

## The Theosophical Symbolism in Yeats's Vision

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*Abstract:*

In his *Introduction to A Vision*, Yeats defined his work as “a last act of defense against the chaos of the world”. A last act though which he wanted to give unity, through a rich symbolic substrate, to the space outside of nature and the space within his own mind. A unity he first met and fully understood when he joined Madame Blavatsky's *Theosophical Society* in 1887. This essay aims to examine the influence theosophy on Yeats's literary works, namely on *A Vision* and how theosophical methodologies of investigation helped him to discover and adopt a metaphysical approach in his own internalisation and representation of material and spiritual realities.

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. . . I am glad to see such a genuine sincere thirst for knowledge in the Irish Fellows. It is the Irish invaluable who were, and are the best members of the TS [Theosophical Society] and my best loved and trusted friends. [...] I trust in the Irish and I love the Irish ever since 1851 when Johnny O'Brien saved my life in Greece and got nearly killed himself. (Quoted in Cranston 1993, 464)

In his “Introduction” to *A Vision*, Yeats defines his work as “a last act of defense against the chaos of the world” (quoted in Unterecker 1963, 43); a last act to give unity, through a rich symbolic substrate, to the space outside of nature and the space within his own mind. With these words that he wrote to his friend Edmund Dulac in 1924, Yeats features the profound meaning of the complex symbolic-philosophical system in which he gathered and encompassed his experience and knowledge. In Warwick Gould's words, Yeats “does not deny the chaos [...] but he attempts to impose limits on it and to set up bulwarks against it” (Gould 2016, 158). He attempts to reach a unified vision from which, paradoxically, an absolutely conflicting concept of reality, of man, and of any living creature emerges through an intricate pantheon of opposing, interpenetrating symbols connected to each other in essentially geometric-metaphoric relationships; this vision apparently came from Yeats's studies on many heterogeneous sources, ranging from Greek philosophers (i.e. Pythagoras, Plotinus, and Empedocles), through Kabbalah and

Hindu mysticism, up to the later Western mystics (Paracelsus, Boehme and Swedenborg), as well as from his direct experiences within London esoteric societies<sup>1</sup>.

Formerly introduced to theosophy through his reading A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), a copy of which he received in 1884 from his aunt Isabella Pollexfen Varley<sup>2</sup>, in 1885 Yeats collaborates to the creation of the Dublin Hermetic Society<sup>3</sup>, together with Charles Johnston and his art school friend, George Russell (AE). In 1888, after leaving Ireland and moving with his family to London, Yeats meets Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), the Russian founder of the Theosophical Society. Established in New York on November 17, 1875, the Theosophical Society expanded with lightning speed propelled by the magnetism, arcane knowledge, and magical force of Blavatsky. Her charisma attracted William Butler Yeats as well, who quickly goes from being a habitu  of the Theosophical Society to become one of its most brilliant members in London. "Theosophy empowered Yeats in two ways", Monteith suggests, "first, theosophy provided its members a sense of community in which they felt they were needed in order to carry on the esoteric tradition [...]. Second, theosophy suggested that the unseen world [...] could be controlled, just as the individual could learn to control himself, in order to evolve and become closer to the universe" (Monteith 2008, 5).

Derived from the Greek θεός ("God") and σοφία ("knowledge or wisdom"), "theosophy" literally means "divine knowledge" or "wisdom of the gods". The term was first used around the 17th century in England by the Platonists of the Cambridge School, namely Henry More and Ralph Cudworth. Later, in the 19th century, the members of the Theosophical Society adopted, updated, and spread the use of the term. "Knowledge of God" is the ultimate truth that the theosophists seek. A truth that is not hidden in a single faith but included within all Eastern and Western religions and philosophies, as it is only from such philosophical-religious syncretism that human beings can be given the chance to access knowledge of the divine and of themselves. This is the fundamental dogma that Blavatsky sets out in her works, and it is explicitly stated in the Society's

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study on Paracelsus, Boehme and Swedenborg's influence on Yeats, see Hutin 1960; Bachchan 1965; Adams 1968; Raine 1986; Schuchard 1995.

<sup>2</sup> "While [W.B. Yeats] was discovering the world of nationalist intelligentsia, he was serving another apprenticeship – spiritual rather than political. Like his literary explorations, it began as he finished at the High School ... In late 1884 WBY's aunt Isabella Pollexfen Varley ... sent WBY a copy of A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. ... WBY lent the book to his friend Charles Johnston ... [who] went to London to interview the founders of the movement, and on his return introduced Theosophy to Dublin. A craze began, much to the chagrin of the Headmaster, who saw 'his most promising students [touched] with the indifference of the Orient to such things as college distinction and mundane success'" (Foster 1997, 45).

