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Three Sources of W.B. Yeats's Syncretic Christ: Dante, Blake and the Upanishads

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This paper considers the sources that inform W.B. Yeats's conception of Unity of Being. Yeats expresses this concept in religious terms and syncretically aligns his 'Christ'—his Unity of Being—with an amalgamation of belief and philosophical systems. In this paper, I focus on a triad of influences that Yeats frequently drew together: Dante, Blake, and the Upanishads. Through a reading of images from the poems 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and 'The Phases of the Moon', this paper hopes to enrich existing literature on Yeats' religious self-conception as it stood at the publication of the second edition of *A Vision*. This article will explore how, since Yeats considered his pre-occupation with Unity of Being to be the origin of *A Vision*, the abovementioned poems are further connected to the background of Yeats's fictional characters Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne through references to 'Rosa Alchemica' and Yeats's play, *Calvary*.



Introduction

The interlinked nature of local and universal contexts is particularly apparent in W.B. Yeats's unique approach to opposites. At the core of Yeats's thought is what George Bornstein terms Yeats's 'antinomial vision' (2000: 384) and what Anthony Cuda calls a 'Blakean model of conflict and discord' (2009: 58). This 'antinomial vision' is chiefly concerned with opposites and the stark poetic command of contraries; seeking unification by engaging a 'wholeness maintained by the warfare of its parts' (Bornstein, 2000: 384). However, though Yeats's preoccupation with opposites is well documented, often the critical focus falls more on the fact of that engagement rather than its origin or aim.

All his life, Yeats had been captivated by bringing opposites together: by establishing a unity that would culminate in his articulation of Unity of Being in *A Vision*. By 1937, when writing the introduction to his works, Yeats refers to Unity of Being as his Christ. In this passage, describing his spiritual questing, Yeats contextualizes his Christ alongside Dante and Blake's writing as well as the Upanishads. While amongst and perhaps conjoined with many other influences, Yeats singles out these three sources in his description of his personal religion. This paper therefore begins by exploring Yeats's engagement with these sources, followed by a reading of 'The Phases of the Moon' and 'Ego Dominus Tuus': two poems that are closely connected with Yeats's conceptualization of *A Vision*. Lastly, I briefly consider how the ideas put forth in these poems and in *A Vision* are reflected in Yeats's play *Calvary*, an atypical dramatic representation of the Passion of Christ.

Unity of Being: Yeats's 'Christ'

To illustrate the development of Yeats's understanding of Unity of Being, I highlight three instances in which Yeats sketches the origins and development of his ideas surrounding a concept that involved the harmonisation of opposites, if not the transcendence of all division: Unity of Being. Firstly, in his 1919 essay, 'If I were Four-and-Twenty' he writes:

One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity'. For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence (1994b: 34).

This focus on the creation of unity is apparent throughout Yeats's oeuvre; Yeats did indeed frequently test his actions against the aforementioned phrase. Secondly, in

Autobiographies, Yeats expounds on this intense dedication to unity and explicitly makes use of the term ‘Unity of Being’:¹

I thought that in man and race alike there is something called ‘Unity of Being’, using the term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the *Convito* to a perfectly proportioned human body. My father, from whom I had learned the term, preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly (1999a: 164).

While this reflection illustrates the further deepening of Yeats’s need for unity and how he connects this need to ever more sources—both local (John Butler Yeats) and canonical (Dante)—Yeats would come to a much deeper understanding of Unity of Being by 1937. Unlike his earlier, half-formed notion of hammering thought into unity, Yeats now extrapolates religious significance from that same hammering. In this third instance, he declares in an introduction to his work that: ‘My Christ [...] is [...] Unity of Being’:

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s ‘Imagination’, what the Upanishads have named ‘Self’: nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, ‘eye of newt, and toe of frog’ (1994c: 210).

The three expositions, identified above, point to Yeats’s ‘Christ’ as a personal search for unity through the contraries and truths pursued by poets and religions. It also illustrates Yeats’s often syncretic search for spiritual knowledge and how he attempts to draw from a myriad of sources, an absolute truth common to all. The abovementioned 1937 extract poses a firm and precise articulation of what Yeats perceives to be his faith, since it directly identifies Unity of Being with Christ. To further illuminate Yeats’s complex beliefs, I will proceed to consider the three main sources from which Yeats shapes his

¹ This use of the term ‘Unity of Being’ occurs in the section titled ‘Four Years: 1887–1891’ of the second volume of Yeats’s *Autobiographies*, which was published under the title, *The Trembling of the Veil* in October 1922 and again in November 1926 (Yeats, 1999a: 19). William H. O’Donnell and Douglas Archibald observe in this second volume of *Autobiographies* Yeats revising the ‘First Draft’ in terms of ‘his recently developed “system” and its associated doctrines such as “Unity of Being”’ (Yeats, 1999a: 19). So, while Yeats may not have used the term ‘Unity of Being’ between 1887 and 1891, his ideas about the concept may well originate from this four-year period.

notion of Unity of Being: Dante, Blake, and the Upanishads. I refer throughout to the above passage as ‘Yeats’s 1937 articulation of faith’.

