

Phantasms as Signposts of the Invisible: Yeats's Mask Theory Revisited

Fantemas como sinalizadores do invisível: A teoria da máscara de Yeats revisitada

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Abstract: Yeats often stresses the vital importance of the “unique” image which helps a person to sieve “unmeaning circumstance” from one’s real passions. As the poet’s definition of this “life-long, secret image” surprisingly fits Agamben’s study of the phantasm this article explores how this psychological phenomenon functions in the poet’s writings. Starting from Lacan’s idea that the so-called individual is an interaction between the unconscious Other, the split or social self, others (persons and objects in one’s life) and the inner self this contribution analyses ten key poems in which the phantasm forms a bridging role between inner and outer worlds, between the visible and the invisible aspects of the body. A special form of phantasm is the body image in which Paul Schilder situates libidinal communications, which in turn are picked up in Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “the flesh”. As many poems are set in a schooling context, Yeats shows that secret personal conflicts can be simultaneously studied and sung.

Keywords: Yeats; Agamben; Merleau-Ponty; Paul Schilder; *Sailing to Byzantium*.

Resumo: Yeats frequentemente enfatiza a importância vital da imagem “única” que ajuda a pessoa a separar as “circunstâncias sem sentido” de suas verdadeiras paixões. Como a definição do poeta dessa “imagem secreta e vitalícia” surpreendentemente se encaixa no estudo de Agamben sobre o fantasma, este artigo explora como esse fenômeno psicológico funciona nos escritos do poeta. Partindo da ideia de Lacan de que o assim chamado indivíduo é uma interação entre o Outro inconsciente, o eu dividido ou social, os outros (pessoas e objetos na vida de uma pessoa) e o eu interior, esta contribuição analisa dez poemas-chave nos quais o fantasma forma uma ponte entre os mundos interior e exterior,

entre os aspectos visíveis e invisíveis do corpo. Uma forma especial de fantasma é a imagem do corpo na qual Paul Schilder situa as comunicações libidinais, que, por sua vez, são retomadas na ideia de “a carne” de Merleau-Ponty. Como muitos poemas são ambientados em um contexto escolar, Yeats mostra que conflitos pessoais secretos podem ser simultaneamente estudados e cantados.

Palavras-chave: Yeats; Agamben; Merleau-Ponty; Paul Schilder; Sailing to Byzantium.

Interactionality within the self: Other, other, social and inner self

Why is Yeats still so very popular with young people today? His verses pop up in the most diverse, unexpected places: his “Down by the Sally Gardens” appears in Ian McEwan’s *The Children Act* (2014), in 2023 the Brandies Band composed music to “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” and other poems in their “Yeats to Music album”,¹ and one of the most stunning zoos of Europe, Pairi Daiza, welcomes visitors with a mosaic at the entrance saying: “I have spread my dreams under your feet; / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams”. (“He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”, l.7-8). This article’s hypothesis is that the poet’s wide and lasting acclaim is due to his constant endeavour to let all work be rooted in the unconscious. Throughout his poems, plays and essays Yeats’ singers, protagonists and narrators display an adventurous mind as they explore the complexities of the self.

To map these complexities this paper starts out with Jacques Lacan’s scheme L which shows how social interactions are rooted in communications which happen on a deeper axis in the self. Analysing ten poems composed between the 1880’s till the late 1920’s will show how Yeats condemns superficial social imitation and instead looks out for phantasms, i.e. others (persons and objects) which seems to correspond with his deepest wishes and fears. As the poet explores the conflictual nature of his vital images Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “the flesh”, Paul Schilder’s concept of the “body image” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s view on the dis-playing image will help to give us better understanding of Yeats’s discipline of the mask.

In Lacan’s scheme L a person is represented as an interaction of vectors. The first one starts from the Other, the unconscious. As this (being both transgenerational and personal) transcends any individual’s comprehension the Other is written with capital. The social self is imbued with this energy but projects it onto “others”, usually familiars (family, peers, idols).

As the social self both receives unknown impulses and tries to control its position Lacan calls it a “barred” or split self: it never has complete control over its actions and interpretations. Moreover, the unconscious also has more direct channels to work on the self as it can send impulses directly via dreams, as indicated in the link between Other and “ego” or inner self, as indicated in the bottom axis.