<sup>3</sup> Going back to those years, AE reminds: "Some dozen years ago a little body of young men hired a room in Dublin, and began to read papers to one another on the Vedas and the Upanishads and the Neo-Platonists, and on modern mystics and spiritualists. They had no scholarship, and they spoke and wrote badly, but they discussed great problems ardently and simply and unconventionally, as men perhaps discussed great problems in the medieval Universities" (AE 1989, 113).

manifesto: "There is no religion higher than truth", since, "all religions derive from one unique divine Truth. This Truth has been passed down over the course of history by a very small circle of initiates who have revealed only those aspects of it conforming to the historic period in which they found themselves" (quoted in Fontani, Costa, Orna 2015, 441).

The Theosophical Society allows no distinction of race, sex, caste, or colour, and most significantly, creed. The call for religious tolerance and universal brotherhood is clear and strongly acknowledged, and is directed to the members of the Society and to all men, as it is based on the belief that no creed can truly claim to be holder of the Absolute Truth. Every person of any religion or culture is therefore called to seek truth, which is encoded in any philosophical-religious doctrine, defined or inspired by a single creator, or under the name of God, Buddha, or Nature.

The syncretism that Blavatsky urged shows up in the Society's symbol itself, the "six-pointed star" made of two interlaced equilateral triangles, opposing both figuratively and symbolically; one is facing upwards (epitomizing the spirit and the masculine) and the other downwards (standing for matter and the feminine), one is white and the other black. This symbol is a primary embodiment of the equilibrium that exists between opposing poles – good and evil, male and female, spirit and matter, which contain the essence of truth but can only be fully expressed once they have been reconciled. The resolution of all opposing dialectics is, therefore, one of the principal aims of the theosophical doctrine, and is unquestionably one of the main points of convergence as well as divergence between the theosophical system and Yeats's system as presented in *A Vision* (1925, 1937; henceforth, respectively, *AVA* and *AVB*).

Yeats considers the dialectics of opposites essential for any change or progress, both determined by a tension between opposing forces: diverging poles must always be well-balanced, since if one succeeds in dominating the other, the tension would be nullified, or in Yeats's words, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Yeats 1998, 235). Yeats's image that perhaps best represents the dynamic union of two conflicting elements is that of the two interpenetrating gyres, or cones, that turn into two opposite directions and develop because of their condition of conflict: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (*ibidem*). They both die the life of the other and live the death of the other. They reproduce opposite qualities, like subjective and objective, beauty and truth, and the particular and universal. In general, each pair is made of two antithetical centres of existence: male and female, day and night, sun and moon, human and God, objectivity and subjectivity, good and evil, natural and supernatural, life and death.

The reconciliation of the two opposing principles can be tied to the hierogamic union (from the Greek *ἱερός-γάμος* or sacred marriage, which traditionally would represent the union of heaven and earth) of the uranic masculine component with the feminine telluric one; the father and mother of all things, male and female, the basic model for all other polarities, such as hot and cold, day and night, life and death. While Blavatsky posits the reconciliation of all dialectics as the aim towards which all people should strive, since the goal is not to achieve the dominance of one

of these two cosmic-physiological centres over the other but, on the contrary, it is to unify them, and to achieve the reintegration of the two primary poles, for Yeats conflict becomes a moral standard, the “sanctified condition” (North 1991, 73).

Yeats’s circles, one white and one black, making up the bases of the two gyres, appear to be symbolically related to the theosophical symbol of the two triangles, but there is an obvious point of contrast between these two symbols. While the six-pointed star is a figuratively static symbol, the two cones maintain and ensure their paradigmatic opposition dynamically; they expand and contrast each other in a reciprocal relation, so that when one widens, the other narrows in a lively pattern which leads to the temporary dominance of one or the other. In other words, after reaching its widest point, the first gyre constricts in order to reach its narrowest point, and the second cone follows an inverse process. The static and dynamic natures respectively characterizing the two triangles and the two cones, clearly underlie a different concept of the dialectic of opposites: the two theosophical triangles are in opposition to each other, as we can infer from their two distinguishing colours and positions; however, their interlaced figure and lack of movement do not express so much a condition of friction as a hypothetical reconciliation and harmony. On the contrary, the dynamic quality inherent to the two cones keeps each one in constant conflict with the other, making the balance itself quite precarious.

