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YEATS AND A PLACE BEYOND

The origins of Yeats's interest in a universe divided between the supernatural and the natural can be traced to his childhood. As a young boy, during his stays in the West of Ireland, particularly Sligo, he was constantly exposed to local tales of the faery world and supernatural events. He "spent a great deal of time wandering about the countryside talking to the country people, listening to their stories."¹ One incident which helped to confirm the poet's belief in the other world, divided from everyday life, was a premonition which came true. Yeats recalls the premonition he received in a dream. It happened on the day on which his grandmother had pointed to a red light on a steamer and explained that "my grandfather was on board." That night, "in my sleep I screamed out and described the steamer's wreck."² Some time later news of the wreck of the ship with Yeats's grandfather aboard was reported. He tells of another strange incident that happened in his childhood:

I had a little flagstaff in front of the house and a red flag with the Union Jack in the corner. Every night I pulled my flag down and folded it up and laid it on a shelf in my bedroom, and one morning before breakfast I found it, though I knew I had folded it up the night before, knotted round the bottom of the flagstaff so that it was touching the grass. I must have heard the servants talking of the faeries, for I concluded at once that a faery had tied those four knots . . .³

As a young boy Yeats continued to experience inexplicable phenomena. In *Autobiographies* he relates an incident which happened in Ballisodare. He tells how he witnessed a strange light on Knocknarea race to the top of the mountain at a speed that would out-do any mortal. He says,

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore. Legend and Myth* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. xix.

² W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Bracken Books, 1995), p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*

I timed it on my watch and in five minutes it reached the summit, and I, who had often climbed the mountain, knew that no human footstep was so speedy.⁴

George Mills Harper quotes Yeats portraying himself as an inquisitive young boy fascinated by the esoteric and the arcane:

When we were schoolboys we used to discuss whatever we could find to read of mystical philosophy and to pass crystals over each others' hands and eyes and fancy that we could feel a breath flowing from them.⁵

The knowledge that a person whom one knows has been involved in a mysterious incident lends that event a greater credibility. Yeats was familiar with the stories concerning his uncle's servant, Mary Battle. Yeats was told of this woman's second sight:

One morning she was about to bring [George Pollexfen's] clean shirt, but stopped, saying there was blood on the shirt-front and that she must bring him another. On his way to his office he fell, crossing over a little white wall, and cut himself and bled onto the linen where she had seen the blood. In the evening, she told him that the shirt she had thought bloody was quite clean.⁶

Yeats continues to reflect upon Mary Battle:

Probably through long association with Mary Battle, the second sighted servant [George Pollexfen] had come to believe much in the supernatural world, and would tell how several times, arriving home with an unexpected guest, he had found the table set for three . . .⁷

Yeats became increasingly interested in and convinced of the existence of powers beyond the physical universe. Division, opposition and the interaction of these worlds engage the poet. "The Stolen Child," for example, exploits the division between faeries and human beings. The faeries belong to one world and mankind to another. Yeats places the ethereal in direct opposition to the worldly and explores the relationship between these two worlds:

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵ W. B. Yeats, cited in: George Mills Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), p. 2.

⁶ W. B. Yeats, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," in: *Autobiographies*, p. 70.

⁷ "Hodos Chameliontos," *ibid.*, p. 258.

Till the moon has taken flight;
 To and fro we leap
 And chase the frothy bubbles
 While the world is full of troubles
 And is anxious in its sleep . . .⁸

The description of faeryland is presented as the antithesis of mortal existence. The portrayal of this "other" world is charmingly Keatsian and evocative of a Utopia. The mortal child of the poem is tempted away from his earthly life. He is bewitched by the powers of the unearthly creatures, so much so, that he abandons everything that is earthly and familiar to him. He leaves one world for another. He travels through the portal between the two worlds and totally rejects his mortal life. It is not until the boy's rejection of things worldly is complete that the faeries begin to torment him with comforting images of his homeland. It is not until the human child has entered the world of the faeries that the underlying sinister tone of the poem surfaces:

Away with us he's going,
 The solemn-eyed:
 He'll hear no more the lowing
 Of the calves on the warm hillside
 Or the kettle on the hob
 Sing peace into the breast,
 Or see the round mice bob
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
 For he comes, the human child,
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.⁹

Once one has entered the world of the faeries there is no going back. The final stanza seems to warn the reader against total surrender to either the world of faeries or to the world of humans. Those of the faery world balance the pleasant images of the human world but, at the same time, the less pleasant images of both worlds are also balanced.

