

Yeats's Prose Work: A Vision

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Abstract: W.B. Yeats married Georgia Hyde-Lees on October 21, 1917. Like Yeats, she also believed in the existence of spirits, ghosts, etc. On 25 October, 1917, she attempted automatic writing for some time. When she came to herself, she told her husband that the automatic writing was dictated to her by some spirits. Yeats believed her and was glad to hear it. She continued her automatic writing in a mystic trance everyday thereafter. Later Yeats interpreted her automatic writing for himself. He systematized, and published it under the title "A Vision", in 1926. It was later revised in 1937. It is a prose work of philosophy of the progress of the civilization, of the progress of the human soul, and of life after death. Describing the nature of Yeats's presentation of his philosophical system, Peter Ure observes:

"A Vision presents his philosophy of (civilization) history, humankind, and life after death. What the 'Unknown Instructors,' who spoke through Mrs. Yeats, told him was a literalization of his own thoughts and beliefs; the classification of historical periods of men and women according to a scheme symbolized by the twenty-eight phases of moon, and the working of the gyres in history. History becomes a system of antithetical movements diagramed by the gyre, or spiral, traced round an imaginary core from apex to base: when the base is reached and the gyre is at its widest, the civilization collapses in a violent reversal, and the new gyre begins again at the narrow apex of the cone."

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The Great Wheel : Yeats writes that each cycle of world history, a round of incarnations, etc. can be grasped by the mental image of a great wheel. The image can also represent a period of thousands of years, called Kalpa in Hindu mythology. Explaining Yeats's point of view, A.G. Stock observes:

"Yeats says that any complex movement of life or thought may be seen in these terms: a single sustained action, a life, a series of incarnations, the universe itself,

so far as the mind can grasp it. The idea is presented in a diagram ‘of the Great Wheel’, which represents the Platonic year or the ‘Kalpa’ in Hindu mythology, It is in the likeness of the Moon, with its twenty-eight phases clearly marked. The phases represent the total number of the basic types of personality, each arranged on the wheel opposite its ‘mask’ or ‘anti-mask’. Out of these two phases, i.e. phase one (dark moon) and phase fifteen (full moon) constitute pure types, which no human being could represent. The remaining types are broadly divided into primary or solar, and antithetical or lunar type, which Jung has described extrovert and introvert types. The Great Wheel also represents ‘the twenty- eight phases of each cycle of the world history.’”

The Wheel, The Soul, And the Birth of Christ :The twenty-eight marks on the Great Wheel are, as it were, the twenty-eight spokes of the wheel. They represent twenty-eight types of the human personality as well as the twenty-eight phases of the moon which is a symbol of the human soul, too. So the phases imply that the human soul passes through twenty-eight during the period of one Kalpa. The twenty-eight spokes also indicate twenty-eight incarnations during one Kalpa. They also indicate ‘the twenty-eight’ basic phases of each cycle of the world history. Yeats adds: ‘phase one is the Birth of the Christ, two is the Second Coming.’ About himself Yeats says that he belongs to phase seventeen, so did Landor, Dante and Shelley.

Two Poles: Supernatural Beings :Yeats explains his theory of spiritual progress and of the cycle of civilization by means of geometrical diagrams and unfamiliar conceptions such as cones, gyres, husks, daimons, tinctures, passionate bodies, etc. He also envisages two poles of the wheel- the pole of complete objectivity and that of complete subjectivity. The soul’s journey from one to the other is represented by the orbit of the moon. The dark of the moon is the pole of complete objectivity. The full moon is the pole of complete subjectivity. At these two poles of the wheel human life is impossible. There are only supernatural beings. “But along the circumference of the circle, between these two ultrahuman poles, there occur twenty-six phases which cover all possible types of human personality.”

The nature of the two opposite poles demands further explanation. In fact, they are the two phases in the progress of the soul towards self-realization. They are the two phases

out of the twenty-eight described by Yeats. The soul itself is the moon. When it is completely dark, it is lost in nature completely. It is not possible for the soul in the human form. Further, when the soul is at the full moon stage, it is completely involved in its own glory, entirely oblivious of nature. This is also not possible for the human soul, which is always in the meshes of the objective and the subjective worlds.

Four Faculties of the Incarnate Man :Yeats then describes four faculties of the “incarnate man,” that is, the soul in human form. They are: the Will, the Mask, the Creative Mind, and the Body of Fate. The Will is the sheer vital energy, the drive towards self-realization. It sets before the soul “an image shaped from moments of exaltation in past lives.” It is an image “of all it can conceive as the most admirable, all that is most opposite to its actual incarnate self”, and the will strives towards it. The second thing is the Mask, which is the image described above. By virtue of the stirrings of the Will and the Mask, the soul moulds itself from within. The third thing is the Creative Mind. It is a kind of the memory of ideas and general principles imbibed in past lives. As such, it is the power of thought which is unborn. It enables the soul to understand all the circumstances which affect it from the objective and the subjective worlds. The fourth thing is the Body of Fate. It is the sum total of the physical, mental, environmental, and social circumstances in which the soul is born and has to make its progress. It also involves Time. Yeats explains it as follows: “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.”