Yeatsian characters embody the opposition of antithetical forces, like Robartes and Aherne, who never resolve their conflict so as to avoid threatening the uncertain balance which is supported precisely by that conflict (see Sidnell 1975, 225-254; 1975, 255-284); as well as the human being and the Daimon (or Daemon or Demon<sup>4</sup>), or the ego and its spiritual counterpart. The term daemon (from ancient Greek δαίμων, δαίμονος meaning “spirit”, “angel” or “genius”) originally referred both to a good demon (or angel) and to a malevolent one (cacodaemon or devil). Only with the advent of Christianity the term lost its semantic polarity and came to mean exclusively a malevolent being, a devil. Yeats considers the Daimon as the self-created, feminine element, which constitutes “the unconscious portion of the psyche of each individual” (Raine 1986, 164); it is the anti-self that transcends the human level, the eternal soul that accompanies the ego in all its incarnations. As such, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), the Daimon is the opposite of every human being – “The Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another’s hearts” (Yeats 1959, 335). Being “the ultimate self of that man” (*AVB*, 83), the incorruptible part that, according to Theosophy, is in every human being and is identified as the Self, the daimonic element reflects divinity and holds the memory of the present life and of past lives: “Memory is a series of judgements and such

<sup>4</sup>As pointed out by Adams 1968, 252: “In his published prose Yeats spelled the word “Daimon”. In many typescripts he spelled it “daemon” or “Demon”. In the poems it is spelled “demon”. The Daimon of the prose is a less concrete visualization than the Demon of the poems. Perhaps the spellings are supposed to accentuate this difference”.

judgements imply a reference to something that is not memory, that something is the Daimon, which contains within it, co-existing in its eternal moment, all the events of our life, all that we have known of other lives, or that it can discover within itself of other Daimons" (*AVB*, 192). The Daimon is the power which is able to see and hold all things in an eternal moment.

Thus, the daimonic mind can give meaning to each reincarnation of the soul. Invisible to human eyes, which are subject to a dialectical vision, the eternal moment can be perceived only by the Daimon. It is at the centre of the sphere and experiences the swirling and perfect motion that Yeats attributes to the "dancer". The pinnacle of the cone, the centre of the sphere, and the dancer's mid-twirl are all images that evoke a completely timeless reality. The form of all things depends on the Daimon. One of its fundamental roles is to ensure the existence of the phenomenal realm, because the visible world depends on its "creative mind":

All things are present in an eternal instant to our Daimon (or Ghostly self as it is called, when it inhabits the sphere), but that instant is unintelligible to all bound to the antinomies. My instructors have therefore followed the tradition by substituting for it a Record where the images of all past events remain forever "thinking the thought and doing the deed". They are in popular mysticism called "the pictures in the astral light", a term that became current in the middle of the nineteenth century, [...]. (*AVB*, 193)

Another paradigmatic symbol of the system of *A Vision* is the Mask. It exists alongside the Daimon and is deeply correlated to it; it presents human beings in their social guise, as they show themselves to others and how they appear. In *A Vision*, the Mask stands for the object of will and desire, "the 'ought' of things, the idea of the good, the object of desire" (Adams 1968, 252) and it is defined as one of the aspects of daimonic memory. The two cones correspond to the four faculties of human nature or aspects of Daimon's memory: two active and two passive. Yeats calls the active functions Will and the Creative Mind and the passive ones the Mask and the Body of Fate. The Will "or normal ego" (*AVB*, 83) is defined in *A Vision* as a "feeling that has not become desire because there is no object to desire; [...] an energy [...] the first matter of a certain personality-choice" (*AV A*, 14-15). Likewise, in *A Vision B*, it is described as a faculty that "has neither emotion, morality nor intellectual interest, but knows how things are done, how windows open and shut, how roads are crossed, everything that we call utility. It seeks its own continuance" (*AVB*, 83). The Creative Mind constitutes the creative intellect, innate thought, which "contains all the universals" (*AVE*, 86), or knows everything it learned during past lives and acts on outside events (*AVB*, 73-89). In terms of passive functions, the Mask is "the image of what we wish to become, or of that to which we give our reverence" (*AV A*, 15) and "[the] object of desire or idea of the good" (*AVB*, 83). The Body of Fate is "the physical and mental environment, the changing human body, the stream of Phenomena as this affects a particular individual, all that is forced upon us from without, Time as it affects sensation. If any reality exists outside us, it lies in the Body of Fate" (*AV A*, 15).

