

**THE FALCON AND THE FALCONER:
PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF BIRD SYMBOLISM
IN THE POETRY OF WB YEATS.**

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for the degree

Master of Arts in
Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

at Canterbury Christchurch University

in

Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom

October, 2015

There are myriad birds scattered throughout William Butler Yeats's plays and poetry. In the lyric poems alone there are over 90 references to birds of one type or another, ranging from familiar native wildfowl—jackdaws, ravens, doves, sparrows, moorhens—to the famous golden bird of Byzantium that was “Planted on the star-lit golden bough” to “scorn aloud / In glory of changeless metal”. Bird images are particularly prevalent in the period between ‘Responsibilities’ (Yeats 2000, p.163)¹ and ‘The Tower’ (1928, p.81), but they are found in abundance everywhere in his work, from the peacocks in the ‘Indian’ poems of ‘Crossways’ (1889, p.3), right through to the cocks “set crowing” by the “words of sages” in his final published poem ‘Under Ben Bullen’ (1939, p.301)

There has been a good deal of scholarly attention paid to the golden bird, and the famous swans that are particularly associated with Yeats's verse,² but less has been written about many of his other symbolic birds, and I have not found any broad survey of the place of birds as a whole in his symbolic system. This is a shortfall I seek to make up in this dissertation. I ask why birds appeared to him as such promising symbolic material: Yeats tended to draw from a relatively small stock of primary symbols which he used over and over again, and these symbols—rose, stone, tower, bird, mask, tree—consequently came to carry an enormous and evolving weight of meaning within his work. What was it about birds, and bird imagery, which appealed to him enough for them to be given a central place among these other prominent symbols? And how did he make use of bird symbolism to illuminate the personal and universal issues that concerned him?

Because of the breadth of the subject I have chosen to take a fairly wide-ranging approach, with a focus on identifying broad themes and connections within the material. In the first section I begin by briefly reviewing the development of Yeats's general approach to symbolism before going on to look at how birds fit into the symbolic sys-

¹ All of Yeats's poems quoted in this dissertation come from this volume. In future I will reference both collections, and individual poems, by page number, prefixed by the original date of publication of the collection in question, viz. *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), *In the Seven Woods* (1904), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *Responsibilities* (1914), *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1933), *Last Poems* (1939).

² For examples of the range of scholarship that has been applied to these two aspects of Yeats's symbolism, see Herbert Levine (1981), Lyndon Shanley (1958), Rachel Billigheimer (1986), L.R. Lind (1953), Henry Merritt (1998), Thomas Dume (1952), Diana Ben-Merre (1979), Helen Sword (1992), and WC Barnwell (1977).

tem he evolved; in the second section I elucidate some of these themes in more detail through analysis of specific poems.

BACKGROUND TO YEATS'S SYMBOLISM

“You cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.” (Yeats 1910, p.255)

Yeats began his literary career as the symbolist movement in Paris was reaching its apogee. In the 1890's he moved in artistic circles in London where the French symbolists were influential, and explored their works with friends such as Oscar Wilde, George Russell, Arthur Symons¹ and William Sharpe. It is to be expected that a young artist might experiment with, and absorb, what was perhaps the most radical literary movement of the time. However Yeats's interest and commitment was very deep. He never abandoned the symbolist approach, remaining committed long after many of his contemporaries had moved on, and continued with it right up until his death in 1939. As the Nineteenth Century gave way to the war and industrial clamour of the early twentieth, and symbolism as a major movement in art gave way to surrealism, dada, and modernism, Yeats's was one of only a handful of writers of his calibre who continued to work in a wholeheartedly symbolist vein.

Given Yeats's level of commitment to symbolism as an artistic method, there must have been something in this approach which dovetailed extremely closely with his artistic, philosophical and personal motivations for writing. What was it about the symbols, and symbolism, which so appealed to him, and allowed for the level of poetic expression which he achieved? In answering this it's necessary first to make a clear distinction between symbolism as a literary technique, and the overtly esoteric and religious symbols which he sought to explore in his work. The similarity of the words makes it easy to conflate 'symbolist' with 'symbolism' in a more general sense, but the overlap is not exact by any means.

¹ Symons wrote 'The Symbolist Movement in Literature', first published in 1908, which was the most influential book on the subject available at the time, and was dedicated to Yeats. The dedication begins: "May I dedicate to you this book on the Symbolist movement in literature, both as an expression of a deep personal friendship and because you, more than any one else, will sympathise with what I say in it, being yourself the chief representative of that movement in our country?"

Yeats's symbolism always had a very different quality to that of, say, Stéphane Mallarmé who was one of his most important influences from the French school¹. Mallarmé was less concerned with traditional imagery and esotericism than was Yeats. Simply put, he believed that only material things are real, but that at the same time they are essentially empty and meaningless. However immaterial things, which are 'not real', are nevertheless where true 'glory' and 'divinity' resides. He saw religion as "a marvel of human invention" (Mallarmé et al 2008, p.xviii) and, in time, "[pushed] his agnosticism to its most adventurous extreme, an unshakeable faith in literature". Mallarmé attempted to express the refined yet unreal 'divinity' he experienced in art through his poetry. As E.H and A.M Blackmore note (2009):

Part of the strength [of his poetry] lies in the things it avoids saying. It 'shrouds itself in mystery'; many of its details are dimly lit and uncertain, and a few of them simply cannot be understood without more information than Mallarmé [supplies]. Yet, by appearing to say less it actually says more. The [poems] may be less clear-cut and less easily comprehensible than [a prose] letter's 'empty forms of matter', yet their resonances go deeper, their perspectives extend further.

Using these techniques to invoke at least a *feeling* of depth and resonance beyond the surface of the poem was the basis of the symbolist style and it was this which attracted Yeats. However he added a much more rich traditional and esoteric symbolic language which gives quite a different flavour and effect, and was done with somewhat different intentions. For Yeats, the symbolist approach to writing enabled him to reveal greater depths and resonance in the traditional, esoteric symbolic material which so fascinated him. So when we talk of Yeats as a symbolist, or as writing symbolically, we need to keep in mind that by this we mean that he was often applying contemporary symbolist *techniques* to much more traditional symbolic material, thereby bringing a new subtlety and depth of expression to both.

Yeats was attracted to develop his symbolic language due to a complex mixture of personal and artistic preoccupations. On the personal side, Ellmann (1978, p.56) suggests that part of the appeal of the symbol was to do with Yeats's relationship with a strong father who was himself an artist, but who had a much more materialistic and rational outlook on life than Yeats himself:

¹ In 'Autobiographies' (2010, p.247) Yeats writes "I think that those [translations] from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the latter poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to *The Shadowy Waters*..."

Yeats's frequent failure in arguments with his father had something to do with the cultivation of his image making facility. He soon found that a picture, unlike a logical proposition, cannot be refuted.

This would in itself have been a powerful incentive for a young man struggling with difficulty to assert his evolving world views. In fact, Yeats struggled more generally with poor self-esteem and low self-confidence as a young man, which Ellmann identifies as another possible factor in his attraction to working with symbols (1978, p.56):

A second factor lay in his dissatisfaction with himself and his consciousness of his own imperfections; by symbols, especially traditional symbols, he could make his work less personal and identifiable.¹

Writing of his dramatic poem 'The Wanderings of Oisín' (1889, p.307), completed when he was 23, Yeats stated that:

In the second part of "Oisín" under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which only I have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did it would spoil the art, yet the whole poem is full of symbols—if it be full of ought but clouds.

Perhaps, as Ellman (1978, p.53) suggests, "the first fascination of symbolism was that it did not altogether disclose the secrets upon which its use depended". However, powerful these factors may have initially been in influencing Yeats in the direction he took, they were never the whole story by any means; as his work developed, they became a much more marginal part of what drove him to express himself in a symbolic mode (Ellmann 1978, pp.56-57):

... if Yeats adopted symbolism in part to compensate for psychological weakness, he was certainly conscious that its value transcended compensation. As he grew into maturity he wanted not merely to protect the inviolability of his own mind, but to ferret out more and deeper secrets which were withheld from logicians and literalists.... he sought out those who said they could manipulate external nature by magic as the poet manipulated it by symbols. ... He rightly perceived that the question of symbolism went beyond poetry and aesthetic theory, and knew that to use the magic wand he must master all its charms.