In the earlier conception, it is, according to Yeats, beauty that Dante compared to ‘a perfectly proportioned human body’ (1999a: 164); later, it is the Unity of Being that constitutes the comparison (1994e: 210). This reference to Dante is complicated; no one has yet identified any direct use of the term ‘Unity of Being’ in Dante’s *Convito* (as Yeats claims in both abovementioned extracts). Therefore, to investigate this reference, Yeats scholars have turned to the copies of the *Convito* to which Yeats may have had access. The catalogue of Yeats’s private library list two copies of Dante’s *Convito*² (O’Shea 1985: 72):

- *466: Dante Alighieri. *IL CONVITO. THE BANQUET OF DANTE ALIGHIERI*. Translated by Elizabeth Price Sayer. London: George Routledge, 1887. 286 pp. Sig.: A. Senier
- 467: ——. *THE CONVIVIO OF DANTE ALIGHIERI*. [Translated by Philip H. Wicksteed.] The Temple Classics. London: J. M. Dent, 1909. ii, 446 pp. Bp: GY. Sig.: Georgie Hyde Lees

George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood, in their *Critical Edition of Yeats’s A Vision* (1978), along with Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper who are the editors of the most recent *A Vision* (2008), point to two illuminating passages from the 1909 Temple Classics edition owned by Yeats’s wife, George Hyde Lees. The first passage that they identify from *The Convito* (treatise III, ch. viii) describes the harmony of the human form:

Amongst the effects of divine wisdom man is the most marvellous, seeing how the divine power has united three natures in one form, and how subtly harmonized his body must be harmonized for such a form, having organs for almost all its powers (Mills Harper and Paul 2008: 237 n46; Mills Harper & Hood 1978: 12 n18).

In Wicksteed’s notes to the earlier 1903 edition of the Temple Classics translation, he identifies these ‘three natures in one form’ as ‘three groups of vital phenomena (the

² As specified by the editor of *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats’s Library* (1985), Edward O’Shea, those items listed with an asterisk (*) before an item number ‘indicates that it appears in an anonymously compiled catalogue of Yeats’s books done sometime in the early 1920s’ (1985: ix). A number of items from this initial catalogue are missing; however, O’Shea does provide details about the Price Sayer translation, implying that it is not mistakenly listed or confused with some other edition.

vegetative, the animal, and the rational), in one soul' (Dante, 1903: 184). Earlier in the third treatise (1903), Dante explained how the 'vegetative power, whereby things live' also has a 'sensitive power', since it provides all living things with senses and forms 'the foundation of the intellectual power' (1903: 144). However, 'beasts', 'birds', 'fishes' and 'every brute animal' possess the vegetative and sensitive powers without 'the rational power' (1903: 145). It is the human soul alone that is inhabited by all three phenomena: 'And that soul which embraces all these powers is the most perfect of all the rest' (1903: 145). Both groups of *A Vision* editors also pinpoint a passage from the fourth treatise of Dante's *Convito*, ch. xxv, that describes the 'well ordained and disposed' body as 'beauteous as a whole and in its parts; for the due order of our members conveys the pleasure of a certain wondrous harmony' (Mills Harper and Paul, 2008: 237 n46).

The editors also point to George and Yeats's 'Automatic Scripts' of 1919 in which the Control suggested they read Dante's *Convito* (Mills Harper and Paul, 2008: 237 n46). All references to the 'Automatic Scripts' in this paper allude to the Script as it appears in volumes one and two of Yeats's *A Vision* papers, edited by George Mills Harper (1992a; 1992b). A link emerges between the Vitruvianesque portrayals in Dante's *Convito* of the human body as meaningfully and beautifully composed and what Yeats describes as Unity of Being. Indeed, as *A Vision* editors point out, a year before the Yeatses were advised to read the *Convito*, in one of their Automatic Script (AS) sessions Yeats had asked "What is unity of being?" and the Control replied: "Complete harmony between physical body, intellect & spiritual desire — all may be imperfect but if harmony is perfect it is unity" (Mills Harper and Paul 2008: 237 n46; Mills Harper, 1992b: 41 section 8, line 18). Since the copy of the *Convito* most cut and commented on is owned by George, and since it is her hand through which their AS takes place, it seems likely that Yeats is not misquoting Dante but misremembering via George's intuitive interpretation of the unity described by Dante in her own reading of the *Convito*. It is therefore probable that the term 'Unity of Being' does not come from Dante at all, but from George's assimilation of Dante's ideas with her own beliefs regarding unity.