Referring to the two gyres, the four faculties are also depicted as the union of two opposing poles: the Will and the Mask are bound together and the Creative

Mind correlates to the Body of Fate. The active and personal forces, Will and the Creative Mind, i.e. imagination and the image of what we want to become, are at the peaks of the two cones, respectively; the passive forces, the Mask and Fate, or intellect and space, are at the two bases (*AVA*, 135). The conflict between the four faculties prevents us from understanding the meaning and ultimate aims of life because everything we know about it comes from our experiences of past lives. Will is the dominant faculty governing human lives up to the fifteenth phase: “It is man’s controlling force, [...]” (Adams 1968, 252). As the movement of the two gyres is opposing – the width of one corresponds to the limit of the other – obviously, the force related to the Will is inversely proportional to the force related to the mind, and the relationship between the Mask and Body of Fate is the same. The four faculties belong to every human being and are defined, as noted, by aspects of the daimonic memory (*AVB*, 83). When the faculties are in harmony with each other, they achieve the Unity of Being.

In addition to the four faculties another quaternary symbol appears in the Yeatsian system, that of the four principles. Yeats claims the existence of a cone exclusively correlated to the four principles, and another instead which is linked only to the four faculties. While the latter represents the cycle between birth and death, that of the principles symbolizes the phase between death and rebirth. Husk, Passionate Body, Spirit, and Celestial Body are the four principles. They are respectively linked to Will, Mask, Creative Mind, and Body of Fate. The principles represent the supernatural element, the solar cycle in which the human soul is reincarnated. It is interesting to observe how in *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) by Sinnett, and in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) by Blavatsky, the two authors illustrate a system made up of seven principles. Yet, the theosophical system assigns a different task and goal to each principle. Determining the different hierarchical levels of spirituality, which Man must go through (from the lowest represented by sensitive reality to the highest represented by spiritual), the principles are defined as “sheaths of the soul”, as William Quan Judge explains in *Lucifer*<sup>5</sup>:

These sheaths are necessary if the Soul is to know or to act. For it cannot by itself understand Nature at all, but transforms instantly all sensations and ideas by means of the different sheaths, until in the process it has directed the body below, or obtained itself experience above. By this I mean that whatever Soul initiates, it has to pass along through the several sheaths, each reporting, as it were, to the one next below it; and in like manner they report from below upward in the case of sensations from natural phenomena and impressions on the outside. (Quan Judge 2009, 324)

The lowest level coincides with the material world and is given by the principle defined as Physical Body (*Sthula Rupa*), totally divided from its own spiritual component. The two principles, which are found immediately above Physical Body, are the vital principle (*Prana* or *Jiwa*), and its vehicle, the Astral Body (*Linga Sharira*);

<sup>5</sup> The journal *Lucifer* was founded by Blavatsky and Mabel Collins (1851-1927) in 1887.

the fourth principle is known as Kama or Body of Desire. The fifth principle is Manas, the Mind, the human soul, whilst the sixth is Buddhi, the intellect or spiritual soul. Finally the seventh principle is Atman, the divine spark which coincides with pure spirit, the noumenic I, which is present in all beings – but only in its incomplete form: “[there] is but one Atma – Buddhi in our universe, the Universal Soul, everywhere present, immanent in all; the One Supreme Energy whereof all varying energies or forces are only differing forms” (Besant 1897, 78-79).

The progress of each spirit is firstly descendent, aiming to trespass Nature itself, and then successively ascendant or rather striving for a contact with the Divine. In addition, the seven theosophical principles are distinct from each other due to two discriminating factors: the position they occupy in the hierarchical scale, and their role. According to their position they are divided into two distinct ensembles: a quaternary, which is made up of four more material principles; and a ternary, made up of three more spiritual principles. As far as their role is concerned, three of the six theosophical principles (except for the Physical Body) absolve the function of vehicles towards the remaining three. In other words, Linga Sharira, Kama and Buddhi allow the realization respectively of Prana, Manas and Atman. The seven principles operate on the four planes of the real: physical, astral, mental, and spiritual. Shtula Rupa (Physical Body), Prana (Life Force) and Linga Sharira (Astral Body) act on the astral plane, Manas (Mind) on the mental plane, and finally Buddhi (Spiritual Soul) and Atman (Divine Spirit) on the spiritual plane (*ibidem*, 82-83).

In *A Vision*, Yeats too associates his four principles to the four planes of being: Husk corresponds to the physical plane; Passionate Body, which represents passion or the objects of desire (*AVA*, 160), belongs to the astral plane and is therefore associable to the fourth theosophical principle, Kama Rupa, or body of desire (*ibidem*, 20). *Spirit* leads back to the mental plane, and to *Manas*, while *Celestial Body*, being “*the portion of Eternal Life [...]*” (*AVA*, 160), belongs to the spiritual plane and is associable to the seventh theosophical principle, *Atman*.