What can be understood from a reading of this poem is, not only Yeats's interest in faeryland but also, his interest in opposites, division, balance and interconnection. One may interpret the poem as a warning by Yeats against a life, unbalanced between the "other" world and that of humankind. He seems to be saying that in order to achieve a complete and content life one must experience balance, a balance between both

⁸ W. B. Yeats, "The Stolen Child," in: Norman Jeffares, ed. *Yeats's Poems* (Dublin: Macmillan, 1974), p. 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*

worlds of the earthly and the spiritual. To reject either of these worlds totally is to deny oneself half of a whole experience. To experience both existences is the path to completeness and unity. In order to experience seemingly polarised existences one must have access to both worlds. It is the interconnection between these two spheres of existence that becomes a unifying theme throughout much of the poetry of W. B. Yeats.

As he grew older, Yeats began to consider seriously the possibility that powers may exist outside the realm of nature. He became increasingly intrigued by unexplained phenomena. As a young man Yeats met someone who was to lead him towards serious exploration of the world of the arcane. This was George William Russell, alias *AE*.

In 1884 Yeats met Russell, a painter and visionary, at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. Their friendship helped to crystallise Yeats's thoughts upon an existence divided into natural and supernatural elements. *AE* shared his own visionary experiences with the intrigued Yeats. Peter Kuch claims:

Russell would paint effortlessly, without preliminary sketch or working diagram, representations of the image that apparently rose spontaneously before his imagination. Sometimes there were scenes depicting the spiritual history of other worlds and other incarnations.¹⁰

Kuch continues:

While holidaying with some relatives in Armagh [Russell] suddenly began to experience hypnagogic visions – “waking dreams” as he used to call them – of astonishing power and vividness which seem to thrust themselves into his unconscious mind.¹¹

Yeats became increasingly eager to establish the source of these visions.¹² After *AE* had made several predictions that came true, Yeats began to believe that his friend's visions had their origins in supernatural forces.¹³ Yeats's interest in the interrelationship between two separated worlds was heightened.

In 1885 Yeats and *AE* came across a book that was to focus their interests and lead them towards a new stage of development. It was *Esoteric Buddhism*, a book written by a prominent theosophist, A. P. Sinnett. Kuch comments:

So while Russell turned to Sinnett's books for moral exhortation and greater spiritual understanding, Yeats read them to study the supernatural.¹⁴

¹⁰ Peter Kuch, *Yeats and A.E.* (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1986), p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 243.

¹⁴ P. Kuch, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Kuch also gives a definition of theosophy:

Theosophy, in the general sense, is a term used to denote those forms of philosophic and religious thought, which claim a special insight into the process. These special insights may be the result of supernatural revelations.¹⁵

One of the attractions of theosophy for Yeats would have been its acceptance of faeries, supernatural beings and the belief in a realm beyond the laws of nature. George Mills Harper claims that it was Yeats's interest in Sinnett that led to the formation of the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885.¹⁶

An Indian theosophist, Mohini Chatterjee came to lecture on Esoteric Buddhism and the Indian philosophy of Sankara in the Dublin Hermetic Society. Chatterjee spoke of division within human beings and between "reality" and the imagination:

... the whole emphasis of Sankara is on inner realisation, and not on any other realisation, and not on any other action or desire that might ultimately lead to action. The only "real" life is that of the imagination, of dreaming and contemplation. Only the self is worth pondering, for all that matters is said to centre in it.¹⁷

One cannot help but think of Samuel Beckett's trilogy at this point. The trilogy presents an interesting challenge to the idea of the self. Nonetheless, Yeats became increasingly surrounded by ideas and people who emphasised the division between this world and the other.

Another important figure in the development of Yeats's thought process was Madame Blavatsky. Blavatsky, a leading theosophist of her time, professed to be a mediator between the material and the spiritual worlds. She claimed to have access to higher power and to a secret wisdom:

She had access, she said, to an oral tradition, for the true and secret doctrine had never been allowed to disappear completely even from a degenerate earth.¹⁸

She claimed that this secret knowledge and wisdom was communicated to her from her "Masters":

Madame Blavatsky claimed that she had been granted her spiritual authority by a Brotherhood of Masters, which had existed for thousands of years in Tibet. She professed to be their chosen medium, called to reveal important truths for what was soon to be a crucial period in the world's spiritual history.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ G. Mills Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ P. Kuch, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats The Man and the Masks* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 59.