Conversely, George Bornstein suggested that Yeats 'may have faultily remembered two passages from the Third Treatise' of the 1887 Price Sayer translation of the *Convito* (Bornstein 1979: 107). The first passage is the Price Sayer version of the same 1909 Temple Classics edition passage from Dante's *Convito* that I have highlighted above. The second passage that Bornstein identifies is composed of lines further into the third treatise, which I quote here in detail:

Morality is the beauty of Philosophy. For as the beauty of the body is the result of its members in proportion as they are fitly ordered, so the beauty of Wisdom, which is

the body of Philosophy, as has been said, results from the order of the Moral Virtues which visibly make that joy (Dante, 1887: 156).

Here, Dante is more noticeably involved in the act of comparing. He argues that 'Wisdom' is beautiful because it is proportioned. In the passages leading up to these lines, Dante explains that 'the natural desire in each thing is in proportion to the possibility of reaching to the thing desired' and that 'human desire [for knowledge] is proportioned in this life to that knowledge which it is possible to have here' (1887: 155). In other words, our moral virtues, like an arm or a leg that is not too long or too short, does not venture into extremes but functions within its proper limits. The well-proportioned body also thinks and therefore behaves in a well-proportioned manner; here we draw ever closer to the harmony between 'physical body, intellect and spiritual desire' as suggested by the Control in George and W.B. Yeats's AS when the question 'What is unity of being?' was asked.

However, the catalogue of Yeats's library lists this Price Sayer translation of Dante's *Convito* as largely uncut apart from pages 81 to 85 (O'Shea 1985: 72). These few cut pages are the introductory parts of chapter fourteen of the second treatise that expound on the concept of the 'third Heaven' along with the close relationship between 'Heaven' and 'Sciences' that are both capable of infusing perfection (particularly in humans). While this edition may help clarify Dante's comparisons, it is not possible to determine the text Yeats or George had in mind. Nevertheless, I would like to add to the suggestions made by Bornstein and the editors of *A Vision* regarding Dante, George, and Yeats's wording. I suggest a close correspondence between Yeats's prose phrasing and chapter twenty of the fourth treatise from the earlier 1903 Temple Classics edition of Dante's *Convito*, *The Convivio of Dante Alighieri*, also translated by Philip H. Wicksteed:

It is the gift of God alone to such a soul as, having a rightly-disposed body to harbour it, has taken a perfect stand therein. To such, nobility is 'the seed of blessedness dropped by God into a rightly-placed soul,'

[...]

And it is evident that human nobleness is nought else than, *the seed of blessedness draws nigh despatched by God into the well-placed soul*, that is, the soul whose body is perfectly disposed in every part (Dante, 1903: 325, 328).

From these extracts, it is not difficult to imagine that Dante's 'a rightly-disposed body', along with 'the soul whose body is perfectly disposed in every part', could have been conveyed either as paraphrase or by imperfect memory as 'a perfectly proportioned

human body' (Yeats 1994e: 210). Moreover, an added dimension is expressed: both soul and body being so disposed as to lie open to divine blessing, or the attainment of 'human nobleness'. While Yeats's attribution of the term 'Unity of Being' to Dante remains unclear, his allusion to Dante indicates a Unity of Being that is, as the term suggests, a balance of the different parts of one's being that is facilitated by divinity.

Similarly, when considering the second source listed in Yeats's articulation of faith, William Blake, we see again the conception of being as made up of different parts that can (or should) be unified. However, the unifying force for Blake, unlike Dante, is not God, but 'Imagination'. Yeats's aligning Unity of Being with Blake's 'Imagination' is clarified both by Yeats and Ellis's 1893 preface to *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*. In the former, 'Imagination' is described as the unifying faculty touching 'nature at one side, and spirit on the other' (Yeats, 1988: 78). In this description, the similarity in religious tone between Yeats's 1937 articulation of faith and the 1893 description of Blake's 'Imagination' is compelling (Yeats, 1988: 78):

Imagination is thus the philosophic name of the Saviour, whose symbolic name is Christ, just as Nature is the philosophic name of Satan and Adam. In saying that Christ redeems Adam (and Eve) from becoming Satan, we say that Imagination redeems Reason (and Passion) from becoming Delusion, — or Nature. The prophets and apostles, priests and missionaries, of this Redemption are, — or should be, — artists and poets.