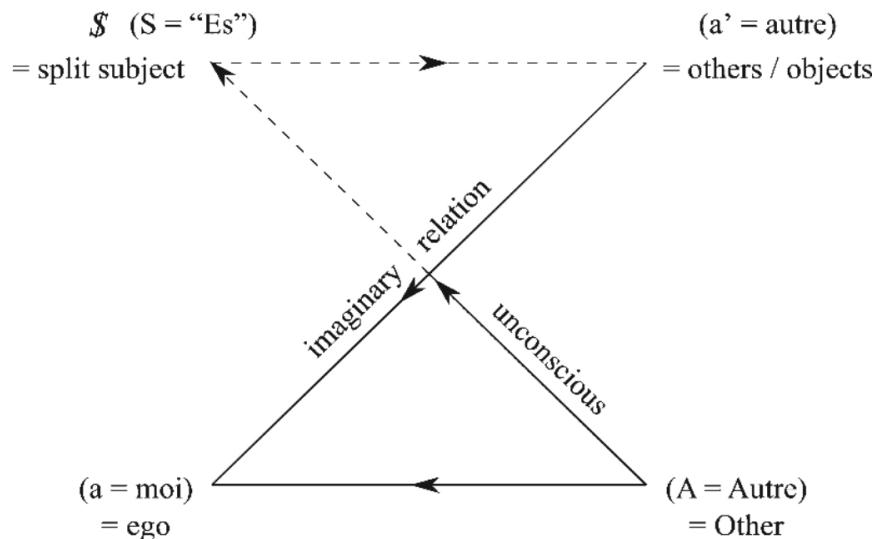


Fig. 3. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Schéma optique pour la théorie du narcissisme also called scheme L, in Séminaire II, 1954-1955 (my translations). © Drawing by Eliane Mahy (KU Leuven).

But precisely because a person is not “individual” but consisting of constant interactions between these four factors all (Freudian) psychoanalysts agree on one thing, that a person should try to articulate the energies that form their unique self. First and foremost they warn of an uncritical “sympathy with the other” in which the difference “between the ‘ego’ and the ‘other’ ... is totally scrambled” (Borch-Jacobsen 58). To be rooted in one’s real self a person must be open to the signals from the Other (arrows from and on the bottom axis). Because of this complexity and fluidity of relations Merleau-Ponty avoids the static formulation of an individual (mind) having a body. He prefers the more dynamic term “embodiment” which reflects the constant “interconnectedness of self, others, and the world”, the uniqueness of which is “vital” (Mazis ix). As this article will focus on Yeats’s perception of Presences and the use of (body) images it hopes to show how close the poet was to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy,

not one of “a yes-or-no phenomenon, but a more-or-less” (Mazis 53); both celebrate an “emphatically nonfoundational ontology” (Mazis xiii).

Throughout his life, Yeats would criticize people who, in their communication, forget about the Ego-Other of a personality, whether it is the kind of journalists who think in terms of mere ‘facts’ or other people who forget that the bottom axis of the personal’s circuits is the dominant one. He shows this in the early poem “The Indian Upon God” (1886) when he mocks creatures who model their image of the Other on the other and not the other way round. This makes for religions based on rivalry and hierarchy, in which the Other is a mere reflection of themselves. In this poem the moorfowl declares that God is “an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond the sky”; the lotus maintains that “Who made the world ... hangeth on a stalk, For I am in His image made”; the roebuck sees god as “*the Stamper of the Skies*”, while the peacock thinks his creator “is a monstrous peacock” (l.7,10-11, 14 19).

From his teens on, Yeats was immersed into types of painting and literature that were dense in symbols. Under the influence of his father who loved the Pre-Raphaelites he was taught to distrust “realism” and the circles of Madame Blavatsky and the Golden Dawn helped him to explore approaches to the unconscious. In the 1910s he further tried to systematize a “theory of the mask”, as in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and in *A Vision*. This paper will now trace, throughout ten poems and other texts by Yeats, how he managed the components of his poetic personality, the social and inner self, Other and others.

Phantasms in early Yeats: the 1880s-90s

Two Early Singers: the Happy Shepherd and Aengus

As Donald Winnicott indicated one of the first material anchor points of a child’s unconscious is their teddybear, or a blanket. He calls it a transitional objects. A baby is steeped in desire for and fear of loss of the first caregiver; and this object soothes the fears in times of the mother’s absence. Every child chooses a very specific object which becomes very intimate, and Winnicott points out that parents must not demand from the child to determine whether it is really animate or not: it is essential for the child that it can be both material and immaterial, belonging to both the outside and the inside world. Christopher Bollas notes that at a later stage the baby’s desire is moved “from the mother-environment ... into countless subjective-objects” (“Transformational Object” 2).