¹⁹ P. Kuch, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

It was this communication, Madame Blavatsky claimed, that fed Yeats's belief in the supernatural. It was his search for answers that led Yeats into the esoteric section of Blavatsky's Theosophical Society.

In 1888 Yeats joined the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, but was later expelled. A short period of time before his expulsion from the society, for what Alasdair Macrae describes as "conducting psychic experiments without the Section's approval,"²⁰ Harper quotes a letter from Yeats to a friend describing,

. . . experiments lately made by me, Ellis, Mrs Bensant etc. in clairvoyance, I being the mesmerist; and experiments in which a needle suspended from a silk thread under a glass case has moved to and fro and round in answer to my will, and will of one or two others who have tried, no one touching the glass, some experiments too of stronger nature.²¹

Roy Foster claims that Yeats's "inclination was towards the more 'spiritist' school, believing in supernatural survival rather than looking for psychological explanation."²²

In 1890, a short time after his expulsion, Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Although many of the beliefs of the society were similar to those of the theosophists there was one major difference. The Golden Dawn permitted the practice of magical experiments. Harper describes Yeats as a "seeker" and this is the role he was able to play in the Golden Dawn.²³ The poet moved deeper and deeper into the world of magical practice and theory. He became increasingly fascinated with summoning spirits, evoking visionary forms and dabbling in telepathy. He became preoccupied with the world beyond the mortal.

Within the Golden Dawn Yeats learnt the significance of symbols. In an essay "Magic" he sets out his belief in the efficacy of symbols as a power that lies outside the laws of nature:

I find another record . . . of having imagined over the head of a person, who was a little seer, a combined symbol of elemental air and elemental water. This person who did not know what symbol I was using, saw a pigeon flying with a lobster in his bill.²⁴

In *Autobiographies* Yeats reveals an experiment carried out by Mathers McGregor and himself with the use of symbols:

²⁰ Alasdair Macrae, *W. B. Yeats. A Literary Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), p. 47.

²¹ Cited in: G. Mills Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²² Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats. A Life The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 462.

²³ G. Mills Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁴ W. B. Yeats, "Magic", in: *Ideas Upon Good and Evil* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1905), pp. 61-62.

He gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes. Sight came slowly, there rose before me mental images that I could not control . . . a desert and a black Titan rising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins . . .²⁵

Their fundamental interest was in attempting "to attain psychic phenomena or visions as a result of meditation on certain chosen symbols and to practise magical rituals."²⁶

These factors, his childhood experiences, his interest in ancient Eastern and arcane teachings, his acquaintance with Sinnett, Blavatsky and Chatterjee and his membership of the Golden Dawn all contribute to the poetry of Yeats and to the complexity of his philosophical thought.

A brief exposition of the Rosicrucian Order is necessary to explain the origins of the symbols in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time." It will also help to highlight the poet's ever-increasing fascination with magic, superhuman wisdom and a bi-polar universe.

The Order has had considerable influence on other arcane orders such as the Masonic Order and the Order of the Golden Dawn. It takes its name from its putative founder, Father Christian Rosencreutz. In translation the name Rosencreutz means rose cross or cross of roses. The symbol of the Rosicrucians is the rose combined with the cross, "the dark rose symbolised sacrifice and hardships and the light rose, delectation and reward."²⁷ The rose was also the central symbol of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Rosencreutz was said to have obtained a secret and sacred wisdom. As a young boy he travelled to the holy lands, Turkey and Arabia. It was there that he was supposed to have acquired his wisdom and secret knowledge.²⁸ Kurt Seligmann describes Rosencreutz as a mediator between the natural and the supernatural. The similarities between these claims for Rosencreutz and those for Madame Blavatsky are obvious.