Like Yeats, Blake relies on the established impetus of religious symbols to express the unifying function of 'Imagination'. What 'Imagination' unifies or saves, Yeats tells us, is spirit and nature; by entering nature and infusing it with spirit, 'Imagination' may reveal nature as symbol (Yeats, 1988: 78). What Blake considers the 'Delusion, — or Nature' from which human reason may then be redeemed is the world of the senses, the divided portions of 'Universal Mind': 'Consciousness is the result of the divided portions of Universal Mind obtaining reception of one another' (Yeats, 1988: 77). Through 'Imagination' and art, consciousness can return to what Blake believed to be a state of clairvoyance: a type of Neoplatonic Oneness. The fall of man is paralleled with the separation of the one mind into sets of opposites (Adam/male, Eve/female). Similarly, in his 1897 essay, 'William Blake and the Imagination', Yeats again conveys Blake's belief that through our senses we are bound to mortality and divided from each other by 'clashing interests'. Yet while 'Imagination' 'divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty', it also 'binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all

hearts' (2007a: 85).³ Unlike Dante's proportions, Blake's contribution to Yeats's Unity of Being appears to emphasise the artificiality of perceived opposites or stark divisions between different states of existence.

Along with being entangled with Dante's perfectly disposed body and soul, and Blake's 'Imagination' and 'Universal Mind', Yeats's conception of Unity of Being is further informed by 'what the Upanishads have named "Self"' (1994c: 210). In Yeats's syncretic fashion, Eastern philosophy is no less appropriate for conveying his beliefs than are Dante and Blake. In the same year as Yeats's 1937 articulation of faith, he declares: 'I have fed upon the philosophy of the Upanishads all my life' (Hone 1962: 459). Kuch considers this statement an exaggeration and notes that Yeats's knowledge of the Upanishads originates largely from 'his early study of the Indian Scriptures' with his friend George Russell (A. E.) (1986: 20). While Yeats did not share Russell's enthusiasm for the Upanishads, he continued to be influenced by the text through their friendship, and later, the Theosophical Society. In 1886, shortly before joining the Theosophical Society, Yeats and Russell attended a Dublin visit from the Indian Brahmin and Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee who would encourage both men to further pursue their study of Indian philosophy (Kuch 1986: 18). Since the introduction to Chatterjee's views, Yeats and Russell often discussed their different interpretations of the Upanishads (Dabić, 2015: 12). In his 1937 preface to *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, Yeats reflects on this shared study: 'For some forty years my friend George Russell (A.E.) has quoted me passages from some Upanishad, and for those forty years I have said to myself—some day I will find out if he knows what he is talking about' (1994a, 171). Thus, Yeats's engagement with the Upanishads can be traced, at least, to the period of his life in the 1880s when immersed in Indian philosophy via the Theosophical Society and Mohini Chatterjee.

Later in his life, Yeats's interest in the Upanishads is closely related to his friendship with the Indian monk Shree Purohit Swami with whom he would co-translate the Upanishads. In his essay 'The Holy Mountain' (1934), that served as introduction to Swami's translation of the account by his Master, Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, of his pilgrimage and initiation, Yeats refers to a communal '*Comédie humaine*'. This is an allusion to Balzac's novel series *La Comédie Humaine* that was 'primarily concerned with painting French life in its entirety' (Trent, 1909: ix). In the context of Hamsa's

³ See also Yeats's 1924 essay 'William Blake and His Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*' (2007b: 103): 'Our imaginations are but fragments of the universal imagination, portions of the universal body of God, and as we enlarge our imagination by imaginative sympathy, and transform with the beauty and peace of art the sorrows and joys of the world, we put off the limited mortal man more and more and put on the unlimited "immortal man"'

initiation, Yeats's reference to Balzac's series takes on metaphoric significance. Yeats refers not to a single work but a shared reality when referring to 'our' and not 'a' or 'the' *Comédie humaine*. Yeats presents 'our *Comédie humaine*' as collective panorama of Western or European thought. It is this '*Comédie humaine*' that has kept Yeats preoccupied with 'national, social, personal problems', something that he recognizes when engaging with the travels of Swami and his Master (Yeats 1994c: 139).⁴ Much like Blake's 'Universal Mind', Yeats identifies a human condition shared by East and West alike: 'No two civilisations prove or assume the same things, but behind both hides the unchanging experience of simple men and women' (1994c: 139).

