theory of strong poets as creators of supreme fictions through misprision. She links the postulate of “more life” with a struggle to overcome the reductive reality principle: “*more life* is not just a quantitative augmentation, but a radical change of quality: it is life intensified, and transformed into a creative principle of expansion which knows no boundaries or limitations” (Bielik-Robson 2011, 260). Therefore the self understood as a strong poet knows his condition to be one of abysmal fall, as Bloom paraphrasing Emerson explains: “we have fallen from the true Adamic stance or upright posture” (Bloom 1982, 22). Bloom applies this Gnostic vision to all creative men, whose condition is belated-

ness. There were greater men before me, Bloom chants repeatedly, and they were closer to the fullness of the past, but though I am weaker, I shall seek to meet them in battle nonetheless. The stake is more life, an escape from others' rhetoric by troping on their tropes. While the satanic-promethean decision to oppose the stronger precursors Bloom calls *clinamen*, the ability to outdo (if only momentarily) the precursor's fantasy he denotes by *apophrades*, the return of the dead. The last ratio is most preternatural in that the ephebe contrives to lie against time (which sets him ever more apart from the ordinary moment) "so that the tyranny of time *almost* is overturned, and *one can believe, for startled moments*, that they are being imitated by their precursors" (Bloom 1997, 141). This is no lasting victory over the precursors, for "[t]here is only a mutual Great Defeat" (Bloom 1982, 29). It is in this "Great Defeat" that Bloom locates "the essentially unfinished and unfinishable project of the modern work on myth" (Bielik-Robson 2011, 305). Bloom's writings trace the passages of influence, and his mode of criticism is essentially a myth of poetic creation; a myth whose principal theme is gaining more life by a meta-lectic (as understood by Bloom) leap over the precursor's tropes.

This short summary of Bloom's project of "antithetical criticism" brings us to the claim that poetry is a fantasy that consciously opposes a lie to "time the destroyer" in order to defy death. This is not to say that Bloom regards poetry as a philosopher's stone. In his work death is simply ousted from the hegemonic position of the sole sense-bestowing category of metaphysics. He proposes, in a summarising statement of his latest book, to view poetry and literature in general as "not only the best part of life," but as "itself the form of life, which has no other form" (Bloom 2011, 4).³ Thus the notion of belatedness is not only characteristic of poets but of Western man himself; more importantly, man, Bielik-Robson's ego of *davhar*, becomes a consciously living being insofar as he is the Blakean real Man, the Imagination. If a strong poet, indeed a strong self, keeps swerving from and outbidding reductive precursors, there can be no acceptance of the horizon of death. Whether it is conceived as metaphysical final truth or an existential possibility to be imaginatively affirmed, death must always be linked with literal reduction and systemisation.

It is little wonder that Bloom is repelled by the later Yeats, whose application of the gyre theory to his poems seems to Bloom a flattening escape into systemisation.

³ Bloom further asserts that fiction may be more real than the actual living man: "[i]f Falstaff and Hamlet are illusive, then what are you and I?" (2011, 28). See also Bloom *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Extolling “Vacillation” as one of Yeats’s greatest poems, he notes that it puts itself in line of the Great Romantic Ode: Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” (1807), Coleridge’s “Dejection” (1802), Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) and more recently Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (1918): “[a]ll these poems are lamenting not the decline of creative power, but the loss of an instinctive joy in the exercise of such power. And all vacillate, in different ways, in their *balancings of loss against compensatory imaginative gain*’ (Bloom *Yeats* 394–395 emphasis in original). It is in this laudatory comment that I see Bloom revealing both a flaw in his estimation of Yeats’s later poems and an undeveloped insight into their inner dialectic.