Whatever wisdom has come to man, through God's grace, by the angels and the spirits, through sagacity and observation - all has been known by our Father RC.²⁹

Seligmann continues:

The Rosicrucian game was, like the ancient initiation rites, a serious one. Its motive was true magic, not make-believe. Magic symbolised man's power over the material world, the belief that through thought and action he could ascend into the realms where all men were brothers. Such an achievement was magic on a level higher than that of making a broomstick walk.³⁰

²⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 56.

²⁶ G. Mills Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁷ Kurt Seligmann, *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1971), p. 290.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

There is no doubt about the influence of the Rosicrucian movement on Yeats's poetry. He uses the symbol of the interconnected rose and cross in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time." This poem, again, highlights the poet's interest in a realm beyond mortality. It is interesting to note its mystical overtones. The poet summons some other force that lies outside the boundaries of nature. Yeats longs to become engulfed and possessed by this all-powerful and unseen force. There is something ritualistic in the chant-like tone of the first two lines of each stanza. The repetition evokes a hypnotic atmosphere. The poet's deep meditative state, focused upon the rose, suggests to the reader the experiments with symbols conducted in the Golden Dawn. At times the poet seems to be on the verge of a trance-like state. The magical overtones of this poem highlight a preoccupation with a world which is real, though separate from everyday human experience.

"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" is also important as it shows Yeats's exploration of divisions and opposites. Significantly, it also portrays the interconnection of divided opposites. The two central symbols, that of the rood and that of the rose, represent the polarised worlds of paganism and Christianity. They also represent the worldly and the spiritual. Yeats does more than simply juxtapose these symbols, he fuses them together so much so that they become part of each other. For Yeats the rose represents many things, unity, perfection, Maud Gonne, eternal beauty, Ireland, the supernatural, the imagination and all that is powerful. It is a symbol that brings everything into a unity of existence. Significantly though, in this case, the rose symbolises all that is spiritual and immortal. However, the poet also recognises its time-bound beauty and mortal significance. It is a symbol that also represents the unity of being and the "reconciliation and union of natural and spiritual."³¹ The rood, on the other hand, represents Christianity and all that is worldly. Yet the rood also has immortal connotations, as Christ represents that which is divinely spiritual. It is the fusion of these seemingly different symbols, and the worlds that they signify, that allows Yeats to achieve a fullness of experience and existence. Unlike the mortal child in "The Stolen Child" he refuses to become engulfed by the immortal world. As he calls upon the power of the rose to imbue him, he suddenly remembers the dangers of living a limited life:

Come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!
Lest I no more hear common things that crave;

³¹ Thomas L. Byrd Jr., *The Early Poetry of W. B. Yeats, The Poetic Quest* (New York: Kennikat Press Corporation, 1978), p. 102.

The weak-worm hiding down in its small cave,
 The field mouse running by me in the grass;
 And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass . . .³²

Yeats fuses these divided worlds into an sort of amalgam. Both worlds are able to interact. He creates a divided unity in which they exist.

Another reading of the poem also emphasises the poet's interest in division, opposites, amalgamation and interconnection. It is interesting to consider the division between rose and rood in terms of female and male. For Yeats the rose can also symbolise a woman and the rood, a man.³³

From Mathers and the Rosicrucian rituals Yeats learned of the conjunction of the Rose (with four leaves) and the Cross, making a fifth element, a mystic marriage; the Rose possessed feminine sexual elements, the Cross masculine; the Rose was the flower that bloomed on the Sacrifice of the Cross.³⁴

In a sense, this is one of the more obvious dichotomies within society. However, it is the very essence of the differences between a woman and a man that can lead to unification, sexual amalgamation. It is the nature of division between the two that ultimately leads to birth and regeneration. From day to day, week to week and month to month the cycle continues in its neatness of repetition, division, union and birth.

It is the division and difference between nature and spirit that allows us to recognise the differences between the two. To acknowledge division is an essential step towards the understanding of wholeness. Without recognition of division, unification may prove impossible.

Throughout Yeats's poetry he recognises the differences between entities, be they mortality, immortality, the natural or the supernatural, reality or imagination. After recognising their differences he seeks a way of unifying, appeasing or amalgamating the divided. Ellmann states:

If [Yeats] contrasts the natural world with a more ideal or supernatural one, it is to conclude that "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed." His work can be read as a concerted effort to bring such contrasting elements as man and divinity, man and his ideal, into a single circle.³⁵

"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" may be seen as a poem that acts as a forerunner to the poetry which follows it. It is a poem that highlights more than Yeats's interests in opposites, balance, amalgamation,

³² W. B. Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," in: Norman Jeffares, Warwick Gould, *Yeats's Poems* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), p. 65.