In “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” (1885) which opens Yeats’s first volume the singer encourages the “sick children of the world” to “Go gather by the humming sea / Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,/ And to its lips thy story tell” (l.35-36). It is interesting that the shell is twisted: it will not ‘reflect’ the speakers’ words but will be “Rewording [them] in melodious guile” (l.39). In his later work the reverberating shell will morph into winding stairs and echoing rocks, in ancestral houses and haunted towers. But another image that runs through Yeats’s entire oeuvre is that of the proud, elusive woman who helps the poet gather his favourite images:

Miss Maud Gonne ... apart from the fact that Carolus Duran and Bastien-Lepage were somehow involved, a man so young as I could not have differed from a woman so beautiful and so young.” She is a “Sybil”, “she seemed a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation ... Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window. (*Autobiographies* 123)

Bollas notices that the “transformational object”, “perhaps the most pervasive archaic object relation” (Transformational Object 10), changes for the adult into mental images which challenge and encourage. He calls these images “genera”, as they generate unexpectedly fertile perspectives. They often rise unbidden, but often when a person is in difficulties. At eighteen, when Yeats has to find a life for himself in turbulent times Maud Gonne, with her impressive stature, her “luminous complexion” and her “sybillic aspect” allowed the poet to make his interests in literature and painting converge. Bollas’ “genera” seem synonymous with what Georges Didi-Huberman’s calls phantasms. He observes how they combine a “visible” and a “visual” aspect, whereby the former is phenomenal (observed by the consciousness) while the latter belongs to the fantasmatic aspect of things (as noticed by the libido).² This again ties in with Giorgio Agamben’s study of the phantasm which he considers a “unit in the psychic system”, Plato calls them a ‘painting in the soul’ of a person’s “desire and pleasure”; Aristotle notes that phantasms are “drawings” made by life itself which almost literally draw a person on to realize his “passion”. (Agamben 75). Because they are coagulations of a person’s deepest impulses, phantasms “are individuated images and not abstract concepts” (Agamben 79).

It is interesting that Yeats, only two pages earlier in his *Autobiographies*, had observed that “We all have our simplifying image, our genius” and it puts a “hard burden ... upon us” (*Autobiographies* 121). He also mentions such secret image of the unique self in an early essay:

there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images, and that this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul, disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow of the world, into that far household where the undying gods await all whose souls have become simple as flame” (“The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” 95)

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” (1897) illustrates one of Yeats’s early experiments with such a phantasm. The first line, “I went out to the hazel wood” immediately calls up a search for wisdom, as the hazel tree in folklore is a tree of wisdom; the second line points out that Aengus, the Celtic god of love, is driven there “Because a fire was in my head” (l.2). This deep desire steers him to the stream where he “caught a little silver trout”: phantasms often start in a totally insignificant object. This turns into a rustling sound which becomes more and more urgent and specific in its appeal: “And some one called me by my name: // It had become a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair / Who called me by my name and ran / And faded through the brightening air” (l.8, 12-16) The rest of the poem is about how Aengus’s central image keeps varying: he broods over it his life long, which leads his soul through depressions and heights (“hollow lands and hilly lands”, l.18). Aengus cannot determine the image, it escapes him.

In Agamben’s study of the phantasm, which he sees as “one of its most fertile legacies for Western culture” he explains how Yeats’s much-admired Dante and his friend Guido Cavalcanti stated that

Love comes from a seen form ... which penetrates through the external and internal senses until it becomes a phantasm or intention in the phantastic and memorial cells”; they “conceived of love as an essentially phantasmatic process, involving both imagination and memory in an assiduous, tormented circling around an image painted or reflected in the deepest self” (Agamben 81).

Here Yeats manages to depict Aengus as a (pre)vision of his own life, tracing metamorphoses of a “glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair” which end in “the golden apples of the sun”. The poet’s fluid lyrics beautifully illustrate how outside phenomena (apple blossom, dappled grass) morph into libidinal objects (the glimmering flowing hair, golden apples) which “draw” the singer on in life. As in Bollas’ observations the poet’s phantasm is not chosen, it seems to choose the one affected. It is an appeal from the Other to the particular self, hence the repeated “called me by my name”. The phantasm is dynamic and ultimately out of reach: it called the singer “and ran”. It is no wonder that Agamben calls the phantasm “one of its most fertile legacies for Western culture”: it seems the type of image that corresponds to the phenomenon of desire which is always metonymical and reverberating: the fire in his head can develop thanks to Aengus’ meditation on certain luminous objects. It is significant that the Celtic god of love, unlike his Roman and Greek counterparts, never finds fulfilment. Instead, he notices that the image of his love, though rippling through the landscape (in dappled apple blossom), is never completely realized.³ In Yeats’s poem Aengus’ love life is an “essentially phantasmatic process” which reflects the poet’s own life, in which an actual person like Maud Gonne immediately becomes “an image painted or reflected in the deepest self”, causing him torment, but one that will fuel his poetic skills.