¹ This initially insecure concern with disguise and secrecy was an important factor in the later development of Yeats's powerful imagery and theory of the 'mask'. For some discussion of this see Ellmann (1978) chapters v-ix.

YEATS AND THE MAGICAL WORLD VIEW

Yeats was unusual in that he was a critically acclaimed modernist writer whose work was heavily influenced by a living understanding of magical and occult thought and practice. He had an extensive knowledge of the Western esoteric traditions, and was actively involved in them in their modern incarnations. He became involved in the theosophical society in 1885 aged twenty; five years later, having been expelled from the esoteric section of the society for unauthorised experiments intended to prove or disprove the claims of the matriarch Madame Blavatsky, he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Throughout his life he experimented with magic and seances, and the automatic writing which he encouraged his wife, Georgie Hyde, to undertake shortly after their marriage in 1917, became the basis for his *magnum opus* of esoteric symbolism 'A Vision' (2015). Peter Childs (2000, p.195) suggest that:

Yeats's symbolism can initially be thought of in terms of the work of the Swiss psychiatrist C.G.Jung, who elaborated a theory of archetypal symbols which exist in the 'collective unconscious' and are common to all cultures, and Claude Levi Strauss, who claimed that an analysis of the structure of symbolism revealed universal principles of thought and exposed the human need to classify the world. Symbols not only act as signs which denote certain values and meanings, they also carry with them connotations of other meanings. In this way, all symbolism involves ambiguity and potential disagreement over meaning.

While there is little evidence to suggest that Yeats was directly influenced by Jung, there are certainly striking parallels between the two men's world views. In 'Per Amica Silentea Lunae' (1918, p.55) he writes :

Before the mind's eye, whether in sleep or waking, came images that one was to discover presently in some book one had never read, and after looking in vain for explanation to the current theory of forgotten personal memory I came to believe in a great memory passing on from generation to generation.

This statement could almost have come straight from Jung, and bears close comparison to Jung's story of the development of his theory of archetypes in 'Memories, Dreams, Reflections' (1995, p.38). Furthermore Alana White (1972) points out that, for Yeats, "the Great Memory is the mother of the muses and symbols provide the means to that memory". Yeats asked (1910, p.49):

Have not poetry and music arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers by? ... I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half consciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artists... Whatever the passions of men have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils.”

Here we see a belief in symbols and their potency which goes far beyond the comfortable ideas of the literary establishment. In Yeats’s universe “every symbol is an invocation which produces its equivalent expression in all worlds” (Yeats 2010, p.356). Seen from this perspective, writing a poem becomes an act of magic—not just reflecting reality, but influencing it. “Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not ‘the eye altering alter all?’” (Yeats 1910, p.246).

YEATS’S SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE IN PRACTICE

Although there is much in Yeats’s work that has its origins in his personal experiences, his focus was always on the mystery at the heart of life beyond the personal. Yeats aimed in his art to transcend the limited view of the self or ego—to write poems “as cold / And passionate as the dawn” (from *The Fisherman*: 1919, p.123). In ‘Ideas of Good and Evil’ (1910, p.254) he wrote:

...we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window.

“All that is personal soon rots”, he wrote: “talk to me of originality and I will turn on you in a rage” (2001, p.387).¹ He may have been initially influenced in this direction by the French symbolists, and particularly Mallarmé, in whose poems “the concept of the *Idea* [my italics] has a recurrent and strong structural function.... In particular it gives legitimacy to the declared aim of truth-seeking, supporting the concept of the impersonal poet by rejecting the primacy of the personal in Romantic poetry” (E.H. & A.M. Blackmore in Mallarmé et al 2008, p.xii). However over time Yeats developed

¹ From ‘A General Introduction for my Work’, written for a planned edition of Yeats’s works which never reached publication.

his own approaches to achieving the abnegation of the personal self in his art. Primary among these was his theory of the mask, which grew from, and united, both his artistic and occult concerns. The basic idea is well expressed in his poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' (1919, p.134):

ILLE: By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon.

HIC: And I would find myself and not an image.

ILLE: That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

However, Yeats's idea of the Mask went considerably deeper than this, as Susan Graf (2000, p.117) explains:

“finding a mask requires imagining ourselves as ‘different from what we are’ and trying ‘to assume that second self’. The end of such practice is not multiple-personality disorder, but rather the realisation that all personality is nothing more than a veneer of a deeper, truer self—in Yeats’s words, the anti-self. Wearing a mask is an exercise calculated to expose personality as a temporal, artificial construct, a means of abolishing the ego and finding the anti-self ... “a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads, and of that only.”¹

Wearing such a mask we still have access to personal memory, but it becomes transformed—the personality and ego is stripped out. It may then stand on a more equal footing with the ‘Great Memory’, and both may enrich each other. In a passage from his *Autobiographies* (2010, p.210), Yeats makes clear his intentions about this in his story of a young girl who:

¹ In practice this search for a mask involved Yeats seeking an objective self to counter-balance his subjective nature (White, 1972).

... heard 'the music of Heaven' from a tree, and on listening with her ear against the trunk, found that it was made by the 'continual clashing of swords'. Whence came that fine thought ... ? I had as yet no clear answer, but knew myself face to face with the Anima Mundi as described by Platonic philosophers ... *which has a memory independent of embodied individual memories, though they constantly enrich it with their images and their thoughts* [my italics].

Another way in which Yeats strove to make his work less personal was through differentiating between what he called 'emotional' and 'intellectual' symbols (Yeats 1910, pp.251-2):

If I say 'white' or 'purple' in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I say them in the same mood, in the same breath with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovereignty; while innumerable other meanings, which are held to one another by the bondage of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy violence. It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession.... So, too, if one is moved by Shakespeare, who is content with emotional symbols that he may come the nearer to our sympathy, one is mixed with the whole spectacle of the world; while if one is moved by Dante, or by the myth of Demeter, one is mixed into the shadow of God or of a Goddess.

In the same way as the mask allows personal material to transcend itself without losing all contact with everyday reality, the intellectual symbol mixed with the emotional can take us beyond the mundane world while still maintaining our connection to it. While he had a great yearning for what is beyond time, Yeats always knew that he loved the world too much to leave it altogether. This love, to the extent that it is not personal and excluded by the mask, shines in his work, and keeps it grounded. It's clear, however, that it didn't come without a cost. In 'The Choice' (1933, p.209) he wrote that:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
When all that story's finished, what's the news?
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
That old perplexity an empty purse,
Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

The combination of the techniques and attitudes outlined above allowed the development of a poetic that is both ascendant and rooted in the earth, and this is one of Yeats's most important achievements. It makes reading his work a very different experience to that of many other visionary poets,¹ who may lose the *feeling* of connection to earthly matters during their ascent, even when the stated intention is otherwise: or alternatively may find that their attachment to personal experience keeps them from ever truly leaving the earth to gain a higher perspective, even when they aspire to it.

ANCIENT SYMBOLS

Yeats drew heavily on ancient symbols in his poems. As has already been mentioned he believed that these serve as a direct link to the Great Memory. However they also came with an added benefit for his purposes, which is to do with the multiple meanings they may evoke in the reader. This ambiguity can be used to prevent the sense of a text from becoming too tightly defined, thus allowing the mind to create greater depth of meaning than could be captured by less multi-dimensional images. This line of thinking was well developed as early as 1903, as is clear from this passage from the essay 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' (Yeats et al 2007, p.66):

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature.

John Unterecker states that a symbol is "an image whose meaning is so complex or ambiguous or elusive that any meaning assigned can only be partial, incomplete. It refers to something which cannot be fully reduced to words" (Unterecker 1969, p.35). He goes on to point out that such symbols do not give meaning, but instead the *feeling* of meaning—an undefined sense of rightness, of congruence at the heart of

¹ William Blake is a good example.

things. For that reason a symbol can have almost any meaning the audience wishes to give it, but all these meanings are partial and incomplete—in a sense it contains *all* meaning; Kathleen Raine suggests that “to sort out [the symbol’s] qualities ... in logical terms would be to lose its essence, which is imaginative and mysterious” (Raine 1968, p.202).