A year after publishing 'The Holy Mountain', Yeats writes an introduction to the Mandukya Upanishad in which he details the initiation vision of Bhagwan Shri Hamsa at Mount Kailas in Tibet. Yeats glosses over the vision itself in his writing of 'The Holy Mountain', in which Hamsa's initiation was initially recounted. Yeats's updated analysis clarifies that Hamsa's ideal was to become 'initiated into the realisation of the Self' (1994d: 158). This realisation requires the images held by the ascetic in meditation to become 'superseded by the unity of thought and fact' (1994d: 160); seemingly opposing states are revealed to be one. Here, Yeats describes the 'Self' as that to which man can become united through the states associated with the sacred syllables *Aum*. In short, the letter 'A' is the 'physical or waking state', 'U' is the 'dream state where only mental substances appear', and 'M' is the 'deep sleep' devoid of desire or dreams (1994d: 157). A fourth state is entered when the pilgrim becomes united to 'sleepless Self, creator of all, source of all, unknowable, unthinkable, ungraspable, a union with its sole proof of its existence' (1994d: 157). Union with this 'Self' in the fourth state (comparable with Blake's 'Universal Mind') is not articulated in syllables or even language but is 'expressed by our articulation of the whole world' (1994d: 158).⁵ Yeats continues to name this all-encompassing state the 'Universal Self but also that of a civilisation' (1994d: 160). When Hamsa becomes initiated after dedicated meditation in which he fixed his mind on the mental image of his Lord, who then revealed himself physically, he rejoices: 'I found myself reflected everywhere in the whole Universe!' (1994d: 161). And so, a sense of Unity of Being transpires that sees the individual as unique (and proportioned just so) as well as reflective of the whole of existence, despite

⁴ For an analysis of connections between Balzac and mystical experience in Yeats's introduction to 'The Holy Mountain', see 'India and Spiritual Discrimination' in *Yeats, Otherness and the Orient* by Nicholas Meihuizen (2018, Peter Lang).

⁵ While the verbal recitation of mantras is commonly associated with meditation and the attainment of different states, Yeats reaffirms that 'the realization of the Self is wordless, unique, an act of the unbroken consciousness alone' (1994d: 160).

existing in a world of division and opposites. Division can thus be overcome, and it is, in particular, the pre-occupation of poets, artists, and ascetics who through divinity (Dante), Imagination (Blake), or initiation (Upanishads) are able to reunite with the cosmos.

Another two years after writing 'The Holy Mountain' as an interpretative introduction to Yeats and Shree Purohit Swami's translation of *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, the description of 'Self' nearing the end of the text emphasises its absolute universality. The text reads 'This Self is the Lord of all beings; as all spokes are knit together in the hub, all things, all gods, all men, all lives, all bodies, are knit together in that Self' (Yeats and Swami, 1937: 135). In pursuit of Unity of Being, then, the prophets and apostles of art and imagination discover the immediately local in the transcendently universal and the transcendently universal in the immediately local.

Unity, Mask and Wisdom

As this article has established, Yeats was certainly influenced by Dante, Blake, and the Upanishads at different points and to varying degrees over his lifetime. What all three sources provide him with is the notion of a (re)unifying faculty that is at the core of his belief of Unity of Being. His expression and poetic enactment of this belief is visible in two poems leading up to *A Vision*: 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and 'The Phases of the Moon'. The following diptych-type reading of the two poems may therefore enrich the discussion of what Yeats considered to be his Christ; those ruminations that would inform the system of *A Vision*.

The 1937 passage in which Yeats articulates his faith and identifies Dante, Blake, and the Upanishads as something of a holy trinity of Unity of Being, is immediately followed by the significant admission that 'Subconscious preoccupation with this theme brought me [Yeats] *A Vision*, its harsh geometry an incomplete interpretation' (Yeats, 1994e: 210). We may therefore consider *A Vision* Yeats's best attempt at interpreting what he believes to be this multifaceted faith in which he lived and died. In *A Vision* (all instances here refer to its first 1925 edition), Yeats names different types of unity and uses them as terms (capitalised): Unity of Being, Unity with God, Unity with Nature, and Unity of Fact. Unity of Fact is mentioned only once, and Unity with God and Unity with Nature are mentioned only briefly as natural and supernatural unity. Unity of Being, however, forms part of the diagram of the 'Great Wheel' representing the lunar phases. It is listed as one of the 'Four Perfections', and the possibility of attaining Unity of Being is discussed at the relevant lunar phases into which Yeats classified human types. These twenty-eight phases are expounded in the body of *A Vision* but are first

introduced by the poem that prefaces the entire text, ‘The Phases of the Moon’. All references to Yeats’s poems in this paper allude to the poems as they appear in the second edition of volume one of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (1997).