In this decade Yeats writes *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, his first essay on a possible “doctrine of the mask”. He starts by deplored his own behaviour, as he lets his social self overrule his inner self: “I have overstated everything from a desire to vex or startle, from hostility that is but fear; or all my natural thoughts have been drowned by an undisciplined sympathy” (*Per Amica Silentia* 325). Instead, he should “close the door”, “and the world must move my heart but to the heart’s discovery of itself” (*ibidem*). Disciplined sympathy seems to mean that the poet needs to get the four factors of his “self”, the others, Other, social and inner self in balance.⁴ This very exercise is the topic of his poem “The Mask”, which sums up the problems he had in writing *The Player Queen*, a play he struggled with throughout that decade.

“The Mask”: the charm of the gap

In 1910 Yeats writes the poem “The Mask”. In this dialogue poem it is interesting that the man is the one who uses a logic of either/or. When a “He” orders a “She” to “Put off that mask of burning gold” (l.1) she refuses, because he thinks he could find out whether she is motivated

by “Love or deceit” (l.7). She however believes that desire is stirred by conflict, when “hearts ... [are] wild *and wise,/And yet not cold*” (106 l.4-5, my emphasis).

As the “she” experiences life not in a dualistic but in an interactional way, this very short poem contains Yeats’s play *The Player Queen* in a nutshell. It is a play about Decima, an actress who, due to some misunderstandings and failed plottings of a Prime Minister becomes a country’s queen. The actress’ metamorphosis is due to two factors: that she recognized her phantasm from early childhood onward, and that she is a perfect improvisor, which allows her to make interior and exterior worlds converge easily. Decima, though “born in a ditch ... wrapped in a sheet that was stolen from a hedge” (*Collected Plays* 408) gets her stamina from an image she picked up from a play in which a mother, upon the birth of her baby, could not “help but braid/The gold upon my hair/And dream that I should carry/ The golden top of care” (*ibidem* 407-8). When in a surreal series of coincidences the actress is taken for the queen, Decima can realize her desire: she has been cultivating this golden image all her life and is now ready to enact the role of the queenly sovereign. The gap between the actresses’ poor origin and the queenly splendour of her royal role only helps her to remain alert and successful in her role.

The Dominus’ whispered wisdom

As Yeats finishes this play he also finishes a volume of essays on his theory of the mask, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which ends in a poem.⁵ “Ego Dominus Tuus” (1915), focusing on the “inner workings” in the self, is a dialogue poem like “The Mask”, but this time the “he”-position is taken by a “*hic*” (Latin for “here”), the she-position by “*ille*” (Latin for “over there”). *Hic*, whose perception aims at the here and now, projects his idea of completeness on his world. He believes an image in the outer world can simply reflect his whole self: “I would find myself and not an image”. *Ille* however knows that completeness is out of reach: life consists in exploring discrepancies. While *Hic* only thinks of the conscious axis *Ille*, like Aengus, remains “Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion”, the study of the Other. This is an exercise in difference: *Ille* seeks “all / That I have handled least, least looked upon”. Like Dante, whose worldview did not just encompass social politics but also the unconscious, he knows he must (like Aengus) go for “the apple on the bough/ Most out of reach”. *Hic* only takes into account the top layer of scheme L; he loves “Impulsive men that look for happiness” and “sing when they have found it” (l.40-41). He lives on the level of “The rhetorician [who] / Would deceive

his neighbours” or “The sentimentalist” who deceives himself (l.46-47). Hic being narcissistic merely sees the visible, which brings “happiness” or seeming fulfillment. Ille, maintaining that “art / Is but a vision of reality” (l.48) goes for the visual, perceived on the bottom axis between inner self and the energies of the Other. As this allows for a full engagement with Life the whole self is happening here, so we could call this “happenness”.⁶

The poem ends with a cryptic statement that this Other, the Dominus of the title, must only “whisper” his helpful revelations about Ille’s enigmatic images; this task of finding one’s own destiny must be kept private, away from the ‘momentary cries’ and the “blasphemous men” (l.79), who ridicule people like Ille as they do not take the unconscious into account. Yet Ille is not only vulnerable to the brutish forces who ignore the bottom axis of the self; he is also split by that Other, and knows himself to be a “split subject”: “men that in their writings are most wise”; only “Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts” (68-9).