The four principles have a particular function in the system of *A Vision*. Their reflecting capacity makes them able to reproduce the divine in the sensible, exactly as the universal matrix or Mirror, in Boehme, can reflect the divine desire of self-manifestation (Boehme 1764, 10-13). Such a manifestation of divinity is made possible through an analogical relationship or correspondence between the higher and lower forms. The aim of the Mirror is therefore to reflect divinity, or rather make the Trinity visible in Nature too. This function, which is carried out by Husk in the Yeatsian system and allows the manifestation of the principles, is absolved in Theosophy by the Double Etheric or Astral Body, which acts as a medium between the inferior principles and the superior ones. The principle of the Astral Body is intrinsically tied to the theosophical concept of Astral Light, which “pertains only to our earth and all our bodies of the system on the same plane of matter with it” (Blavatsky 1897 [1888], 500).

This spirit of the material world, known as Anima Mundi, belongs to every living being and is an androgynous principle. The male component has the spiritual

quality and the female one has the material part. The Anima Mundi represents a fundamental concept in the Yeatsian system. In the *Vision Papers*, the poet states that one of his four principles, Passionate Body, is the fruit of “astral” or “universal images” and is therefore part of the “[...] world memory opacity passionate body” (Yeats 1992, 390; henceforth *YVP*), or rather of the Anima Mundi. According to Theosophy, only in “the highly evolved man” (Besant 1897, 23) is the astral plane perceptible in a direct and conscious way. On the contrary, this is vaguely usable by “common” human beings only during the dream state, thanks to the Body of Desire.

In *A Vision*, Husk and Passionate Body are defined as lunar principles, while Spirit and Celestial Body as solar principles. As well, Creative Mind and Body of Fate are solar or primary faculties, while Will and Mask are lunar and antithetical. In Yeatsian words, the word *primary* is related to the “objectivity of mind” and focuses on “outward things and events rather than of inward thought”. Thus, primary mainly means “reasonable and moral”. By contrast, the word *antithetical* sends back to “our inner world of desire and imagination” and is therefore “emotional and aesthetic” (*AVB*, 73). Primary and antithetical principles and faculties lead Yeats’s opposite system. While the primary pole aims to reach unification and equality, the antithetical one is based on division and differentiation.

In *A Vision*, Yeats contemplates the myth of cyclic nature, “A purely cyclical theory of history dominated by the organic imagery of birth, growth, death, and birth [...]” (*AVA*, 43). A cyclical movement of history, which somehow includes and validates all the symbols that can be found in the System and that in turn refer to and elaborate the unitary and cyclical vision of history:

November 1917 had been given to an exposition of the twenty-eight typical incarnations or phases and to the movements of their Four Faculties, and then on December 6<sup>th</sup> a cone or gyre had been drawn and related to the soul’s judgement after death; and then just as I was about to discover that incarnations and judgement alike implied cones or gyres, one within the other, turning in opposite directions, two such cones were drawn and related neither to judgement nor to incarnations but to European history. (*AVB*, 11)

The Great Wheel with its 28 moon phases directly refers to the symbol of the Great Year with its 28 historical phases. Exactly as a human being goes through the 28 phases and incarnates for as many as 26 times<sup>6</sup>, in the same way the historical cycles move from 1 to 15 up to 28. Since each wheel is part of a larger wheel, phase 1 of one cycle may correspond to another phase of a longer cycle; besides, each phase contains a wheel within itself.

Now, by dividing the moon phases into sub-sets of eleven moons each, four quarters emerge. The first quarter is dominated by the element of Earth, by the faculty of Will and by the principle of Husk. In this first cycle, soul reincarnations

<sup>6</sup> “Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon, / The full and the moon’s dark and all the crescents, / Twenty and eight, and yet but six-and-twenty / The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in; / For there’s no life at the full or the dark” (*AVB*, 60).

begin, for "Phases between 1 and 8 are associated with elemental earth, being phases of germination and sprouting" (AVB, 93). According to the wheel of rebirth, phases 1-8 correspond to the childhood of the soul, which is still preserving its inherent innocence. However, the appearance of Will around phase 8 causes the loss of its *status nascendi*: "In the early phases one finds travellers, chroniclers, grammarians, geographers and the general multitude of obscure hunters, fishers and tillers of the ground who do not see beyond their trade. All are objective with objectivity not of intellect but of instinct" (YVP, 4, 29).