‘The Phases of the Moon’ is in conversation with another poem that does not appear in *A Vision*: ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’. However, the two poems appear together first in the collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). The significance of the close positioning of ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’ and ‘The Phases of the Moon’ in this collection has been emphasised by Nicholas Meihuizen; the two are separated by only a single poem, and we know that the placement of poems was important to Yeats (2003: 32). The wisdom borne by the anti-self in ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’ is ‘directly related to that dispensed by Robartes and Aherne in “The Phases of the Moon”’ (Meihuizen 2003: 32). The poems also share the significance of their setting: Thoor Ballylee, ‘a place set out for wisdom’ as Aherne calls it in ‘The Phases of the Moon’ (Yeats 1997: 168).

One aspect echoing between the two poems is that of an opposite of the self that may be called forth. Firstly, in ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, Hic asks Ille why he seeks delusional wisdom, to which Ille answers: ‘By the help of an image/I call to my own opposite, summon all/That I have handled least, least looked upon’ (Yeats, 1997: 161). The same phrasing appears early on in *A Vision* when Yeats refers to ‘the unity described by Dante in the *Convito*’ (2008c: 18). In this instance in *A Vision*, Yeats is describing a ‘deeper being’ that may result in or somehow lead to Unity of Being. This state of being is activated through the ‘Mask’: Yeats compares antithetical (or subjective) man to an actor in the improvised drama of Italy who ‘must play a role and wear a *Mask* as unlike as possible to his natural character [...] He must discover a being which only exists with extreme effort, when his muscles are as it were all taut and all his energies active’ (2008c: 17). Similarly, in *Autobiographies*, ‘Mask’ is described as anti-self; it ‘delineates a being in all things the opposite to their natural state’ (Yeats, 1999b: 200).

When Ille calls to his own opposite in ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, he does so because, as revealed in the last stanza of the poem, his anti-self will disclose all that he seeks. What Ille seeks, he also declares in the final stanza of ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’: ‘I seek an image, not a book’ (Yeats, 1997: 163). This image echoes back to the opening of the poem when Hic replies to Ille’s calling up the help of an image: ‘And I would find myself and not an image’ (Yeats 1997: 161). Ille seeks to be united with himself, a (re)union that may also become union with that universal whole of which he is a reflection—much like Hamsa who found himself reflected ‘everywhere in the whole Universe!’ upon ‘being initiated into the realisation of the Self’ (Yeats, 1994d: 158). Reminiscent also of Blake’s

'Imagination', the Mask is 'A form created by passion to unite us to ourselves' (Yeats, 2008c: 18).⁶

The image sought by Ille in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' is perhaps also recalled in 'The Phases of the Moon' when Robartes refers to the poet as having found 'Mere images' that are 'after the manner of his kind' (Yeats, 1997: 165). In 'The Phases of the Moon', the poet's 'kind' is the tradition of Shelley, Milton, and Palmer; those poets and artists who are the 'prophets and apostles, priests and missionaries' of Blake's 'Imagination' (Yeats 1988: 78). At the beginning of both 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and 'The Phases of the Moon', Yeats identifies himself as just such a hermit poet, who reads alone in the dark or traces shapes in the sand in search of mysterious wisdom. Under the 'old wind-beater tower' in 'Ego Dominus Tuus', 'A lamp burns on beside the open book' (Yeats 1997: 161) and in 'The Phases of the Moon', 'the light [from the tower] proves that he is reading still' (1997: 165). Consider Robartes's description of the poet's solitary scene in 'The Phases of the Moon':

He has found, after the manner of his kind,
Mere images; chosen this place to live in
Because, it may be, of the candle-light
From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince:
The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
And now he seeks in book or manuscript
What he shall never find.
(1997:165)

Thoor Ballylee itself becomes a symbol of the poet's kind when compared to Milton and Shelley's towers (*Il Penseroso* and *Prince Athanase*). While Norman built, Thoor Ballylee is predominantly thought of as an Irish tower: intentionally named Thoor (Túr), it stands symbolically amongst English castles in that '*Comédie humaine*' of unchanging experience. The image of Yeats as poet in the tradition of Milton and Shelley illustrates Yeats's dual kinship with English and Irish identities. Similarly, the

⁶ Neil Mann explains that Yeats developed the symbol of *Mask* most notably in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and 'Ego Dominus Tuus' but that it took on a different form in *A Vision*. In *A Vision*, 'the *Mask* defined for Yeats his own concept of the artistic self and creative imagination, as well as determining the nature of emotion and the poetic process' (Mann, 2013: 168).