The French symbolist poets who influenced Yeats also played with ambiguity in their work—and for broadly similar reasons as Yeats did—but they relied much more on literary technique to gain the effect. Consider a passage from Mallarmé’s poem *Brise Marine* (Mallarmé et al 2008, p.24):

Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu’un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots . . .
Mais, ô mon coeur, entend le chant des matelots!

Here we are left wondering, without sufficient information to come to a definitive conclusion: why would the sailors be singing in such a situation?—and what mood lies behind their song? The doubt creates space for the imagination to enter, resulting in a much richer experience than if the details were explained to us. Yeats certainly uses these kinds of devices, but has less *need* to do so, because within his more formal and traditional symbols there is already a lair of ambiguity ‘built in’ through long and multiple usage and ownership. The symbol *itself* creates space for the imagination to enter.

A LATE-FLOWERING OF GENIUS

Yeats is a relatively unusual example of a Lyric poet who grew into his full power late in life, and who wrote much of his most important work in old age. He always displayed a remarkably single-minded pursuit of his intention to become a great poet. It’s worth noting that although the intentions behind his work were, at least roughly, mapped out fairly early on, the reality did not begin to match the ambition until later. Ellman (1978, p.165) writes that:

The world which Yeats builds up in the ’nineties is ... not really an independent world at all, but a skilful evasion, neither here nor there. His professed object was ... to evoke an unseen reality, and symbols were the only way to do it. But in practice Yeats used the symbols primarily to hide this world rather than reveal another one ... Symbolism, instead of providing a means for balance and reconciliation, furnished an elaborate robe to cover a wretched young man.

In the early poems—particularly the dramatic verse such as ‘Baile and Aillinn’ and ‘The Wanderings of Oisín’ (p.307)—Yeats was unable to entirely escape the influence of the Aesthetic movement (personified by Oscar Wilde) and from his affection for the Pre-Raphaelites, and a latent romanticism undermines the impersonality he was looking for. Ellmann gives a fairly damning critique of Yeats’s symbolism during this early period, which is probably justified (Ellmann 1978, p.166):

Instead of manipulating his symbols, he drowned in them. The result is that they are imperfect symbols. Yeats’s ‘shadowy horses’ and ‘majestical multitude’ are elaborate metaphors which suggest a symbolical meaning that they do not sustain. They are pegs to hang moods on, but other pegs would do just as well.

This is a criticism which could be levelled at the work of many of the French symbolists as well. It is possible to evoke a powerful effect through symbols (or ‘pseudo-symbols’) which *feels* superficially impressive but doesn’t connect with a deeper reality. The reader is left with a feeling of disappointment, as if being presented with a beautifully wrapped parcel which turns out, on closer inspection, to be empty. Over time, however, as Yeats brought his evolving theories into his work, together with the substantiality of his esoteric and political activities, and his growing stature as a public figure, he managed to create and deploy symbols of real power that offered a genuine possibility of both revelation and relevance. Ellmann (1978, pp.242-3), suggests that:

The tower [at Ballylee] and many of its furnishings took on deep significance ... while outside in the garden flowered’ the symbolic rose’ ... What was always far off and remote [now grew] on his property. Those other vague, unpossessed emblems of his youth, such as ‘the wind among the reeds’, which represented the spirit breathing upon mankind, had entirely given way before the solidity and private ownership of tower and stair. This is not the symbolism of an exile or pariah, but of a man of means and position.

For Yeats, symbols were anything but a literary conceit: they became a living and integral part of himself and his world. I now move on to examine how the factors discussed above play out specifically in the symbolism around birds in Yeats’s work.

BIRDS AND OTHER KEY SYMBOLS

Having made a brief survey of Yeats’s general approach to symbolism, we must now be more specific and look at the symbols themselves. There are certain key symbols which appear again and again throughout the poems. These central images are per-

haps surprisingly few in number. Unterecker (1969, p.36) identifies: tree, bird, tower, sea, house, well, mask and rose. To these I would add stone, sky, moon/night and the gyre, or spiral, and also note that, as well as the sea, water in all forms is symbolic to Yeats

Of these symbols, the rose appears predominantly in Yeats's early work and then fades out to be replaced by the mask; sea images become less frequent as time progresses; house and well appear intermittently; towers begin to appear in earnest when Yeats moves into his actual tower at Ballylee in 1917, and from there they continue undiminished to the end. The gyre becomes particularly important after its development in 'A Vision' in 1925, and bird and tree persist right the way through his work. On the face of it, such a small range of key symbols might seem a limitation; in a lesser poet it could be taken as a sign of lack of imagination or limited vision. However for Yeats this limitation served an important purpose: it enabled the symbols to become cumulative. As they were used again and again throughout his work they gained more and more depth and nuance of meaning. We will uncover many examples of this as we start to look at the poems in more detail.

Birds are probably the most common symbol in the poems, and certainly the most consistent of the primary symbols mentioned above. They appear in almost bewildering variety, and clearly had a great appeal for Yeats, but it's not easy to pin down exactly why this should have been so. Part of the reason was surely personal: much of Yeats's life was spent in the countryside around Sligo where there are great numbers of birds which can't help but grab the attention of anyone sensitive to nature, particularly water birds—geese, swans and moorhens, which appear around and over the loughs and fields, with a frequency reflected in the poems. Levine (1981, p.411) notes that:

Visitors to Sligo or Galway are often surprised by the sight of dozens of wild swans drifting along the quay towards evening. From the time of his boyhood, Yeats must have had familiar intercourse with these denizens of lake, bay and stream

There's something somehow fitting about the birds' presence in this imposing, and often lonely, landscape which can't have escaped his notice. It seems probable that, notwithstanding any symbolic significance they may have had for him, Yeats the nature lover simply liked and enjoyed birds, and that the romantic in him must have appreciated the mixture of company and pathos which they brought to the landscape he loved. Also, and still at the personal level, birds are obviously associated with ascent, and with the ability to rise above the earth that humans are bound to. This must

have resonated with that side of Yeats's character which—in opposition to the public and political side of his character—was forever probing into the mysteries of life above and beyond the bounds of what is known and respectable. There was a pronounced side to Yeats—the insecure, subjective young man whom he tried to counterbalance with the cold and rational mask—which could be described as fitting Carl Jung's *Puer* archetype, for whom the winged boy Icarus is such a fitting symbol. The flutter of wings was, we may suspect, never too far from this part of Yeats's character, which may well have been his most authentic self.

Beyond these more personal reasons, there are sound symbolic and poetic ones why the bird was so useful. Unterecker points out (1969, p.127) that:

They suggest ... a whole host of felt values: speed, lightness, freedom, flight, quickness of intellect; they link to artist—since their language is song, to the afterlife—since the medium which they inhabit is thin air; they fly against symbolic sun and moon, nest in the symbolic tree, and hatch symbolic eggs.

Birds come with a great deal of myth and traditional meaning already attached, thus meeting Yeats's need for symbols with enough 'depth' to generate creative ambiguity. Unterecker, above, gives a couple of examples, above, of ways in which birds interact with Yeats's other primary symbols to enrich both, but there are many more: seagulls can skim the ocean; birds can perch on stones or trees, and make their nests in the eaves of houses or among the loose stones of the tower at Ballylee; they can fly in gyring spirals reflecting the fundamental energetic pattern he saw at the heart of all life. As such they often serve a unifying function in his poetry which it would be impossible for his other, more static symbols to achieve. Birds are the only one of his primary symbols which are sentient, and able to move and act independently. As living, warm blooded creatures they add a softness and levity to the more hard-edged and occult symbolism of rose, mask, gyre and tower. Yeats always wanted to "Cast a

cold eye / on life, on death”¹. Mask, tower, or stone are hard, cold images, and even the (mystical) rose may have an air of distance and unattainability about it. The softer images of birds, no matter how divorced from everyday life they become in some of the poems, help to prevent the distance and coldness from becoming repellent.