An annoying other: Michael Robartes

“Michael Robartes and the Dancer” (1921) takes up the positions of “The Mask”, only this time a more imperative “*He*” than ever gets the lion’s share in the dialogue while “*She*” hardly gets a word in. The discussion starts with “*He*” (Robartes) explaining a painting to “*She*”.⁷ He uses it rhetorically as teaching material for his own interpretation, which is very reductive: he proclaims the dragon is conscious thought, and identifies with its killer, because he wants her to get in touch with the unconscious as represented by painters such as Paolo Veronese and Michelangelo. However, when Robartes specifies that the Dancer must embody his ideals to mirror them (otherwise “he will turn green with rage / At all that is not pictured there” (l/17-18)) his “vision” of art turns out to be his mere view on it, which is limited by his narcissism and its scopic nature.

In the second stanza Robartes moves from Neoplatonic painters to philosophers: he has “a Latin text” which proves “That blest souls are not composite” and that “all beautiful women may/ Live in uncomposite blessedness”. There is only one way to this simplicity: the only thoughts that women must follow up on are the ones that create lineaments in the body and the skin which “pleasure soul”. This sounds all noble and logical, in a Yeatsian interpretation of Neoplatonism whereby phenomenal and libidinal body interact, only the

male speaker seems to forget that the nature of phantasms may be theorized, but their actual experiencing is not a general but a singular, individual concern.

No wonder then that the Dancer does not agree. She is happy enough to go along playing Robartes' allegorical game, but she corrects him, pointing out that the knight's fight is not so much with the dragon but with the lady: "You mean they argued" (l.13) about the nature of thought. As she has a mind of her own she asks, "May I not put myself to college?" (l.19), "And must no beautiful woman be / Learned like a man?" (l.26-27).

As He does not deign to answer her question she playfully sticks to the allegorical language of Robartes' chosen altarpiece, mocking his rhetoric: "My wretched dragon is perplexed" (l.42). She may be perplexed about two things: first, if he wants her to fully engage in certain images to the point that she would embody them, she will have to look for them herself; and secondly, her perplexity may well relate to the fact that his theories about uncompositeness use very composite means, complicated images. She would have found great support in Paul Schilder's notion of the body image. This psychoanalyst, a contemporary of Yeats, focused on how thought and emotion together form mental images of the self which he called the "body image". This is far from uncomposite or everlasting:

The image of the body is constructed, and ... there is a continual testing to find out what parts fit the plan and fit the whole. The individual will try to get more and more impressions, because he wants to come to definite formations. The gestalt will be built up ... in distinct levels and layers (Schilder 286).

"Sailing to Byzantium": gathered by the Other

As the continuous form in the title of "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926-7) echoes the sustained effort of "Wandering Aengus" this shows that "there is a continual testing" of the body image, which will be inspired by different forms as time goes on. Here the lover of Byzantium is not any more interested in "birds in the trees", "The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas" (l.4) which appealed to younger figures like Aengus. Here, the poet's old phantasm of the blossoming boughs has moved to golden birds "set upon a golden bough to sing" (l.30). As Schilder remarks

The body image changes continually according to the life circumstances. ... An important part in this continuous process of construction, reconstruction, and dissolution of the body-image, is played by the processes of identification, appersonization, and projection (241)

This time it is a 62-year old Yeats who seeks images to inform his own unique “singing-school”. Like the Dancer who wants to find her own models, the singer is focused on having his soul “studying / Monuments of its own magnificence” (l.13-14). As Yeats was fascinated by the magi and other saints who glittered through Ravenna’s mosaics he experienced what Schilder describes when a phantasm “hits”, i.e. “when outer physiological images connect with inner psychological ones they feed into the body-image” (21). Bachelard too stresses that the singular significance of phantasmatic objects are to be taken seriously: “I am firmly convinced that if man lives his images and words sincerely, he receives from them a unique ontological benefit” (*Air and Dreams* 12). In this poem the poet articulates very precisely what a phantasm does to the self.

O sages standing in God’s holy fire⁸

As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. (l.17-24)

First of all we recognize Schilder’s identification: as the immaterial aspect (standing in God’s holy fire) pushes the material into the background (“As in the gold mosaic of a wall”) the “other”, this object in the outer world, turns out to be a channel for the Other, to the extent that the self is so happily overwhelmed by it that it almost forgets it is split. Bachelard asks, “how can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche?” (*Space* 1). Merleau-Ponty describes these felicitous moments as a mix of self and o/Other, material and emotional unity:

This concentration of the visibles ... this bursting forth of the mass of the body toward the things, which makes a vibration of my skin ... this magical relation, this pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance" (*Visible and Invisible* 146).