two personae in ‘The Phases of the Moon’, Robartes and Aherne—pre-established personae from Yeats’s previous prose—may be considered constructed identities, often thought of as antithetical. In ‘Rosa Alchemica’, Yeats describes Michael Robartes as having ‘wild red hair, fierce eyes, sensitive, tremulous lips and rough clothes’ that made him look ‘something between a debauchee, a saint, and a peasant’ (2005a: 179). Aherne is described in ‘The Tables of the Law’ along the same lines: ‘He had the nature, which is half monk, half soldier of fortune’ but who is ‘more orthodox in most of his beliefs than Michael Robartes’ (Yeats, 2005a: 192). Claire Nally interprets Aherne as an emphatic Anglo-Irishman, while Robartes is ‘partly a stereotype of the Gael’ (2010: 51). While these two personae may well be antithetical to varying degrees and at different points in Yeats’s prose or poetry, in ‘The Phases of the Moon’ they form a unit representing Yeats’s own antithesis. Together, Robartes and Aherne (Robartes in particular), represent that active search for ‘truth’ and the anti-self that may be reflected everywhere in the universe since it is Robartes and not Yeats who has travelled to collect the mysteries anthologised in *A Vision*. It is from Robartes’s teaching, those ‘documents upon which this book is founded’, that Yeats had received what he needed to construct ‘a system of thought’ that would leave his imagination free to create as it chose and ‘yet make all that it created, or could create, part of that one history, and that the soul’s’ (Yeats 2008a: lv).

The ‘image of mysterious wisdom’ won by the poet in his tower in ‘The Phases of the Moon’ leads him to ever more toiling after that unity with the self and its opposite. In the second volume of *Autobiographies*, Yeats considers this artistic toil again through Dante: ‘I thought there could be no aim for poet or artist except expression of a “Unity of Being” like that of a “perfectly proportioned human body”—though I would not at the time have used that phrase’ (1999b: 200). The poet’s task, then, is to express what is mirrored back to him upon meeting himself. In ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, this search for the anti-self is initiated by the tracing of shapes upon the sand under the light of the moon. The act itself echoes Robartes’s discovery in Damascus of ‘markings upon the sands’ which he would come to learn as the doctrine of the Judwalis whose ‘Sacred Book had been lost’ (Yeats, 2008a: lxi). The Judwalis are a fictitious group introduced by Aherne via Robartes in the introduction of *A Vision* as a ‘strange sect’ with several tribes who are ‘known among the Arabs for the violent contrasts of character amongst them, for their licentiousness and their sanctity. Fanatical in matters of doctrine, they seem tolerant of human frailty beyond any believing people I have met (Yeats, 2008a: lxi). Since their Sacred Book had been lost, Judwali doctrine would ‘constantly be explained to their growing boys and girls by the aid of diagrams drawn by old religious men

upon the sands' (Yeats 2008a: lx).⁷ Yeats, as an 'old religious man' too, traces magical shapes in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and is 'Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion' (Yeats, 1997: 161). We may consider 'unconquerable delusion' in Blakean terms as a divided and shrinking consciousness: a world of division. The poet, it is implied, can only reach at shapes and images when seeking to redeem Reason and Passion through 'Imagination'. Once the anti-self or Robartes-like 'mysterious one' appears, 'standing by these characters' in the sand (Yeats, 1997: 163), the poet, much like a Judwali youth, is able to infuse the magical shapes with meaning.

Both 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and 'The Phases of the Moon' centre around the calling up of an opposite either by moonlight or candlelight. This calling up occurs either through magical shapes in the sand or through reading in the tower.

Shapes and images

Yeats refers to Judwali markings upon the sands again in the extensive note to his 1920 play *Calvary* in which Lazarus, Judas, and a group of Roman soldiers reject Christ (Yeats, 2001a: 696). In his note to the play, Yeats quotes Robartes's 1917 letter to Aherne that recounts Robartes's time living with the Judwalis. On one of these mornings, a young Arab explains to Robartes how 'certain marks on the sand' outside the tent of a wonder-worker were made, not by a jackal, but by 'the wonder-worker's "Daimon" or "Angel"' (Yeats, 2001b: 696). While Yeats's conception of the Daimon changed over time, it derives primarily from his earlier notions of the Mask and anti-self. In its broadest sense, Neil Mann describes the Daimon as 'a supernatural being, paired with its human counterpart, paradoxically both the human's opposite in every respect and also an expression of the soul's more complete essence' (2019: 154). By seeing that which is called up through these drawings in the sand as both a separate and supernatural being, as well as an extension of the self upon meeting, this type of Daimonic thinking forms part of Yeats's poetic process of expressing Unity of Being. By tracing shapes upon the sand in 'Ego Dominus Tuus', the poet becomes like the Italian actor who, with the help of a Mask, calls to his own opposite 'with extreme effort, when his muscles are as it were all taut and all his energies active' (Yeats 2008c: 17). Indeed, Ille leaves 'the lamp/ Burning alone beside an open book' (Yeats 1997: 163), seeking not 'sedentary toil' but active evocation on the 'wet sands by the edge of the stream' (Yeats 1997: 163). Note