In order to get a grip on the myriad birds in Yeats’s verse it’s helpful initially to subdivide them into manageable categories. The most obvious, though perhaps the least revealing approach, is simply to arrange them in groups according to species. The most common type of birds found in the poems are swans, closely followed by various birds of prey, notably hawks and eagles. Then we find seagulls, and somewhat fewer though still reasonably plentiful peacocks, cockerels, moorhens and parrots. Finally we find a smattering of one or two references to jackdaws, ravens, doves, sparrows, cuckoos, ducks and geese, and a few references to metallic (usually golden) birds, whose relative scarcity is belied by the critical attention they have received.² On examination we tend to find that there is usually some consistency with how each bird species is used (for instance when cockerels appear there is almost always some direct or oblique reference to their announcing of the dawn, and the traditional association of this with insight, vision and renewal). On the other hand the same species may be used in very different ways at different times: swans start out being linked very much to Yeats’s one-sided romance with Maude Gonne,³ but they later take on a much greater and more impersonal resonance and power as the ravaging Zeus transformed into

¹ From the extraordinary epitaph in the final stanza of ‘Under Ben Bulbin’, (1939, p.301), Yeats’s final published poem of 1939:

Under bare Ben Bulbin’s head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:
*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!*

² See the bibliography for examples of papers illustrating the wide range of scholarship that has been applied to these golden birds.

³ a connection which will be examined in more detail in the second part of this dissertation.

a swan,¹ a myth which Yeats links—among many other things—to the changing ages of history.²

Another, and perhaps richer, approach to categorising the birds is in terms of the symbolism we tend to find associated with them. So we find birds (of various different species) as lovers,³ as evolving human souls,⁴ as ascended souls,⁵ as transcendent vision,⁶ as Art or artist,⁷ and as Annunciation.⁸ The situation is complicated by the fact that the poetry is complex and multivalent, so a symbol may be carrying several different meanings at the same times, but nevertheless these categories represent reasonably clear demarcations which are fairly consistent throughout the poems.

Alternatively we can look at the question from the angle of how different birds relate to his wider themes. One way this can be done is in relation to the artistic and philosophical interests which Yeats sought to bear on his work. These were very broad, ranging from questions of nationhood, state-building and war to the magical and occult interests nurtured in his associations with Theosophy and the Golden Dawn. Or we can take the same approach but apply it to material which had its origins in Yeats's personal life and feelings. This is the approach I will take in the second part of the dissertation, looking at how Yeats brought bird symbolism to bear on three key areas of his life which are woven deeply into his work: his love for Maude Gonne; his view of himself as an artist; and his feelings about

¹ In 'Leda and the Swan' (1928: p164)

² Typically for Yeats, the link with Gonne is maintained in the later 'Leda and the Swan' material. Yeats frequently associated Gonne with Helen of Troy—perhaps most famously in 'No Second Troy' (p73) in which he asks "Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?". Here these connection and associations are kept alive since one of the outcome of Zeus's rape of Leda was, of course, the birth of Helen, and hence the Trojan war.

³ e.g. the seagulls in 'The White Birds' (1893: p33)

⁴ e.g. the swans in Coole Park and Ballylee "That stormy white / [that] sails into the sight And in the morning's gone, no man knows why"; "another emblem", as Unterecker (1969, p.212) points out, "for the progress of the soul". For an excellent and concise survey of Yeats's Bird-Soul Symbolism see James Allen (1960).

⁵ Allen (1960) suggests this is one meaning of the golden birds of Byzantium; note however that these are very rich symbols, and no one meaning can approach their complexity.

⁶ e.g. the cockerel in Solomon and the witch (1921: p149)

⁷ For example many swan references, which "on dark waters symbolized ... for Yeats the artist who, dying, sings in fading light" (Unterecker 1969, p.212); also 'The Hawk' (1919: 124)

⁸ See 'Leda and the Swan' (1928: p164) already mentioned.

growing old in a changing world. I will use these in turn to explore how he linked these personal matters to his more universal concerns.

YEATS AND MAUDE GONNE

Yeats's doomed love affair with Maude Gonne was, without question, one of the most important and formative experiences of his life, and had a major influence on the development of his work. They first met in 1889 when he was a rather shy and insecure 23 year old; he was immediately smitten by a woman who was, many said, "the most beautiful in Ireland". The affair was doomed to remain almost entirely un-consummated, and Yeats proposed and was turned down at least three times. They had a single, and by all accounts unsatisfactory, sexual liaison in Paris in 1908, and after this became increasingly distant from one another, due both to this failure and to Yeats's growing disagreement with many of her political activities. Yeats was involved in many ways with the cause of Irish independence, but came to believe that violent action must be matched and preceded by a corresponding cultural and spiritual unity. He turned increasingly towards his personal vision of a country rejuvenated and made whole through art, focussed around his work with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Gonne, on the other hand, was far less discriminating in her revolutionary zeal, and her activities (together, no doubt, with the men that they attracted), increasingly disillusioned Yeats as time went by, as expressed in 'No Second Troy' (1910, p.73):

Why Should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
...
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Gonne's presence in Yeats's verse follows a trajectory from an initial naive and (it has to be said) rather mawkish sentimentality, through disillusionment to, in later years, a radical deepening both in complexity of feeling and symbolic significance. The symbolism he chose to represent her and their relationship revolved consistently around a specific bird symbol—the swan. Childs (2000, pp.197-8) lists some of the associations with swans that were particularly resonant for Yeats:

The swans are archetypal symbols found throughout Yeats's work, and allude to the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, painting, Celtic myth, and Lady Gregory's estate.... The swan symbol builds in resonance over the course of his poetry, standing at different times for power, phallic

strength and purity ... each mention of the swan adds to the intensity of the imagery while serving as shorthand for many complex ideas.

Spencer, of course associated swans with love,¹ and this association is almost universal due to the fact that they tend to pair-bond for life, and the sadness they show on losing their partner. It was surely this most basic association which first attracted Yeats to them as an image of his love for Gonne. However in the first poem in which we find birds associated with Gonne, 'The White Birds' (1891, p.33), both she and Yeats appear in the form of another white bird—the seagull. Alana White (1972, p. 48) tells how:

... Yeats asked Maud to marry him for the first time in 1891 and ... when she refused, insisting they could be no more than dear friends, the pair went for a stroll. As they walked, Maud noticed a flock of birds flying overhead and commented that if she could be any bird, she would surely choose to be a seagull. Three days later, Yeats sent her 'The White Birds'.

The imagery in this early poem is very personal, and the other symbols in the poem—rose, lily, flame, star— are there rather as a counterpoint to the two lovers rather than serving any particular purpose in their own right. The two birds and their imagined love are everything—which is in fact rather how romantic love feels, at least in the early stages:

I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it can fade and flee;
And the flame of the blue star of twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,
Has awaked in our hearts, my beloved, a sadness that may not die.

In the same volume appears another (and much better) poem related to Gonne "The Sorrow of Love". Here we find "the brawling of a sparrow in the eaves" which initially, along with "The brilliant moon and all the milky sky, / And all that famous harmo-

¹ The most well known example, perhaps, being the swans in Prothalamion:

With that, I saw two swans of goodly hue
Come softly swimming down along the Lee;
Two fairer birds I yet did never see.
The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew,
Did never whiter shew,
Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be
For love of Leda, whiter did appear:

The association of the swan with the Leda myth was important to Yeats also, as will be seen below.

ny of leaves, / Had blotted out man's image and his cry". However in the second stanza a girl appears with "Red mournful lips", proud as Priam murdered with his peers", so that "on the instant clamorous eaves, / A climbing moon upon an empty sky, / And all that lamentation of the leaves, / Could but compose man's image and his cry". This poem prefigures the style and imagery of Yeats's much later mature writing on *Gonne*, linking her both to *Troy*—which becomes an important part of the imagery connected to her in his writings—while also making links to wider concerns than Yeats's own personal suffering.