This lending of the body, which Schilder calls "appersonization", is realized as Yeats's singer wants to be "gathered", like that other Neoplatonist, Shelley, when he wants to be whirled up by the West wind (in turn like Ganymed who was taken to the Olympus). Like Shelley's plea with the West Wind to "Make me thy lyre" (l.57) the singer in Byzantium wants to join his singing masters in their work. It is in this moment of fictional fusion that the phantasm is at its strongest. While Bachelard notices how poetry for Shelley is a "synthesizing function of dynamic imagination, which sets the whole soul in motion" (*Air* 49) this chimes in with what Didier Anzieu sees happening in the phantasm: "it has a bridging role, it is an intermediating screen between the psyche and the body, the world and the other psyches".⁹

Yet of course, like with Aengus, completeness is not quite reached: the poet's heart is still "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is". "The body which seems so near to ourselves ... thus becomes a very uncertain possession" Schilder observes (297). This is where projection comes in: Yeats's acrobatic lyrics, the ottava rima, the enjambments and unexpected rhyming sounds can make "me" rhyme closely with "eternity", but the link between them is sheer, brilliant artifice.

"Ancestral Houses": creating phantasms

As the poet finds glowing phantasms in art (luminous leaves, the burning gold of the mask, the mosaic, the golden bough) he also considers the side of the creators : who contributes these heartening images to the treasures of human civilization? In the opening poem of the series "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1928) the speaker senses that strong images are always the result of a civil war in the self, a conflict which has been transcended in a new balance of extra elegance:

Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns,.../ Life overflows without ambitious pains;/ And rains down life until the basin spills,/ And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains/ As though to choose whatever shape it wills" (l.1, 3-6).

Yeats makes a point that neither powerful men nor poets ask others what they should do, but they watch what is suggested by the Other. So “Homer had not sung / Had he not found it certain beyond dreams/ That out of life’s own self-delight had sprung / The abounding glittering jet” (l.9-12). Here the Other is given a name: it is Life itself. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats describes Life as a formidable force; but while it is adored by poets, it is indifferent to them: “we confess to Life ... and Life answers, ‘I could never have thought of all that myself, I have so little time.’ And it is our praise that it goes upon its way with shining eyes forgetting us” (475).

Time and again Yeats stresses that Life is bigger than the ego, and, as Freud remarked, it is indifferent to the ego’s wellbeing.¹⁰ The poet observes a like attitude in the “men of action” he admires, as he shows in his elegy for Robert Gregory,¹¹ and this is reflected in the art works they want to have made. That these men of action and the artists in their service make the primordial energy of the Other interact with the social world of others can be gleaned from the chiastic constructions which staple the poem in its micro- and macrostructure. This is especially prominent in the central stanza:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known. (l.17-21)

So phantasms can be found but also provided. As Schilder puts it: “the whole body image of others can be taken in (identification) or our own body image can be pushed out as a whole” (240). Again Yeats’s central image, that of the fountain which makes itself overflow, corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s “thrill” which helps distinguishing between the happiness (of *Hic*) and the joy (of *Ille*):

“joy” is a bursting out of oneself called forth by the strength of happenings in the world; one is not just “happy” in the sense of a self-possessed contentment with the world. In ... this mood, it escapes from us without deliberate intention ... The perceiver who is made joyous by something in the world experiences a kind of happiness that overflows itself ... a being taken in within a thrall and a release from oneself (Mazis 38).

Again the dividing line runs between those who allow themselves to be steeped in “primordial perception” (Mazis 37), the bottom axis of the personality, and others.

The final two stanzas of these “Meditations” ponder over the possibility that the inheritors of great art works (sweet and gentle things, born from violent and bitter fights) who aim at mere social happiness and who ignore any sense of the Other may not pick up the enormous energy contained in “Ancestral Houses”. Jean-Luc Nancy is on Yeats’s wavelength when he warns the reader not to forget the nature of the phantasmatic image: “But the unity of the thing, of presence and of the subject is itself violent. ... it must irrupt, ... it must grasp itself, ...out of nothing, out of the absolute non-unity that first is given” (Nancy 23).

“Among School Children”: an element of trauma

In “Among School Children” (1926) the poet, “sixty-year-old”, returns to school, but this time in a “public” capacity: he comes to inspect it. Yet immediately after taking note that “The children learn to cipher and to sing” and to “be neat in everything” (l. 8,3,5) the inspector turns to inspect himself. The neatness of contours (like the “nun in a white hood”) blur into libidinal bodies: “I dream of a Ledaean body” (l.9). Instead of controlling other people’s results, he investigates his own cognitive processes.