Bloom asserts that the poems in what he names the tradition of the Great Romantic Ode engage in a dialectic of *identification* and *compensation*. The loss they identify is the fact that man is no longer part of nature as he was as a child, which in the classic, Wordsworthian crisis poem necessitates the imagination’s compensatory effort. In Romantic poems, man’s initial alienation from nature is followed by “a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness and assured power that is its own reward” (Abrams 1973, 96). However, to the twentieth-century mind of Yeats, it is apparent that the loss not only needs to be recuperated in the imagination, but that it itself creates the space for the poem. In other words, the loss becomes a “blessing in disguise,” to refer to Odo Marquard’s famous assertion from *Glück im Unglück* (1996); what appears to be a woeful lack, in Wordsworth’s case man’s severance from nature, is at the same time a blessing, for without the initial dearth, there would be no space for the beauty of the endless patching and re-patching of this dearth. This is the logic at the heart of Yeats’s imploring “*Come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still / A little space for the rose-breath to fill!*,” though he wishes to find “Eternal beauty wandering on her way” (Yeats *CP* 31), which can be regarded as the total restitution of the aesthetic, spiritual or emotional lack, he understands that such a gain would eventually terminate his poetry. This is an early diagnosis of why Alastor, according to Bloom, Yeats’s preeminent precursor, cannot reach the end of his quest, for were he to attain the completion of vision in life, his poetic power would end. Alastor must embark on a quest for his own death to be able to sing. In this sense, his question: “And what am I that I should linger here / With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes” is implicitly answered by its last part: “... wasting these surpassing powers / In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven / That echoes not my thoughts?” (Shelley 1973, 405 ll. 285–286) Because the air is deaf, and the earth and heaven unresponsive, the poet can sing in the place surrendered by them; here lies this precious “rose-breath space” for him

to fill. Wordsworth, representing a different strain of the Romantic Ode, chants what may be termed a "beauty in disguise" in section X of "Intimations of Immortality:"

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind (Wordsworth 181, ll. 177–180).

The speaker identifies the destitution as man's inherent condition, but refuses to submit to it, finding strength in the compensatory quality of his imagination. The result is the beauty of the poetic expression: "To me alone came a thought of grief: / A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong" (Wordsworth 177 ll. 22–24). The implication seems to be that in the "timely utterance" the speaker has regained the former strength, although in bodily life he is as distant from unity with nature as he was at the beginning of the poem. These two are by no means the only examples of this logic.

Yeats's transformation of the Great Romantic Ode not only revels in the sheer power of imagination to dress the wound left by time, professing the "more life" doctrine, but it takes as its theme the dialectic of what I propose to call *beautiful destitution*. On the one hand, the later Yeats poem (with "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli" as prime examples) identifies variously understood loss as an inner quality of man's existence, its destitution; on the other, it takes this destitution as a reason to rejoice because it deploys space for the beauty of endless poetic restitutions. The greatest destitution, as Bloom and his reading of Romantic poetry show, is the reality principle as reductive literalisation; thus it appears that death, the truth-bestowing fact of human life as Heidegger and Lacan would have it, becomes an ineradicable part of poetry-as-poetry in that it creates a horizon of existential angst that calls for imaginative response. Bloom himself admits to such a feeling in his recent *The Anatomy of Influence*: "Growing old, I intensify my personal quest to gain more vitality from the literary text" (Bloom 2011, 31). I see Bloom as uttering here the most humane of man's feelings, one which only a poet can conjure up, particularly a poet who sits so uncomfortably with a critic as Yeats does with Bloom; the onset of death cannot be negotiated with or placated, only responded to, and as the most disturbing destitution, death compels the poet to rise to his greatest artistic capacity. Yeats understood it perfectly when he wrote in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae:" "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).

Bloom grasps the importance of this passage: “[h]ere the natural man, William Butler Yeats, and the antithetical quester perfectly fuse, as they rarely do even in his most magnificent poems” (Bloom 2011, 188). The man and the antithetical quester fuse; Yeats says that when he understands that the ringers in the tower, Shelley’s *Alastor*, Prince Athanase and Ahasuerus, offer only fleeting moments of solace and that he has nothing *but* his ownmost potential of being, the dark of such destitution will grow luminous with the light of poetic expression. This much lies dormant in Bloom’s comment, but his belief that Yeats rarely comes to such a close fusion even in his best work allows us into another reading of the two poems that Bloom disqualifies.