In Yeats next volume, 'The Wind Among The Reeds' (1899, p.43) two *Gonne* poems appear in which the seagull image has been supplanted by the more characteristic swan. The first of these references is rather oblique: in 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' (1893, p.47), Yeats—again writing of his personal pain and longing—draws on the first part of the myth, in which Aengus (the Master of Love in Irish myth) is searching in vain for his future 'swan bride'. Here the lovers as swans are implied but not mentioned. They appear fully fledged, however, a few years later in the poem 'The Withering of the Boughs' from the subsequent volume 'In the Seven Woods' (1904, p.62). In this poem, in which the idealistic hope of 'The White Birds' has been entirely replaced by unrequited longing, we find Yeats dreaming of "the sleepy country, where swans fly round / Coupled with golden chains, and sing as they fly". This is another reference to Aengus, who "designs that the betrothed couple Baile and Aillinn die on hearing of one another's death so that they can be transformed into swans, tied to one another with a golden chain" (Levine 1981, p.412). One senses, however, that Yeats knew by now that such a future was not a possibility for himself: "No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind; / The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams."

These poems are still rather sentimental in feel and technique. Yeats has not yet mastered his mask, or managed to obtain the kind of densely integrated symbolism that characterises his later work. However they do succeed in establishing part of his own personal myth in symbolic terms, which to those familiar with his early work adds additional layers of implication and meaning to what comes afterwards.

There are two dominant themes in Yeats's later writing on *Gonne*. The first is his move towards independence from her, and his coming to terms with the end of the affair: the second is the increasing association of her with the *Leda* myth. Both of these moves served to deepen and broaden his use of the swan symbol. Herbert Levine (1981, p.411) points out that "the multiple symbolic uses to which Yeats put the swan in his later poetry would have been impossible had he not learned how to control his

memories of Maud". The break between them enabled Yeats to access a great deal of richness around the swan which would not otherwise have been possible.

In 'The Wild Swans at Coole' (1919, p.107), we feel this shift:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty Swans.
The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

Immediately we are aware of the differences to the early swan material. The two swans joined by a golden chain of 'The Withering of the Boughs' are here transformed into a flock of fifty-nine. No longer isolated as a co-dependant dyad, the swan is liberated. The associations around them are also getting richer. Rachel Billigheimer (1986, p.56) writes that:

The symbolic significance of the number "fifty-nine" in the poem has been linked with the occurrence of the "fifty silver bells and nine" in the folk ballad "Thomas Rymer," in which Thomas meets the queen of Elfland and is escorted by her to her domain, riding a horse with fifty-nine silver bells hanging from its mane. This story may be seen to parallel Yeats' experience of being led by Lady Gregory to her enchanting estate at Coole Park where he was able to enjoy recreation and cultural pursuits in a serene atmosphere.

We note that, being an odd-numbered flock, one of the swans is on its own—a continuing reference to Yeats's separation from Gonne. But now his personal tragedy is subsumed in something greater. "They [the swans] even manage to anticipate the structure of eternity, the gyre, which Yeats saw as the pattern of all things, when—halfway through his count—they rise from the lake to wheel above him in 'great broken rings'" (Unterecker 1969, p.31). At the end of the poem we find Yeats wondering "Among what rushes will they build, / By what lake's edge or pool / Delight men's eyes when I awake some day / To find they have flown away?". Billigheimer (1986, p.

57) suggests that here “the poet is expressing regret at his increasing age, but his "awakening" paradoxically refers to his own death, since it is he who has departed from the world of the imperishable swans”. So, once again, swans are associated with love, but now it is a much more encompassing love than that between a man and woman—it is a love for life itself.

Later in the same volume is a poem which is much more directly related to Gonne. In ‘Broken Dreams’ (1919, p.128) we find Yeats reflecting on her legendary, and now fading beauty. But again this is translated into wider concerns of life, death, and after-life:

But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood,
And with the fervour of my youthful eyes,
Has set me muttering like a fool.

It’s probably fair to say that this is not to be taken entirely literally, and that it is beauty itself which lies beyond death, as in the following stanza he writes that:

You are more beautiful than any one,
And yet your body had a flaw:
Your small hands were not beautiful,
And I am afraid that you will run
And paddle to the wrist
In that mysterious, always brimming lake
Where those that have obeyed the holy law
Paddle and are perfect.

Once again we find his old love in the form of a paddling swan, but it’s clear that this swan is now being related to a much deeper and more mysterious ‘lake’—which Yeats both celebrates and fears—than that of mere human love.

It was Yeats’s increasing artistic and emotional freedom from Gonne which allowed this shift. Herbert Levine writes that (1981, p.424):

He had long dreamed that he and she would one day take the proud, enchanted form of beautiful white swans and fly off inseparable. As he approached old age, he reserved that special form for himself alone”.

In 'The Tower' (1928, p.164) we find this described in terms of a lone swan who must "fix his eye / Upon a fading gleam, / Float out upon a long / Last reach of glittering stream / And there sing his last song". At one level of interpretation the swan is Yeats, nearing the end of his life as a self-contained and self-confident poet, aware of his own greatness, and of his approaching death. There is pathos in the single swan, but no trace of self-pity or regret. Yeats has mastered both his technique and his mask, to create an impersonal image from his personal material that is worlds removed from the romantic musings of his youth.

The other strand in Yeats's later treatment of the Gonne material in relation to bird symbolism, lies in his connection of her to Helen and the myth of Troy. As previously noted, the connection comes from the fact that Helen was born of Leda following her rape by Zeus in the form of a swan, a connection made most directly in the poem 'Leda and the Swan' (1928, p.182). The connection is not absolutely direct: Gonne is both Leda and a "daughter of the swan" like the young girls in 'Among School Children' (1928, p.185). But through the associations he has previously build up in his work he can continue to allude to the Gonne material—though now she tends to add additional meaning to concerns which have become more important to him than his love affair, rather than the other way round.

The brevity and apparent simplicity of 'Leda and the Swan' is belied by its multiple associations with many different aspects of Yeats's work, and with Greek myth, making what may seem on the face of it quite a simple poem extremely dense and complex. There are numerous threads in it which can be taken up: at one level it can be related to Yeats's connection of the fall of Troy to the beginning of the Graeco-Pagan age which preceded the Christian Era; at another it is concerned with the artist's relation to divine inspiration. Helen Sword (1992, p.305) suggests that:

...although poets and mystics throughout history have figured creative and religious inspiration in terms of sexual union and shared sexual ecstasy, the dark side of inspiration is violation, a violent overwhelming of self by Other that finds its sexual analogy in rape.

Gonne's connection with Leda can be related to this, though somewhat obliquely. We may conjecture that Yeats was (among other things) reflecting on the way he—in a sense—took 'ownership' of Gonne in his poetry, transforming her (or at least his memory of her) into something new: "Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute

blood of the air,¹ / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?”. I continue this discussion of the Leda material in relation to art and the artist in the following section.

YEATS AS ARTIST

Of all the many roles he played in his life—lover, mage, husband, father, revolutionary, statesman—Yeats thought of himself above all things as a poet. From a young age and throughout his life he showed a remarkable single-mindedness in pursuit of greatness in his chosen field. In this he was both helped and hindered—but mostly helped—by his artist father, John Butler Yeats. We’ve already noted how Yeats was impelled towards symbolism partly due to a need to stand up against his father’s more logical and atheistic turn of mind. However, while they certainly didn’t see eye to eye, there wasn’t any serious disagreement about the central importance of art and the validity of pursuing it as a way of life. John Yeats both encouraged and challenged his son until the former’s death in 1922; having an artist father meant that at least Yeats was able to feel that he had solid support in his endeavours in principle, even when the two of them disagreed over particulars.