The two triadic phases of this cycle, which exactly go from 2 to 4 and from 5 to 7, are different in essence from each other, as they are characterized by the so-called "Opening and Closing of the Tinctures". The two *tinctures* represent the very origin of the dialectic tension that dominates the existence of each man. The first is the symbol of macrocosm, of objectivity, of knowledge and therefore of *primary*, while the other represents the microcosm, subjectivity, creativity and, as such, is *antithetical*. Ultimately, the two *tinctures* are the two opposite poles that we have already encountered as the solar and lunar opposites. Going back to their opening and closing, Yeats claims that they are open until phase 4, while they close again at phase 5. During their opening, the dominant *gyre* is the primary and objective one of the four principles, while the four faculties are at their weakest moment. However, as mentioned above, in this quarter Will begins affirming itself, causing the loss of innocence. As a matter of fact, the child starts relating to the world outside; this is the reason why the fifth phase is defined "Separation from Innocence". At this point, faculties take control, while principles keep losing it.

Mask (faculty) and Passionate Body (principle) dominate the second quarter. Water is its element. Phase 8, the West, is the one that opens this quarter; it is also "symbolised in the diagram of the "Great Wheel" as a cup, for it is an emotional or natural intoxication" (AVB, 258). This phase expresses a transitional moment between the primary cycle and the antithetical one, between objectivity and subjectivity, where *primary* and *antithetical* contend with each other for supremacy. However, it also represents the birth of individualism, knowledge and sensuality. The dominant faculty is the Mask, the symbol of desire and knowledge. The Mask, indeed, "before Phase 15 is described as a 'revelation' because through it the being obtains knowledge of itself, sees itself in personality" (AVB, 85). The phases featuring this cycle are emotional and antithetical. The opening and closing of the *tinctures* respectively coincide with Phase 11 and Phase 12, and so they entail: "[...] a reflecting inward of the Four Faculties: all as it were mirrored in personality, Unity of Being becomes possible. Hitherto we have been part of something else, but now discover everything within our own nature. Sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated. Personality seeks personality. Every emotion begins to be related to every other as musical notes are related. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating" (AVB, 88).

At the end of this second quarter, Will and Mask (antithetical faculties) have reached strength and power, therefore primary faculties are extremely weak, so

much that Creative Mind disappears in Will and Body of Fate in Mask. This is what happens in Phase 15: “Thought and will are indistinguishable, effort and attainment are indistinguishable; and this is the consummation of a slow process; nothing is apparent but dreaming Will and the Image that it dreams. Since Phase 12 all images, and cadences of the mind, have been satisfying to the mind just in so far as they have expressed this converging of will and thought, effort and attainment. The words ‘musical’, ‘sensuous’, are but descriptions of that converging process. The being has selected, moulded and remoulded, narrowed its circle of living, been more and more the artist, grown more and more ‘distinguished’ in all preference” (*AVB*, 135-136).

In the third quarter the dominant faculty is the Creative Mind and the element is Air “because through air, or space, things are divided from one another, and her intellect is at its height” (*AVB*, 93). The fifteenth phase geographically coincides with the South and is characterized by the symbol of the flower, embodying fleeting beauty. This phase makes up the centre of the wheel and the lunar phases, and it represents the moment when the individual gains a deeper knowledge of oneself. This quarter stands for the second half of human existence, from maturity to old age and death (which comes indeed at Phase 22). The dominant faculty and principle are respectively Creative Mind and Spirit, that is “intellect, as intellect was understood before the close of the seventeenth century – all the mind that is consciously constructive” (*AVA*, 15); but also, according to its antithetical form, imagination (*AVB*, 142). Phase 22 now represents the transitional moment when primary elements regain a dominant position.

Body of Fate and Celestial Body lead the last quarter, which is connected “with elemental fire, because here all things are made simple” (*AVB*, 93). This quarter exemplifies the last journey, the one towards the after-life, when man becomes aware of his lived life and of death, even though he is not able to accept it, yet: “Eyes spiritualised by death can judge / I cannot” (“Are You Content”, ll. 7-8). In Phase 22 (symbolised by the flower and located in the South) the self comes in contact with ultra-sensual reality; however, intellect cannot grasp it and in Phases 23, 24 and 25 the intellectual approach still struggles to prevail, together with perceptual knowledge. During the last three phases, on the contrary, “he [man] permits those senses and those faculties to sink in upon their environment. He will, if it be possible, not even touch or taste or see: ‘Man does not perceive the truth; God perceives the truth in man’ ” (*AVB*, 181). After the opening of the tinctures, the annihilation of personality takes place, and there is “a sharing of or submission to divine personality experienced as spiritual objectivity” (*AVB*, 88-89). Phase 28 is a kind of spiritual paralysis; here, the four faculties are not completely formed yet and its exemplary symbol is the Fool, whose incarnation represents the departure of man from perceptual reality:

Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents  
 The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow  
 Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel

Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter  
 Out of that raving tide – is drawn betwixt  
 Deformity of body and of mind. ("The Phases of the Moon", ll. 118-123)

In the first phase, the solar and primary element is dominant, while the prevailing faculties are Body of Fate and Creative Mind: "there is complete passivity, complete plasticity" (AVB, 183).

According to this division of the wheel of incarnations into four quarters, the transitional points that inaugurate each new quarter occur between the phases 26 and 27, 4 and 5, 12 and 13, 18 and 19. Between the twenty-seventh and the fourth phase "the Tinctures become one Tincture", between the fifth and the twelfth they "become two again", between the thirteenth and the eighteenth "each Tincture divides into two" and, at last, between the phase 19 to 26 they go back to two again, to become one all over again (AVA, 17).

This image of quarters and lunar phases clearly shows how beyond phases 8, 22, 15 and 1, each quarter consists of six phases or two triads. In the second edition of *A Vision*, generally known as *A Vision B*, Yeats states that the first phase of each triad represents the manifestation of power, the second the organization, and the third the preparation to the form of power that will appear in the new phase (AVB, 92-93):

Excluding the four phases of crisis each quarter consists of six phases, or of two sets of three. In every case the first phase of each set can be described as the manifestation of power, the second of a code or arrangement of powers, and the third of a belief, the belief being an appreciation of, or submission to, some quality which becomes power in the next phase. The reason of this is that each set of three is itself a wheel, and has the same character as the Great Wheel. (AVB, 93)

Yeats's formulation of the transmigration of souls, which he expresses through the symbolism of the lunar phases, the quarters and the thirteenth cone, takes us directly to the heart of Theosophy. Reincarnation after physical death is a concept that Blavatsky seems to inherit from Buddhist theory. According to Buddhism, the reincarnation cycle is an educational pilgrimage offered to man in order to learn how to separate himself from his material "bodies". She argues that this separation is made possible through the help of *Mahatma* or Teachers: they are human beings who have already accomplished their cycle of incarnations, but they have decided to remain into perceptual reality in order to help others to reach perfection. According to Blavatsky, man cannot reincarnate both in body and spirit, as only his most sublime part will be able to become immortal. Indeed, among the seven "bodies" that make up the human being – divine, monadic, spiritual, intuitive, mental, astral and physical – only the highest two are truly immortal, while the other five cannot reach this condition. In other words, Physical Body and Prana (or vital principle), which are the lowest principles, are placed in the Kama-loka or the place of desire (Blavatsky 1877, App. 32-33), as well as Linga Sharira (Etheric Double or Astral Body), Kama Rupa (Desire Body), and the lo-

wer part of Manas “are left behind in Kama-loka, firstly as material residue, then later on as a reflection on the mirror of Astral light. Endowed with illusive action [...]” (*ibidem*, App. 34). Therefore, only the highest triad made up by the higher part of Masas, Buddhi and Atman, will be able to reach the *Devachan*, that is the condition of happiness prior to reincarnation (*ibidem*, App. 34).

As the lunar or primary principles and phases are connected to the physical sphere and thus are mortal, the solar or antithetical principles and faculties, which are connected to the mental and spiritual sphere, are necessarily immortal. For this reason, while Husk and Passionate Body will disappear after physical death, since “Husk is sensuous and instinctive, almost the physical body during life, and after death its record” (AVA, 160), Spirit and Celestial Body will appear again (AVB, 188, 223-224). Spirit represents the principle of the individual soul or “mind” (AVB, 187) and, within the theosophical system, it appears to find many similarities with Manas. In *The Seven Principles of Man*, Annie Besant defines Manas as “[...] the immortal individual, the real ‘I,’ that clothes itself over and over again in transient personalities, and itself endures for ever” (Besant 1897, 29).