Here three features stand out. First of all, the phantasm seems to accommodate trauma time, Freud’s deferred action: the “Ledaean body” immediately splits into “a tale” of “tragedy”, recalling a past in which the poet’s self and another “blent”. Second, as a present event triggers a past image the phantasm of young Maud Gonne has a strong tactile aspect. The poet sees a child and wonders “if she stood so at that age— / And thereupon my heart is driven wild:/ She stands before me as a living child” (l. 19, 23-24). The child’s body image recalls a precise “desire and libidinous tendency” from the past (Schilder 201). The woman since ever associated with painterly dignity is not only imagined to be fashioned by Michelangelo or other “Quattrocento fingers”, but the image also touches on “the libidinous half of the body-image as well as its sensual part” (Schilder 288). Thirdly the “inspector” looks at how phantasms work on women. As in *Ego Dominus tuus* the primordial powers of the Other are worthy of a capital: they have become “Presences”. On the one hand these phantasms are worshipped (“Both nuns and mothers worship images”), on the other “they too break hearts”. While they dynamize the deepest impulses like “passion, piety or affection”, promising sublimation (“that all heavenly glory symbolize”), they are simultaneously “self-born mockers of man’s enterprise” (l.53-55).

In this “fission”, the Presences recall the challenging images of Ille. He therein reflects the distinction Jean-Luc Nancy makes between open and closed images. Open images “think in their own way”: they go beyond the social self’s narcissistic projections; instead of yielding the expected effect “open” images disturb complacency. (Nancy 30) If a picture is “thought of as a closed presence, one completed” it is only reflecting “the stupidness of the idol” (Nancy 31).

In the poem’s famous final stanza the poet celebrates the balance and containment the complex human being can reach. “Labour is blossoming or dancing where /The body is not bruised to pleasure soul”: when the poet’s work touches upon the Other, Life itself, this brings joy, “happeness”, as it is the unique self that is happening here, like the fountain springing from some unseen source. If a person realizes their whole self and comes into full being as a “great rooted blossomer”, all parts combine. Yeats specifies that motional and emotional aspects mix: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (l.63-64). Real body and body image combine, “Every striving and desire changes the substance of the body, its gravity, and its mass...and the shape of the body” (Schilder 201). It is in this line that Yeats most beautifully illustrates what Merleau-Ponty calls “the polymorphousness of the flesh”, and he explains: “the flesh ... is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body”: “The flesh is ... a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself” (146).

“Before the World Was Made”: dis-playing libidinal lines

While the She in “The Mask” bluntly told the He that he should not enquire whether she was motivated by “Love or deceit”, the speaker in the second poem of the sequence “A Woman Young and Old” (1928) is more willing to introduce the He to the epistemology of her boudoir. When the lady applies make-up “No vanity’s displayed:/ I’m looking for the face I had / Before the world was made.” (l. 7-8) This “face” refers again to the Neoplatonic belief that the Holy Spirit was a feminine divinity.¹² However, this female speaker does not aim at any ontology, all she does is exercise the different components of her being. This brings interesting nuances into the practice of the body image. First of all, this speaker actively experiments with her body image, and while the male poet merely used his imagination to identify with the sages in Byzantium via “autoplastic” changes in the body-image this lady also uses “alloplastic methods, masks, and clothes” (Schilder 205). She is as playful as the psychoanalyst who remarks that “We like to have our body in a hundred sizes and a thousand variations” (Schilder

204). She explores the emotional effect of each change, knowing that “the primary visibility ... does not come without a second visibility, that of the lines of force and dimensions” (Merleau-Ponty 148).

In the second stanza the dimension of the other is introduced: changing the body image with alloplastic means is one thing, but one’s gaze has a more unsettling effect. Yet she tries it all:

What if I look upon a man
As though on my beloved ...
I’d have him love the thing that was
Before the world was made. (l. 9-10, 15-16)

While this lady does not literally wear a mask as in the earlier poem she stresses the opaqueness of the self. This opacity is sincere, not just to sabotage the narcissistic lover’s projections, but to draw attention to the unconscious layers of the self. Stressing that she is but an image to her lover, which Nancy defines as “the display of presence”; she does not hide; on the contrary, “in the dis-play the image shows that the thing is and how it is” (Nancy 21).