“The Gyres” and “Lapis Lazuli” open Yeats’s *New Poems* (1938), capturing a major tone not only of the entire collection but also Yeats’s poetic writings of the last two decades of his life. The first stanza of “The Gyres” depicts “not only the fall of an age, but an age in which the form of the good destroys itself” (Bloom 1970, 435). Thus Bloom opens his brief analysis of the lyric, but seems prejudiced from the start. The opening may be not so much a cry of exultation as an implicit lament. The gyres, as *A Vision* explains, ensure that the present chaos is merely the final breath of a civilisation that will soon be replaced by its antithesis. However, apparently lacking faith in the gyres, the speaker challenges the “Old Rocky Face,” perhaps the Wandering Jew of *Hellas*, as a sage figure to “look forth.” What the Rocky Face beholds is a horror landscape, a conflagration echoing a number of Yeats’s poems, notably “The Second Coming” (1920) and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” (1921). No thought can save this world, for “Things thought too long can be no longer thought.” The suggestion is that time burns up an idea’s currency, turning it into an ossified cliché, so that “beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth.” Since our bulwarks against the eruption of atrocity have grown obsolete, reason fails and “Irrational streams of blood are staining earth.” It is at this point that a direct reference to *A Vision* is made. Empedocles, as the thinker of unity in discord, is an early proponent of the antithetical view of history. Here he is used metonymically; the responsibility for the tragic state of civilisation is ascribed to the mutual position of the two cones, one of which is reaching its full expansion. This, in turn, causes the chaos that predates an incipient apocalypse. Mythical reference to the destruction of Troy reminds us that the present violence is by no means unprecedented.

It is only in the last line of the first stanza that the speaker is identified as the poet who, together with like-minded creators, “laugh in tragic joy.” The question about why this joy is tragic also applies to “Lapis Lazuli.” The tragedy refers quite obviously to the overriding violence in which the world is plunged. On this dragon’s day the poet is

faced with two options: he will either succumb to despair and fail in his writing or he will oppose the chaos. This he can do only by summoning his most powerful images to resist death. No "painted forms or boxes of make-up / In ancient tombs" will suffice, as they are the beauty that has died of its own beauty. The irrationality and mindlessness of the present nightmare will abate only if their force is turned against itself. If a city is burning, what can an aged poet do? He is no man of action, so he may either mourn the dead or chant the song of defiance, and "Rejoice." The cavern from which a turbulent cry issues forth evokes "Kubla Khan" (1816). Whereas the Alph disappears in "the caverns measureless to man," sinking "in tumult to a lifeless ocean" (Coleridge 256 ll. 27–28) in "The Gyres," from one of those caverns "comes the voice / And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice.'" Kubla Khan hears "Ancestral voices prophesying war." The poet of "The Gyres" has lived to witness this war, but the cavern here, true to its antithetical logic, returns the message of joy.

In Coleridge's lyric, the pleasure dome occupies the place where the tumult of the river along with the voices prophesying war are heard.

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure
 From the fountain and the caves (Coleridge 256 ll. 31–34).

Representing poetic creation itself, the dome is a record, if perhaps a failed record, of the poet's dream vision. It is an artifice, a fantasy. At the poem's end, the speaker wishes he could recreate the dream vision dome in his verse, which is an ironic commentary on the lyric itself, for at least a fragment of the dome has actually been recreated. "I would build that dome in air, [...] And all should cry, Beware! Beware!" The dome *as artifice* made in the poem thus encapsulates the violence of the river, and so of writing itself (Bennett 2004, 124), becoming an antinomy to the present time of peace, with the war for now looming over the horizon.

Rejoicing in "The Gyres" represents the poetic joy of constructing an artificial response to the "numb nightmare." The last stanza identifies another form of destitution. "Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul." The "blood and mire" that "the sensitive body stain" are accompanied by a social, artistic and religious depredation, but the speaker undauntedly sings his "What matter!" for "Those that the Rocky Face holds dear," the antithetical men, shall "disinter / The workman, noble and saint, and all things run / On that