In spite of this encouraging family background, it was still necessary for Yeats, as it is for any artist, to some kind of accommodation between the demands of his vocation and the expectations of wider society. In ‘Beggar to Beggar Cried’ (1914, p.92), we find Yeats poking fun at his friends Lady Gregory and Mrs Shakespeare who, on hearing that he had almost been caught out by an affair with an unmarried woman,² advised him to find someone suitable to marry, which they felt would help him with his emotional difficulties. In this poem he images the beggar wishing for “a comfortable wife and house / To rid me of the devil in my shoes, / ... / And the worse devil that is between my thighs” where he would “grow respected at my ease, / And hear amid the garden’s nightly peace. / ... / The wind-blown clamour of the barnacle-geese”. This last image of the geese as harbingers of wildness and freedom is typical of Yeats in this context; the untamed soaring quality in birds drew him to them as images of art and poetry which he saw (partly) as a way to break beyond the bounds of the everyday, time-bound mind. Clearly he still feared at this point in his life that to tie

¹ According to Billigheimer (1986, p.67), “the association of the swan with air and blood is ... derived from the occultic theory of the correspondences between the elements and the humors as set out in the occult system of Cornelius Agrippa ... “The Humors partake of the elements, for yellow choller is instead of fire, blood instead of air, flegme instead of water, and black choller or melancholy instead of earth”.

² According to Unterecker (1969, pp.122-3) she attempted to deceive him into marriage by falsely claiming to be pregnant.

himself down in marriage would leave him in too comfortable a garden, forced to listen to the geese from a distance, rather than flying among them¹.

This theme of conflict between an artist's calling and the expectations and judgments of society are explored further in *The Hawk* (1919, p.124) four years later:

Call down the hawk from the air;
Let him be hooded or caged
Till the yellow eye has grown mild,
For larder and spit are bare,
The old cook enraged,
The scullion gone wild.'

'I will not be clapped in a hood,
Nor a cage, nor alight upon wrist,
Now I have learnt to be proud
Hovering over the wood
In the broken mist
Or tumbling cloud.'

'What tumbling cloud did you cleave,
Yellow-eyed hawk of the mind,
Last evening? that I, who had sat
Dumbfounded before a knave,
Should give to my friend
A pretence of wit.'

Hawks were an important personal and magical symbol for Yeats which he connected to that part of himself from which came the artist and poet. It is linked in his plays (via the grey hawk feather) to Cuchulain, the instinctive, emotional warrior, and so also to Yeats's Robartes character, who is paired with the cooler more rational Aherne, in the same way that Cuchulain is paired with Concubar.² At the most obvious level we can see the hawk in the poem as the poet seen from three different perspectives.

¹ Lyndon Shannon (1958) argues that Yeats was influenced by Thoreau's 'Walden' in some of his descriptions of swans, and there is certainly something about the feeling of wildness and freedom which Thoreau achieves which resonates with many of Yeats's birds.

² Some indication of the importance of the Hawk to Yeats can be gleaned from a passage in a letter from Yeats to Sturge Moore (6 September 1921) quoted by Kathleen Raine (1976, p.58): "He is writing on the subject of a book-plate Moore was designing for him, and he is clearly thinking of the magical character of symbols when he writes: "don't nail the hawk on the board. The hawk is one of my symbols and you might rather crudely upset the subconsciousness. It might mean nightmare or something of the kind for some of us here. Life when one does my kind of work is rather strange"".

In the first stanza it is from the point of view “of all ‘practical’ people who would find utilitarian functions for everything from hawks to poets” (Unterecker 1969, p.140). The second stanza sees the poet proudly refusing to be trammelled in this way. The final stanza displays a note of the disillusionment or doubt about his symbolic enterprise which slips into Yeats’s work now and again: “What value is his symbol, he seems to ask, when he can be ‘Dumbfounded before a knave’ yet display for his friend [only] ‘A pretence of wit?’” (Unterecker 1969, p.141). This reading is clear enough, yet Yeats means a little more than this. In his ‘Autobiographies’ (2010, p.164) he implies that the hooded and caged Hawk is related to both societal and inner fragmentation—“the isolation of occupation, or class, faculty”. This fragmentation becomes clear in the final stanza where it is apparent that the Hawk is not the whole person, but a fragment which can be addressed by other fragments. Yeats seems once again to be taking his personal experience and applying it to more universal themes. Ultimately the poet’s inner division is only a symptom of a fragmented wider culture. The hawk is both Yeats’s personal visionary faculty, and that of his country as a whole, where many forces seek to neuter, control, and make use of the arts for their own practical and profitable ends—leaving artists to try and defend what may feel at times even to themselves, to be indefensible.

If the hawk can be said—at one level—to stand for the poet, or the poetic faculty, then it is not a great stretch to expand this to include by association other birds of prey. Hence we find eagles, in particular, also linked to these modes of experience. Alternatively, it is possible that the eagle was in fact the ‘archetype’ from which the more familiar and local image of the hawk descended. The association of eagles with vision, pride and the ascending spiritual principle in its male aspect is very ancient: an eagle is one of the forms of Zeus (who we have already found linked to both Yeats and art in ‘Leda and the Swan’) but the idea seems likely to have gone back much further than Greece. Thus we find several poems which have Eagles connected to art, poetry and vision. In ‘Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation’ (1910, p.77) we find Yeats asking: “How should the world be luckier if this house ... became too ruinous / To breed ... the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow / Where wings have memory of wings”; and later we come across eagles in the ‘Last Poems’ (1939, p.249). In ‘Those Images’ (p.275) the poet counsels us to “Find in middle air / An eagle on the wing / Recognise the five / That make the Muses sing”; and in ‘An Acre of Grass’ (p.257) Yeats acknowledges his impending death (“Now strength of body goes”) yet still asks to be granted:

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,

Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds;
Forgotten else by mankind,
An old man's eagle mind.

Facing oblivion the passion for poetic inspiration remained. Birds of prey are also associated with independence and pride, and Yeats's mature voice contains a fierce pride which is not arrogance or over-confidence, but a coldly objective assessment of his worth as a poet—pride stripped of personal feeling, seen through a mask. In 'The Peacock' (1914, p.98) written when he was starting to come into his full power as a poet he asked:

What's riches to him
That has made a great peacock
With the pride of his eye?
The wind-beaten, stone-grey,
And desolate Three Rock
Would nourish his whim.
Live he or die
Amid wet rocks and heather,
His ghost will be gay
Adding feather to feather
For the pride of his eye.

The pride is clear, and yet, given the level at which he was starting to write, it is an objective assessment.

The collected poems are inhabited by several peacocks, whose most obvious characteristic is their propensity for display. Yeats's desire to revel in his skills was well served by the peacock image, with its masculine vision of beauty and splendour. But the peacock has much wider associations than this. In Ancient Greece it was believed that the flesh of the bird did not decay after death. This together with the annual renewal of its plumage meant that it came to be associated with immortality (Murray, & Murray 2004). The peacock's tail is also associated with the cosmos—its many 'eyes' representing sun, moon and stars—and with the tree of life. There are also strong associations with Hera, or Juno, whose chariot was pulled by two peacocks, and who was responsible for placing the ocelli on the peacock's tail. Given her violent and vengeful nature, particularly against mortals who have offended her, her presence can add a dimension of the fear and threat which is another aspect of transcendent experience. In 'A Vision' (2015, p.195), Yeats speaks of:

The loss of control over thought comes towards the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation—the scream of Juno’s peacock.

We sense that the scream of the beautiful bird is not an entirely comfortable thing to experience; to see beyond the limited self, and experience the realm of the gods, is both liberating and terrifying.

All these additional associations of the peacock symbol give it great expressive power, allowing multiple levels of meaning even in this short poem. It allows Yeats to express his own human pride in his poetic accomplishment—it’s breadth of scope and the potential for his own artistic ‘immortality’—while also claiming a transcendent reality that the poetry is capable of revealing.

Alongside the Yeats who was proud and confident in his abilities and the value of his art, and of art in general, we always find another, more doubting and less certain character, an echo perhaps of the shy and insecure youth he once was, as well as a product of a man reaching maturity in an age when many old certainties were being destroyed, and in which his country was intermittently torn by violence and civil war. In ‘Meditations in a Time of Civil War’ (1928, p.169) we find peacocks appearing with very different feelings attached to them:

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,
...
O what if gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else all Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities;
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?