It is quite interesting to observe how both Spirit and Manas seem to have two distinctive parts in dialectical opposition with each other that take them in two antithetical directions. As a matter of fact, Manas gets attracted to Kama, the Body of Desire and the last mortal principle, as well as to Spiritual Soul, the second spiritual principle above which there is only Atman or Divine Spirit. In a similar way, Spirit also shows the same double attraction and split, which will get solved only through a process of growth that originates in lived life, but that will reach its completion in spiritual reality. In other words, even though Spirit is not likely to undergo any *Bildung* during its material existence because of its attraction for Passionate Body, nevertheless it will be able to elevate its gaze towards Celestial Body during its spiritual existence and overcome its materialistic craving. It is worth noting, at this regard, the divergent judgement Yeats and Blavatsky express in relation to the attractions to which the two principles under discussion are subject. Indeed, Theosophy considers the union between Manas and Kama as definitely negative, since it expresses Manas’s inability to free itself and fight against its condition of captivity, so that its *status* of dependence will only end with physical death. On the contrary, according to Yeats, Passionate Body’s power of attraction over Spirit during worldly life is the *conditio sine qua non* for its very incarnation: Spirit will only be able to completely embrace and understand ultra-sensual reality after having completed its worldly pilgrimage and having totally devoted itself to material life.

This contrast between the two systems is crucial to explain the different view that Yeats and the theosophists have of phenomenal and noumenic realities; a view that makes clear, at least up to some extents, the different goals of the two systems. While the theosophical approach to culture, and therefore implicitly to Truth, is essentially ascetic, Yeats’s approach is instead essentially pragmatic and empirical. Thus, if on one hand Theosophy aims at reconciling every contrasting principle in the primary unity and therefore at man’s abandoning the material world, on the other, Yeats, the “magician”, the new Faust, aims at reaching ultimate knowledge not

to ascend to *nirvana*, but, paradoxically, to remain in *samsara* in order to understand all its mysteries. He seems to be much more focused on each phase and on the “true” and real human beings to be found there, rather than on “the breaking of the circle (or hatching from the egg) and the return to “Great Eternity” [...]” (Besant 1893, 139). In Raine’s words, “Yeats was less preoccupied with release from the wheel than with the States themselves, as perhaps was Dante, whose “states” of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise are, like Yeats’s phases of the moon, peopled with many souls, with human individuals incomparably richer than are Blake’s and Swedenborg’s abstract Patriarchs, [...]. For Yeats release from the wheel was a remote possibility, while the States were charged with attraction and full of interest” (1986, 139).

After attending the theosophical lodge in London as an apprentice for a few months, Yeats realizes, to his great disappointment, that the privileged and undisputed object of these theosophical lectures is not the practical exercise of acquired notions, but rather a wider and deeper analysis of those same notions, from Neoplatonism to Cabbala, from Vedic to Tibetan philosophy (Ellmann 1989, 65), which allow the disciple to overcome the several trials of initiation facing him on his ascent of the ladder. It is not surprising then, how Yeats tries to convince the brotherhood of the necessity of reaching esoteric knowledge by using more practical tools. Eventually, in 1888, due to the pressure of a few “chelas” who wished to delve into the secrets of practical magic, Blavatsky decides to form an under section of the Theosophical Society, the Esoteric Section, only for her most eminent initiates<sup>7</sup>. Yeats joins the section and, during this time, he learns and understands the semantic and symbolic value of the seven principles and seven planes of being, as well as of the four natural elements, only to mention some of the main theosophical axioms (Yeats 1973, 23). Yet, contrary to the sterile practice of magic, which is dangerous when used without the necessary deep understanding of the ancient knowledge it stems from, Blavatsky goes on educating her disciples in the historical and critical study of the magical esoteric symbols, in order to provide them with a fertile ground to grow as theosophists. In 1888-1890, in the midst of his enthusiasm for occultism and yet unable to understand the importance of Blavatsky’s chosen method for revealing “God’s wisdom” to her disciples<sup>8</sup>, Yeats crosses the superimposed limits in the experimentation with the magical notions acquired – practical exercises that resulted in disaster. In 1890 Yeats is asked to resign from the great London lodge (Ellmann 1989, 69).

<sup>7</sup> “But in 1888 the Theosophists’ demand for magical instruction was so great that she resolved to form an Esoteric Section for the sincerest of her “chelas”. Yeats was delighted and joined the group soon after it was formed. He was eager to probe more deeply into Theosophical arcana, and he hoped too that the Esoteric Section would [...] (prove) that occult phenomena were possible [...]” (Ellmann 1989, 65-66).

<sup>8</sup> The time that Yeats spends in the Theosophical Society, and especially in the Esoteric Section, would later appear crucial and even necessary for his *Hodos Chameliontos* into the mysteries of occultism, and it certainly represents the first seed of the symbolic layers that make up *A Vision* (Hough 1984, 35).

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