unfashionable gyre again.” This may be read as a simple recourse to the system of *A Vision* and its doctrine of the eternal circulation of a soul in a twenty-eight-phase cycle, but what is striking is the shift in tenses. The fact that the antithetical men *shall* disinter the qualities that are to restore order suffices to *bring* all things back “On that unfashionable gyre again.” Thus the speaker suggests that a dedication to antithetical qualities, choosing of all things not impossible the most difficult, returns balance. The disinterring turns into a pledge of revisionary evocation of those images that stand in contrast to the present chaos. The gyre is unfashionable because it assumes everything that is opposed to the present state of degradation, while the shift of tense to the simple present in the last clause suggests that the struggle with the “Irrational streams of blood” is not to be enacted on a supra-historical level, but here and now. Thus the poet’s tragic joy stems not so much from his faith in the interchange of the gyres, or any occult force, but from an identification of the artifice as a dialectical response to the growing destitution. The dialectical connection between chaotic reality and poetic rejoicing in this chaos consists in the fact that while the worldly destitution is triggered by bloodshed and a collapse in aesthetic and moral standards, that destitution creates a rift which only antithetical poetry can try to bridge.

Moreover, the joy is tragic in the sense that it refers to an artificial, textual response to the violence. Yeats thus adumbrates an idea expressed nearly fifty years earlier in “The Song of the Happy Shepherd:” “words alone are certain good: / Sing, then, for this is also sooth,” although he no longer accepts the poem’s conclusion: “Dream, dream, for this is also sooth” (Yeats 1996, 8 ll. 57). Words are good insofar as they exist in an antithetical link to a reality of destitution. Poetry, recalling Auden, may make nothing happen, but it survives in the valley of its making, provided the valley lies among the towering peaks of the natural world. “The Gyres” identifies the worldly destitution, and plays up its ubiquity in order to capitalise on the nightmare and compensate for it in the poetic artifice. No system is taken for granted, but everything is garnered to help the poet establish those precious, if transient, moments of terrible beauty.⁴ In the worldly destitution, where death is an irreducible and incontrovertible fact, the poet finds the occasion for the beauty of the poetic artifice made here and now.

Yeats effects a fusion of the sphere of his personal involvement in reality (the poem may partly be a response to the Spanish Civil War of 1936) and the realm of poetic fan-

⁴ In this sense, “The Gyres” redeploys the logic of the early “The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart” (Yeats 1996, 56), where “All things uncomely and broken” in fact create the longing in the poet to “make them anew” in order to keep the image of his fantastic muse intact.

tasy, showing that the birth of beauty is intertwined with all manner of "dull decrepitude." Furthermore, as the aged Yeats is exposed to the growing decomposition of both his world and his own body, so in the poem he presents a mask of willing affirmation of both. The fantasy of tragic joy becomes for him a beautiful saving grace in a twofold sense. In the poem, he seeks both to restore the balance to the world and to assert his poetic persona as a powerful artifice; this persona is not only a Romantic ephebe seeking more life, but an intra-poetic figure that takes its *raison d'être* from its rootedness in the worldly fragmentation. The bloodshed imaged forth in "The Gyres," coupled with Yeats's growing senility, create the aura of death's approaching destitution, but that is a reason to rejoice because the loss engenders imagination; tragedy is the poet's blessing in disguise.

"Lapis Lazuli," by far the more widely appreciated of the poems, responds to the same "instability of international affairs in the modern world" as does "The Gyres." Jeffares set the scene for the future discussions of "Lapis Lazuli," noting that the poem is an expression of what Yeats called creative joy, found "in the supreme moments of tragedy" which constitute "a heightened dramatic moment, an affirmation of life" (Jeffares 70–71). However, it is in an excerpt from "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time," quoted by Jeffares, that Yeats identifies the feeling that lies at the heart of "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli." There is in creative joy

an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exultation, at death and oblivion (Yeats 2007, 233).

Acceptance of life and hatred of death become the two elements that spark creative energy, and thus joy. However, the two antinomian feelings form a dialectic relation between endless beautiful restitutions and the final destitution. It may therefore be argued that to Yeats the recognition of death as the ineluctable reduction, the triumph of the reality principle, creates the energy that is channelled into images of beauty. Since the condition of death is inherent in life, lively beauty cannot but invest itself in the realm of the artifice.