Here Yeats grapples with a conundrum which has exercised many artists and writers in the age of world wars and the great populist movements of the Twentieth Century: the question of how to value art which—in spite of its beauty and seeming power for good—so often seems, when at its best, to be in cahoots in some way with powers of repression, inequality and violence. The proud peacock of the previous poem here

“strays with delicate feet” upon old terraces, vulnerable both to the passing of the age and social class in which it was conceived and nurtured, and to the physical effects of war. And war changes everything: even the proud bird of ‘The Hawk’, (1919, p.124) “Hovering over the wood / In the broken mist / Or tumbling cloud” is transformed:

The cloud-pale unicorns, the eyes of aquamarine,
The quivering half-closed eyelids, the rags of cloud or of lace,
...
Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place
To brazen hawks.
...
Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,
The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon.

The transformation of the hawk into a kind of anti-hawk is a powerful image, made more resonant by the earlier associations with Hawks in earlier poems. These brazen hawks are one of only a few metal birds which appear in the poems.¹ They make an interesting counter-point to the golden birds of the Byzantium poems which I return to in the next section.

Birds appear again in a threatening form in ‘On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac’ from the same volume (1928, p.183). Unterecker (1969, pp.189-90) tentatively identifies the Centaurs with “the sort of national culture Yeats once hoped to found”, whose hooves had stamped his work “down into the sultry mud” at the “black margin” of a wood where “horrible green parrots call and swing”. It is difficult to pin down the precise nature of these parrots. Henry Merritt (1998, p.266) gives several possibilities:

The poem's parrots have been seen in almost as many ways as the centaur, representing, popular Irish culture (after all, they are green), Yeats's dealings with the supernatural and even "art too full of the otherworldly and of the intellect". ... It might be simplest, however, to see the parrots as defined by opposition to the goldsmiths' work [in sailing to byzantium]: they are 'natural', speaking only what is learnt and of what is past, not of what is "passing or to come".

They may also be linked to demonic forces which Yeats felt were threatening his family at that time, the ‘frustraters’ which seemed to interfere with the process of auto-

¹ They may be referencing the prophecy of divine retribution in Deuteronomy 28:23: “The heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron”.

matic writing undertaken by his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees between 1917 and 1921.¹ Unterecker (1969, p.190) sees a definite connection with the parrot in the early poem ‘The Indian to his Love, (1889, p.9), that “sways upon a tree, / Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea”, and possibly with the “portly green-pated bird” in *Demon and Beast* (1921, p.157); but beyond a general feeling of malevolence in the first of these, and the link of the second bird to the demonic, there is not much in the way of firm conclusions that can be drawn about the connection. However, whatever the difficulties and dark forces he alludes to in ‘On a Picture’, he has managed to bring “full-flavoured wine out of a barrel found / Where seven Ephesian toppers² slept”. The full-flavoured wine refers to ‘A Vision’ itself, and the satisfaction Yeats felt on completing his mystical *opus magnus*—notwithstanding the continuing need to keep “Unwearied eyes upon those horrible green birds” that he feels at the end of the poem.

It’s clear that Yeats didn’t shy away from danger in his pursuit of occult and spiritual knowledge. He was well aware that to seek beyond the boundaries of everyday consciousness does not come without risk, whether attempting to make contact with spiritual ‘entities’, or seeking direct vision of esoteric truths. This returns us to ‘Leda and the Swan’, which was perhaps Yeats’s clearest statement of his awareness of how small, and fundamentally insignificant the human psyche is when it comes into contact with something beyond itself (Sword 1992, p.308):

... poised uncertainly between empathy and impartiality, [the poem] amply documents the dangers of ... unmediated access to divine inspiration. With its vivid depiction of the swan's attack—from violent impact to shuddering orgasm to callous postcoital indifference—the poem betrays every bit as much fear of the "sudden blow" as desire for Leda's resulting visionary stature.

¹ Yeats’s worries about this seem very genuine. In a poem from the same volume—*A Prayer for my Son* (1928, p.180)—he claims “Some there are, for I avow / Such devilish things exist / have planned his murder, for they know/ Of some most haughty deed or thought / That waits upon his future days”. This fear is most likely linked to the conception of the boy, which was done with various magical rituals intended to result in the birth of an Avatar linked to a group of spirits which he and Georgie felt themselves to be in psychic communication with at the time. They believed that this operation had been successful, hence the fear of dark forces seeking to destroy the boy. Given that Michael Yeats (1921-2007) turned out to be a fairly normal person—albeit eminent and successful on his own terms—one has to wonder if W.B. and his wife were rather letting the unconscious run away with itself. There is an interesting discussion of these questions in ‘W.B. Yeats, Twentieth Century Magus’ by Susan Johnston Graf (2000, pp.175-8). Sadly, though perhaps understandably, there seems to be nothing in the public domain about what Michael Yeats himself came to think of the matter.

² These were Christian martyrs whose bodies were preserved for centuries, giving faith to Theodosius when they briefly awoke for that purpose.

Yeats's art drew liberally on his personal experience of life, and of the political and cultural currents around him; but with his spiritual yearning and intensity it could never be limited to that. As he aged he evolved an art in which the mundane and personal became a perfect mirror for the higher truths he sought.

AN AGEING POET

As a poet who came into his full power late in life, it is perhaps to be expected that ageing and dying are important themes in some of Yeats's best work. He aged well, continuing to write with undiminished passion until his death at 74 in 1939. Some twenty years earlier he gave a clue as to the attitude of mind that made this possible (Yeats 1918, pp.49-50):

A poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment. ... Surely, he may think, now that I have found vision and mask I need not suffer any longer. He will buy perhaps some small old house where like Ariosto he can dig his garden ... Then he will remember Wordsworth withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted, and climb to some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth, some bitter crust.

Already acknowledged as a great poet, a nobel prize winner, honoured in his own country and abroad, it would have been easy for him to slacken off and follow Wordsworth into a comfortable decline. We can be thankful that he remained true to his original intention.

Yeats was growing old in a world in which many things he valued were fading—or had faded—away. This, combined with his awareness of his physical decline, gives a great deal of pathos, though seen with remarkable consistency through the mask. In *Coole Park and Ballylee* (1933, p.206), he offers consolation to his friend and supporter of many years, Lady Gregory, who had had her estate at Coole Park taken away from her by the State, and was dying as he wrote. Underlying these specific concerns lies a more general sadness at the loss of aristocratic life, and the art it nourished:

We were the last romantics — chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;

The poem is structured around bird imagery. In the opening lines the moor hens swim on a stream which descends underground before rising again to be the source of one

of the estate's lakes—"Yeats, seeing it as an 'emblem' for the soul's progress out of light (life) into darkness (death) and again into light (reincarnation)" (Unterecker 1969, p.212). However, this symbolism is complicated by a return to:

the "darkening flood" in his last line. Here ... there is no "flooded lake" but rather the wine-dark sea celebrated by Homer ... who, giving voice to great myths, had set on his dark waters an immortal drifting swan.

These birds at the beginning and end of the poem bracket another in the middle. Yeats is looking at a wood, "Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun ... And all the rant's a mirror of my mood", when the swan which at the end drifts on the darkening flood almost explodes out of the water in what must surely be one of the most beautiful passages in all Yeats's verse:

Another emblem there! That stormy white
But seems a concentration of the sky;
And, like the soul, it sails into the sight
And in the morning's gone, no man knows why;

But the relief is short lived:

We shift about — all that great glory spent —
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.

There is hope in this poem, but not much. The darkening flood in the final line presages another poem of real despair and fear at what Yeats saw as the beginning of an era of violence, insensitivity and potential apocalypse. 'The Second Coming' (1921, p.158), which is probably Yeats's most famous work, begins with a bird image laden with impending doom:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The most obvious reading of this passage is that the falcon (humanity) is losing touch with the falconer (the sacred or eternal), without which civilisation cannot hold together. The image is given greater resonance by connection to Yeats's cyclic view of history expounded in the chapter 'Dove or Swan' in 'A Vision' (2015, p.193). Yeats saw the basic pattern of life as a 'gyre' or spiral, or rather as interlocking opposite

gyres—objective and subjective, man and mask, solar and lunar— which, passing through one another create the conditions both of the individual life, and of human history.¹ In ‘The Second Coming’ the spiralling falcon in the ‘widening gyre’ enables Yeats to precisely and almost irresistibly merge his theory to the subject matter of the poem. It is a hugely effective image.