Final Thoughts

Rereading some of Yeats’s key poems in this overview of his work has shown “the permanent importance of the individual phantasm” and its “bridging role” as “an intermediating screen between the psyche and the body, the world and the other psyches”. It made us agree with Merleau-Ponty that we “have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 151). That Yeats tried to weave his unconscious impulses in his conscious life to come to some form of “Unity of Being” was an exploration that revealed many aspects. The Aengus figure highlighted how a simple object can become a phantasm. Like the unconscious, it is paradoxical: belonging to the outside world, yet kindling inside desires; non-intended yet chosen; recognizing the self in the Other, to the extent that the poet wants to be gathered by that Other. Some poems focused on the creation of phantasms, showing they were always inspired by Life, by Presences, which kept the self alive with conflict, as in *The Mask* and later poems. Ille observed that his unconscious self should not be shared with others: one’s deepest secret is sacred ground for self-research. Yet the other is important too, as Michael Robartes indicated, though he forgot that “the

body image is always only partially communicated”, and that it is unique and opaque. Unlike Robartes Schilder respects the secret: “I acknowledge ... the deep-lying factor of the partial community of the body-image” (Schilder 247). Yet Yeats is keen to explore these libidinal communications, so many of the poems find the singer in a “schooling” context. This remains true till his last poem, where the poet acknowledges strong conflict “Before he can accomplish fate” (“Under Ben Bulben” (1938), l.35).

Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DihqvTevvGQ>
- 2 “Une telle opposition (between the visible and the visual)... n’appelle donc pas un édifice de concepts: elle répond plutôt à la structure d’un fantasme” (Didi-Huberman 119).
- 3 As Denis de Rougemont explains in *L’Amour en occident* it is the Celtic tradition of the “white woman”, the ever-elusive concept of the perfect spiritual companion of the Celtic monk, that gave rise to the idea of courtly love, the desire for the unattainable lady, which has become an important strand in European emotionology.
- 4 As Yeats lives between cultures (London and Sligo, Protestant and Catholic, Romantic and Expressionistic, politics and the unconscious, theatre and poetry) in a country that must invent some form of “home rule” for itself he does not have a firm framework that helps him to make choices so he has all the more reason to get in touch with his deepest self, the Other.
- 5 In Yeats critical and creative work (poetry and drama) have always converged. As he observed in 1908, in each of his texts “It is myself that I remake”.
- 6 When Ille says “I seek an image, not a book” (l.67) he means he is not looking for a theory or some general truth but for a singular sensual impulse that will resound with his deeper self. Yeats does not use the term Other but anti-self. He is ambiguous in its definition: on the one hand the anti-self “look[s] most like me, being indeed my double” (l.72), on the other hand that Other is “most unlike” me (l.74). In other words the “anti-” seems to indicate a symmetry, but declaring itself as “Ego Dominus Tuus” (later “Lord of Terrible Aspect”) the Other does seem to be in a hierarchically higher position.
- 7 As He specifies that it is an altar-piece we know it is St George who slays a dragon. In most pictures with this theme there is also a lady in the picture, who is the captive of the

dragon. However, the most famous picture in this tradition is Paolo Uccello's depiction of the scene which has been puzzling critics for over 6 centuries about the position of the lady, who seems to see the dragon not as her guard but her pet, or a friendly companion. While traditionally the dragon, belonging to a cave in dark earth, as the unconscious, Robartes does the opposite, seeing it as the representation of opinion.

- 8 In his study about images JL Nancy observes that the French expression sage comme une image, literally “wise as an image” (10), indicates that powerful images always come from the Other. This is certainly the case here, both in form and content.
- 9 “l’importance permanente du fantasme individuel conscient, préconscient et son rôle de pont et d’écran intermédiaire entre la psyche et le corps, le monde, les autres psychés.” (Anzieu 26).
- 10 Freud sees the unconscious or the “primary system” as “an indifferent psychical energy which only becomes libido through the act of cathecting an object” (On Narcissism 78). Yeats often refers to the way in which “Dante and Villon ... seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens, being at the same instant predestinate and free, creation’s very self. We gaze at such men in awe” (Autobiographies 273). The fact that these masters are ready to realize their full self, Other included, to prefer happenness to happiness, is awe-inspiring.
- 11 “Those that I fight I do not hate, Those that I guard I do not love; (l.3-4) Nor law, nor duty bade me fight, Nor public men, nor cheering crowds, A lonely impulse of delight Drove to this tumult in the clouds” (“An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” l.9-12).
- 12 There was a strand in mediaeval Celtic monasticism where “white women” accompanied monks in Platonic love relationships.

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