³³ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 65.

³⁴ N. Jeffares, W. Gould *op. cit.*, p. 496.

³⁵ R. Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 7.

the supernatural and the existence of both spiritual and natural elements within the universe. Depending on the interpretation of the rose as a symbol, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" is also about Ireland, politics, love and Maud Gonne. It underscores the fullness of life and meaning. It is a poem that illustrates a wholeness and unity of life.

"The Two Trees" again illustrates Yeats's preoccupation with opposition, division, balance, amalgamation and interconnectedness. It also gives an insight into his pursuit of kabbalistic practices within the Golden Dawn. As Unterecker points out:

The basic imagery of this poem is drawn from the passage [Yeats] had read in Mathers' *The Kabbalah Unveiled* about the birds – Mathers identified them as souls and angels – which lodge and build their nests in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.³⁶

The Kabbalah Unveiled is an in-depth study of magical practise and supernatural powers.

"The Two Trees" demonstrates Yeats's interest in psychic experimentation. Of particular significance is the poem's connection with a vision that a young girl was reported to have had:

Shortly before [Yeats] had read Mathers' account he had wathed a young Catholic girl who, in a trance, had claimed to see the tree of Life with ever-sighing souls moving in its branches instead of sap, and among its leaves all the fowl of the air.³⁷

Yeats was so intrigued by the similarity between the girl's vision and passages in *The Kabbalah Unveiled* that he set about writing "The Two Trees." This poem not only explores an unexplained power that lies outside the "norm", but it displays starkly division within unity. In doing so it echoes the divided unity of "The Stolen Child" and "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time." The title of this poem suggests two separate trees. The trees are in fact part of one tree. Although they are separated they are not separate. Yeats describes two aspects of the same tree.

The first stanza presents the image of the Tree of Life. The Kabbalistic Tree of Life is a spiritual tree, presented as organised, blossoming and in harmony with its surroundings.³⁸ Yeats creates a peaceful and harmonised image of the Tree of Life as he commends subjectivity to his beloved. He encourages her to reach into herself to find truth and the wholeness of

³⁶ John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1959), p. 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Barbara L. Croft, *Stylistic Arrangements* (Lewisburg: Associated University Press, 1987), p. 53.

self. The poet creates an image that promotes organisation, fullness and gaiety:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colours of its fruit;
The surety of its hidden root.³⁹

The organised image is continued when the birds of the tree are described as circling and soaring in a controlled and calculated way. Unterecker claims that "no image can exist without its opposite."⁴⁰ Yeats goes on to present the reader with the antithesis of the holy tree.

It the second stanza Yeats presents an image of the Tree of Knowledge. This tree is the holy tree's opposite in every way. Unterecker states that in this stanza "opposing the world of spirit is the world of flesh and blood and the 'bitter glass' which we look into when we live exclusively for practical and worldly ends."⁴¹ The tree of Knowledge is a dying and decaying tree. The branches are no longer filled with flowers and leaves but are described as having "broken boughs" and "blackened leaves." The once organised and swooping birds of stanza one have been replaced by the calamity of savage birds:

The ravens of unresting thought;
Flaying, crying, to and fro,
Cruel claw and hungry throat,
Or else they stand and sniff the wind,
And shake their ragged wings; alas!
Thy tender eyes grow all unkind . . .⁴²

The leaves of the holy tree are no longer ignorant, knowledge has come to give "unresting thought."⁴³

It is important to remember that although both images are polarised and divided they are part of each other. Each image is the counter image of the other. In this way both Trees have a direct relationship with one another and can therefore never be totally severed. Unterecker says that "each reflects precisely one-half of that enigmatic man-shaped kabbalistic

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, "The Two Trees," in: N. Jeffares, W. Gould (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁴⁰ J. Unterecker, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² W. B. Yeats, "The Two Trees," p. 83.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

tree which stands between them."⁴⁴ He draws the symmetrical pattern of the relationship between the two trees:

Tree of Life	[The Self]	Tree of Knowledge
Spirit		Flesh
Man's heart		The world
Inner truth		Outer falsehood
Peaceful ignorance		Unresting thought