Bird symbolism returns towards the end of this poem albeit somewhat veiled:

... a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs

This is clearly a sphinx, but Yeats tells us (1962, pp.392-3) that this creature began as a “brazen-winged beast” that he first imagined as a boy and associated with “laughing, ecstatic destruction”. It’s hard not to make the connection—as Billigheimer does (1994, p.90)—between this beast and the brazen hawks in ‘Meditations in a Time of Civil War’ (1928, p.169), “The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon”. So here we find an image which first appeared in the poem in the context of Yeats’s personal anguish at the violence and destruction being wrought in his own country taking on a much more universal aspect—it becomes the impersonal force of history itself.²

¹ This image of the gyre gave rise to much related imagery and allusion. Kathleen Raine (1999, p.49) quotes Yeats relating it first to his childhood in Sligo where his grandfather’s house was near the ‘pern mill’—pern being another name for a spool on which thread was wound. This in turn he related to Plato’s spindle in *The Myth of Er*, in which :

time is ‘unwound’ as the souls travel back their thread of life ... as the journey of life is reversed in death. ... Plato describes how in the Iron Age men pass, as now, from birth to death, youth to age, in the Golden Age from age to youth; or it may be understood in the sense that as the body ages the soul grows younger. In *A Vision (The Soul in Judgment)* Yeats develops this theme in his elaborate symbol of the ‘dreaming back’ of the dead.

This theme is also found in the *Politicus*. As Raine points out, it is likely that Yeats, a scholar of William Blake’s work, was inspired to explore this symbolism via Blake’s poem, ‘The Mental Traveller’, which is on this same theme.

² There is much more that could be said regarding the relationship of ‘The Second Coming’ to both ‘Leda and the Swan’ and ‘The Mother of God’ (1933,211). Together these poems form a triad, each in turn marking the turning point of a new 2000 year age of the world. ‘Leda’ deals with the beginning of the Greek age at the fall of troy; ‘The Mother of God’ marks the beginning of the Christian era; and ‘The Second Coming’ deals with the end of that Era and the beginning of the mechanistic, soulless and violent age which Yeats believed would follow it. All three poems deal with question in terms of an annunciation of sorts, and in all three, birds—or bird imagery—plays a significant part in this annunciation.

Having looked at one type of metallic bird we may now turn to a very different sort. As we have already seen, Yeats' poetry in his later years was much concerned with ageing, and the paradox of feeling young and full of life, while trapped in an deteriorating body:

What shall I do with this absurdity —
O heart, O troubled heart — this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible —
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back
And had the livelong summer day to spend.

For such an active man as Yeats (with, it has to be said, a considerable libido), old age was clearly something of a challenge. As is not uncommon in this situation he turned to Plato for consolation. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928, p.163) he writes:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
...
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

There are again echoes here of Plato and William Blake's view that the soul gets younger as the body ages. In his arrival at the holy city Yeats seems to have accepted consolation, or even sublimation in the contemplation of eternal truths. And it is here that we find some of his most extraordinary images:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perch 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.

According to Graf (2000, p.102), the sages are related to Yeats's view that he had a daemon, a disembodied soul, who inspired his poetry. This is essentially a bird image—the reference to 'perning in a gyre' is—when taken in relation to its appearance in other poems¹—clearly alluding to birds, and connects in turn to the highly developed bird-soul symbolism which runs throughout his work.² Yeats continues:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

What is the source of this extraordinary image of the metal bird? According to Thomas Dume (1952, p.406)

... when Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize, he used some of his money to buy books—including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the *Cambridge Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Histories*—for his own library. Browsing through these volumes, he would certainly have turned to the sections on Byzantium. Gibbon wrote of the Emperor Theophilus: "His fanciful magnificence employed the skill and patience of such artists as the times could afford ... a golden tree with its leaves and branches which sheltered a multitude of birds warbling their artificial notes".³

However the image evolved, what concerns us here is its connection to the Platonic forms, and to a 'higher' reality that is attractive while being in many ways alien and

¹ For example the falcon in 'The Second Coming' as previously discussed.

² See Allen (1960) for an excellent overview of Yeats's bird-soul correspondence.

³ Perhaps we don't need to look further than this for the source of the specific image, although in Yeats's hands it is connected to many other perennial themes. In his excellent survey of prototypes for the golden bird, Allen (1979) identifies numerous connections: to the bird-soul symbolism so prevalent in the poems; to the Cabalistic tree of life; to the cockerel in 'Solomon and the Witch' (1921, p149)*; and to various poems with song-birds in paradisaic island settings, among many others. This is a rich and multi-valent image.

* "A Cockerel / Crew from a blossoming apple bough / Three hundred years before the fall / And never crew again till now".

completely inimicable to embodied human life. This feeling of alienness is made more explicit in the later, related poem 'Byzantium' (1933, p.210):

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.
Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

This is beautiful, but it is no world for the living: it is the vision of a man focussing on an immanent departure from the world. Yeats has turned his personal feelings about ageing into something remarkable, but it can be seen as an escapist solution to the problem (he was, after all, still alive with potentially many years before him), and it doesn't fit entirely comfortably within the overall tenor of his work. That he is not entirely comfortable with it is suggested by the lines "gather me / into the artifice of eternity" in the first of these two Byzantium poems: artifice can here be interpreted either as meaning 'something made', or else as something artificial, or contrived. This ambivalence is confirmed by the title poem (The Tower, 1928, p.165) of the same collection which immediately follows 'Sailing to Byzantium', in which Yeats seems to renounce the whole Platonic cosmology expounded in the previous poem.

And I declare my faith:

I mock Plotinus' thought
And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,

Aye, sun and moon and star, all,

If Sailing to Byzantium is a retreat from life, then 'The Tower' is an unequivocal return to the complexities of human existence, the metaphysics of which owes more to Mallarmé than to Plato.

Following on from the above passage in 'The Tower' we read that:

... at the loophole there
The daws chatter and scream,
And drop twigs layer upon layer.
When they have mounted up,
The mother bird will rest
On their hollow top,
And so warm her wild nest.

The coldly beautiful metal bird of Byzantium is immediately supplanted by a very alive, warm-blooded, and reproductively active one. But still one eye was fixed on death. Later on in the same poem we come across another bird we have already come across—the swan—which:

...must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

Billigheimer (1986, p.61) suggests that this swan:

...symbolizes the triumph of a life which rises above achievement, success, and the tragic and ephemeral concerns of the mortal world, in a devotion to high and timeless ideals, and thus becomes reconciled to a transcendent realm.

We may note, however, that the swan is fixing its eye 'on a fading gleam—presumably the fading gleam of mortal life. It remains in love with the world until the last as—ultimately—did Yeats its creator. He was always pulled between this world and the next, between time and eternity, and it was the attempt to resolve the contradiction without either sentimentality or nihilism which led to poetry which—like a bird itself—spans the gulf between heaven and earth.

EPILOGUE

I have given here a fairly concise overview of a subject which could be expanded on at much greater length. In particular the material around bird-soul symbolism and its

relationship to Yeats's evolving spiritual beliefs and relationships would bear a considerably deeper examination than has been possible here. There are also specific birds (in particular cockerels, parrots and peacocks) and specific themes (Yeats's relationship to Ireland and Irish nationalism, and his interest in magic and the occult)—which it would have been revealing to explore in greater detail had space allowed. It would also be interesting to explore the role of birds in relation to other of Yeats's major symbols. However I hope I have managed to provide an overview of how important birds were in his evolving symbolic system, and of how well they function to tie together the personal and universal concerns of an extraordinary mind:—

*The sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings”.*

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