Progressive Movement of the Soul: The soul starts at the right of the objective pole, and passes first through the bodies of physical life- of the Bacchuses and of the shepherds of the poets. It is moving towards subjectivity as did the souls of Walt Whitman and Alexander Dumas. It is seeking itself, and when it is near self-realization, it becomes beautiful. The ultra-human subjective phase, which has produced Christ, is “a phase of complete beauty,” in which “Thought and Will are indistinguishable, effort and attainment are indistinguishable- nothing is apparent but dreaming Will and the image that it dreams.” This phase is preceded and followed by the phase in which the soul is as advanced as that of Baudelaire or Beardsley, Keats or Giorgione, Blake or Rabelais, Dante or Shelley. It is the soul of the man who has withdrawn from the life of the world in order to live in his

dream. After the all-subjective phase, the soul “would be the world’s servant.” As it serves the world, it takes upon itself the coarseness of the drudge, loses its beauty, and moves towards deformity. It has moved full circle by now. There still remain three final human phases for the human soul. They are the Hunch-back, the Saint, and the Fool. After them, there will be the phase of complete objectivity, again. Yeats describes all the twenty-eight phases of the soul. But in his description there is a conflict between reality and imagination, action and philosophy.

Progress of Civilization :Civilization, according to Yeats, moves from the objective to the subjective direction. The period of progress consists of ages. Christ’s age stands for Objectivity, Renaissance for Subjectivity. One civilization is followed by another of antithetical nature. For example, the Christian civilization is now almost at its fag end. The signs of a new civilization are brewing in the offing. To use Yeats’s words:

... “The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre regardless of the greatest expansion and of the other to that of its onward, unlike that birth of Christ which was narrowing, and almost reached the greatest expansion. The revelation, which approaches, will, however, take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. The future civilization will be ‘hierarchical, multitude, masculine, harsh, surgical’ as the Christian era has been ‘dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, human, peace its means and end.’”

Drawbacks in the System of a Vision :The main weakness in the philosophical system of ‘A Vision’ is that its universe has no God, no controlling power except that which hurls the soul into rebirths and causes it to move through twenty-eight phases. The soul endures a lot of purgatory, which burns the evils of its past life till it is ready to be reborn. So a critic remarks:

“The system expounded in ‘A Vision’ confirms Yeats’s fast division between natural and supernatural Here the supernatural, as spiritual reality, is virtually eliminated, existing only as a blind power driving the wheel of birth and rebirth in which man and the cosmos are involved. The system is rigidly deterministic. Man, according to it, is an inert caught up in a cyclic mechanism of successive

incarnations in which he passes from pure subjectivity to pure objectivity, the tension between which poles of being determines fate, life and character. Human life exists for no purpose beyond its own mere being, nor is there seemingly any escape from the wheel. Thus, by implication, moral effort is redundant. The individual is freed from all responsibilities. There is obviously no place for the human emotions, love, pity, and the rest...”

Two Main Elements of the System :There are two main elements of Yeats’s system in ‘A Vision’. First, he categorizes, human beings in order to see them as souls of different degrees of self-realization, and then to see them as mythological figures. Second, he sees the progress of civilizational history as a series of cyclical movements, a thesis following an antithesis, and so on. He says a lot, but he proves almost nothing. At one place he is himself sceptical of the truth of his system. He says that the whole thing may be merely a background for my thought, a painted scene.”

The System- A Myth :The modern age cannot believe in the philosophy of ‘A Vision’ whose essentials are supposed to have been dictated by spirits. So modern critics remark that Yeats’s system, as expounded in ‘A Vision’, is not a philosophy. It is rather a myth which consists of the fragments of many myths. “In the doctrine, as he formulated it, there are elements from many sources; but the proportions of the complete design are neither Christian, Hindu, nor Buddhist, but pagan; both the supernaturalism and the love of life are of a pagan kind.”

‘A Vision’- Its Effects on Yeats :Mrs. Yeats told her husband that the spirits said to her as follows: ‘We have come to give you metaphors for poetry.’ Yeats believed her and employed in his poems such metaphors as “gyres”, “Second Coming”, “The Wheel”, “Byzantium”, etc. Then after 1926, Yeats began to write poems to substantiate the principles of the system in ‘A Vision’. For example, in The Second Coming he represents the idea that the Christian civilization will be followed by that of a prophet “with lion body and head of a man.” So critics have remarked that ‘A Vision’ proved to Yeats’s later poetry “a scaffolding”- a framework for poetic themes. Yeats admitted the charge as follows:

“I do not know what my book will be to others. Nothing perhaps. To me it means a last act of defense against the chaos of the world, and I hope for ten years to write out of my renewed security.”

And after the publication of *A Vision* (1926), Yeats frequently employed some of its concepts as metaphors, and its doctrines as themes of his poems.

Sources of Doctrines Treated in ‘A Vision’: His critics have traced out the sources of the doctrines he has treated of in ‘A Vision’. For example, the concept of the Self and the doctrine of the movement of civilization as a series of cyclical processes came to him from Empedocles, Heracleitus, and Pluto. The doctrine of the twenty-eight phases of the soul’s progress was his own, but built upon the beliefs of Swedonborg, Blake, Gregor Mathers, and others, in the existence of different kinds of spirits.

Conclusion: A.G. Stock observes: “In the final form ‘A Vision’ amounts to a summing-up of Yeats’s own sense of values in a system of thought about the soul in and beyond life, and also about the meaning of history, all worked out in a geometrical symbolism, based on the esoteric doctrines in which he and his wife had both become adepts. It is coherent but not simple. The general lines are easy to grasp, but innumerable details branch out from them and fly away in many patterns”. Because of its origin from the supernatural dictation, its bizzare terminology, and its “believe-me” philosophy. ‘A Vision’ is an awkward work to enjoy. Yet the knowledge of the essentials of its doctrines and ideas is a must for a student of Yeats’s poetry composed and published after 1926. Why did Yeats write it? T. S. answers this question as follows: ‘A Vision’ has been written as a reaction against the growing materialism and the advances of the demon science which shattered faith in religion. Many came to believe in the illogical dualism of religion and science. But Yeats makes his own private religion and sums it up in ‘A Vision’.

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