This point introduces the logic of "Lapis Lazuli." The first stanza presents an image of irresponsible artists who are not bothered by the generally-recognised fact that

civilisation might be heading into armageddon. The first line suggests that the speaker is being ironical, considering those women who are “sick of the palette and fiddle-bow, / Of poets that are always gay” (294, ll. 1–2) to be hysterical and thus out of their senses, for they cannot see beneath the outer veneer of the artists’ gaiety. The second stanza offers an explanation of the speaker’s reasons for being gay. Vereen Bell summarises the argument: “[a]ll of life is but the same ‘tragic play’ in which we are all actors interpreting a role that has been interpreted many times before by many others. Understanding this helps us to achieve a tragic ‘gaiety’ that transfigures dread” (Bell 2006, 131). Traditionally, this stanza is regarded as an expression of the freedom of man’s will to expression (Lentricchia 1968, 116), and Bell furthers this point by asserting that this tragedy “cannot grow better or worse; it simply, permanently *is*, and when civilisations fall, they are rebuilt so as to fall again” (Bell 2006, 131). In this conclusion lies the germ of beautiful destitution, although Bell does not put it directly, thus reducing the poem to a system-reiteration. The question as I see it is, what is the relation between the Shakespearean characters and men who are faced with the end of their world? Bloom would say that all is the same, for our principal knowledge of ourselves is derived from Shakespeare. But there is a difference. Hamlet, as the Bloomian “poem unlimited,” exists in an artifice that takes its strength, its tragic pertinence, from the natural man’s deathly destitution. Art not only *is* as civilisations rise in order to fall, but art reaches a crescendo of its imaginative power from the experience of worldly fall. “No handiwork of Callimachus” may stand, but it was joy to “handle marble as if it were bronze” and make “draperies that seemed to rise / When sea-wind swept the corner” (294, ll. 29–32) though their beauty turns out to be as transient as the world from which their maker arose. It is not only that “to make poems in the face of [tragedy] cannot defeat [it], but it can provide a momentary release” (Lentricchia 1968, 117), as the last two stanzas imply; what release there is in imagining the three Chinamen seated and staring “on all the tragic scene” (295, l. 52) lies in the fact that they are a construct of the imagination that derives from the earthly tragedy. Bell notices that “they are in art – literally – rather than in life. The women in the first stanza of the poem are ‘hysterical’ because (as the poem concedes, to its credit) they are in life, where real history is on the verge of working out ... one of its most horrific manifestations” (Bell 2006, 108). Within the realm of art, Bell maintains, the Chinamen can retain their stoic gaiety, but the poem’s imaginative strength lies in the fact that the horror of history fires fantastic creativity that produces lively beauty.⁵

⁵ Yeats explains that beauty “is indeed but bodily life in some ideal condition” (1994, 20).

Translating the argument into the terms of *A Vision*, the Mask as poetic artifice takes its strength from its radical opposition to what the Body of Fate brings the world to. "Lapis Lazuli" does not play out the system beyond the assertion of artistic beauty as a stance against the crack in reality in which the beauty is rooted. Death as ultimate destitution of both natural man and his world is no occasion for hysterical lament, but an opening of the sphere of art. The creative self, the Will of Phase 17, finds its destiny in fantasy that cannot stop the nightmare but seeks to fashion it into a poetic tragedy. The speaker of the poem is situated between the hysterical women and the Chinamen. This mid-position is adumbrated in the last stanza, where, speaking directly, he manifests his presence in the middle of the strophe. We behold the imaginary landscape of the sculpture before we discover that it is already a part of the phantasmagoria the poet "delights to imagine."

"The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli" are thus double-bound lyrics, for they exist in a dialectic of imaginative art and a literally reductive world peculiar to Yeats's later poetry. What the world takes away from the natural man creates a gap that the poet-in-man (Will seeking antithetical Mask) compensates for in imagination, thus creating a scene of fantastic tragedy in which poet-as-poet (the speaking persona) can revel. The body grown senile, the mind must find its vitality in the antithetical persona-as-artifice. But the poem, being a product of the persona, exists as a space of struggle between the reality principle of reductive death and the imaginary principle of "more life." As a result, the tragedy that spurs creativity in both poems derives from a clash of reality with fantasy, and no matter that the world is to burn, for poetry will take its firepower from the conflagration. This is as humanist a vision as honesty can allow.

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