"The Two Trees" displays Yeats's search for unity in dualism and it seems to illustrate Longley's phrase, "the fundamental interconnectedness of all things."⁴⁵ Mankind may be seen as being made up of spirit and flesh, subjectivity and objectivity, ignorance and unresting thought, however these elements are all interconnected. As Unterecker claims that "only in name are there two trees. Their images, placed back to back form one design."⁴⁶

The Tree of Life, as a symbol, is telling of Yeats's interest in spiritualism. Here he makes evident his interest in a world or state of being that is set in contrast to nature. In Kabbalistic terms the Tree of Life is a pathway towards the spiritual and a higher plane of consciousness. Using the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, Barbara Croft explains the unification of oneself with the spiritual:

The Saint can travel straight [up the tree] and so, beyond matter, while the poet must wonder in nature through the connections between Sephiroth until he completes the path and is united with the spiritual. The other way to achieve a union with the spiritual world is by a zigzag path, the sudden illumination from above, the lightning of vision. This is the reward of those who keep to the winding path.⁴⁷

Yeats considers the attempt to achieve union with the spiritual world in "Sailing to Byzantium." Norman Jeffares quotes Yeats:

Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city.⁴⁸

In order to achieve closeness to the spirit world of immortality Yeats must escape from the ravages of time. He must slide from one existence to another and from one world to another. His desire to shift between divided

⁴⁴ J. Unterecker, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ Michael Longley, "According to Pythagoras," in: *The Ghost Orchid* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 8.

⁴⁶ J. Unterecker, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Barbara L. Croft, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Cited in: N. Jeffares, W. Gould (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 576.

existences reminds the reader of his magical practises and his attempts to make contact with a place beyond nature. The poet prepares to leave his old age and mortal life behind in the first two stanzas. He prepares for a transition to a world that lies beyond ordinary humanity. As he does so, he places these two worlds in sharp dualistic contrast, one with the other. He portrays them as polarised, antagonistic opposites:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 – Those dying generations – at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh of fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect . . .⁴⁹

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 come⁵⁰

Yeats wishes to travel to a place where art, perfection, completion, wisdom, beauty, the imagination, the possession of intense feeling and thought exist in a unity of immortality. For Yeats, Byzantium represents a place of unity and wholeness. It is a place where the divided and different can exist in harmony. Jeffares quotes Yeats's thoughts upon Byzantium:

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one.⁵¹

Prior to reaching this unearthly place Yeats seems to lapse into a trance like state. Again, this is suggestive of his explorations of the arcane and of magic:

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fasten to a dying animal

⁴⁹ W. B. Yeats, "Sailong to Byzantium," in: N. Jeffares, W. Gould (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

It knows not what it is, and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.⁵²

The poet seems to experience a vision of some sort. Forces outside the natural world, which he is leaving behind, are affecting him. O'Donnell claims:

He seeks the golden splendour of Byzantium whose supernatural, permanent beauty will replace the fecund beauty enjoyed by the young in the country he has fled.⁵³

Yeats describes a dualistic existence of earthly and unearthly experiences. As with "The Stolen Child" "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" and "The Two Trees" these worlds, divided between spirit and flesh, are not totally separate. The fact that Yeats is able to slide from his earthly existence to the "other" side draws the reader's attention to the portal or passageway between the two worlds.

Yeats uses the concept of reincarnation to suggest the interconnection between differing existences. The poet displays an ability to escape from the old to the new. He has left one form behind and taken on another. In this repeated pattern of reincarnation, immortality is secured. Reincarnation keeps the cycle of change interconnected. It is possible to argue, however, that "those dying generations" of the first stanza are ironically immortal themselves. They are born, live and reproduce; although they eventually die, part of them lives on in their offspring. They create a continuous cycle of regeneration and rebirth. Heraclitus illuminates this interconnected cycle: "Dying each other's life, living each other's death."⁵⁴

In Yeats's determined fascination with the search for unity and truth, his poetry moves from his early explorations in the arcane to his later creation and construction of "his own philosophy."⁵⁵

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⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁵³ William H. O'Donnell, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (New York: The Ungar Publishing Co., 1986), p. 92.

⁵⁴ Heraclitus cited in: N. Jeffares, W. Gould (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 678.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Drake, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 125.