⁷ According to Suheil B. Bushrui, when constructing the Judwali sect, the 'only tribe in Arabia (and in Mesopotamia in particular)' that Yeats could have had in mind was the 'the Sabians (or Harranians)' who 'held a religious philosophy strongly tinged with Neoplatonic and Christian elements' (1965: 297-298).

also, how the tracing upon the sands in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' takes place outside of the tower and the shapes made in Robartes's retelling in the note to *Calvary*, too, takes place outside the tent of a wonder-worker.

The significance of the shapes and the image through which the opposite is summoned in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' is further enlightened by its recurrence in 'The Phases of the Moon' when Robartes looks upon the poet in the tower, 'reading still'; one who 'has found, after the manner of his kind,/Mere images' (Yeats, 1997: 165). In 'Ego Dominus Tuus' the poet traces shapes beside the stream at Thoor Ballylee in the style of those diagrams he may have been pouring over by candlelight inside the tower. It is these images in which the poet remains engrossed when gazed upon by Robartes and Aherne in 'The Phases of the Moon'. A similar scene is recounted in Aherne's introduction to *A Vision* in which he tells of his and Robartes's coming by Yeats's Bloomsbury lodgings but turning away (Yeats, 2008a: lxi). However, the images of 'mysterious wisdom won by toil', Robartes notes, cannot be transformed or expressed with the help of 'book or manuscript' alone.

Here, Robartes's own narrative origins may prove insightful. In 'Rosa Alchemica', the short story from which Robartes is resuscitated, Robartes is seen seeking out an initiate for his 'Order of the Alchemical Rose'. Throughout 'Rosa Alchemica' and in line with what Yeats believed of Blake's teaching that the imaginative arts were 'the greatest of Divine revelations' (2007a: 85), Yeats emphasised the importance of mystical and prophetic texts alongside prose and poetry. When arriving at the Temple of the Alchemical Rose, for instance, the narrator notes the alchemical library as 'exhaustive' with 'poets and prose writers of every age' (Yeats, 2005a: 185). Robartes's initiate has to first study the 'book on the doctrine and method of the Order' before being admitted in ceremony. This ornate book, 'interspersed with symbolical pictures and illuminations' arrives in a special bronze box. The doctrine of the Order of the Alchemical Rose argued that:

[...] divine powers would only appear in beautiful shapes, which are but, as it were, shapes trembling out of existence, folding up into a timeless ecstasy, drifting with half-shut eyes, into a sleepy stillness. The bodiless souls who descended into these forms were what men called the moods; and worked all great changes in the world; for just as the magician or the artist could call them when he would, so they could call out of the mind of the magician or the artist, or if they were demons, out of the mind of the mad or the ignoble, what shape they would, and through its voice and its gestures pour themselves out upon the world (Yeats, 2005a: 187).

Robartes's Order considered the ability to draw from both physical and 'bodiless' realms to be the 'independent reality of our thoughts' and 'the doctrine from which all true doctrines rose' (Yeats, 2005a: 187). The appearance of shapes, either conjured by the imagination of the artist or self-manifested through the artist's imagination by divine powers, recalls both Blake's 'Imagination' as well as Bhagwan Shri Hamsa's initiation vision in which mental images became 'superseded by the unity of thought and fact' (Yeats, 1994d: 160). In the same way that Robartes's initiate has to 'learn the steps of an exceedingly antique dance' before his initiation could be perfected (Yeats, 2005a: 188), the poet in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' performs something of a summoning ritual. By tracing those characters upon the sand after examining them from mysterious text and diagrams, the poet intends to bring ritual and physicality to the thought that has been engaged with the whole: that proportioned body, Universal Mind, Universal Self. Through the mind of the poet, a Mask must be created.

John Unterecker suggests that perhaps the poet's characters upon the sand in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' have 'succeeded in luring beneath the tower his anti-self' in the form of Aherne in 'The Phases of the Moon' (1959: 153). Similarly, Michael Sidnell proposes that since Robartes and Aherne, too, are 'mere images' or fictional personae, for Yeats to 'imagine these mental creations a-knocking at his door [...] is to imagine the inconceivable—the inconceivable that the poem imitates' (1975: 235). The placement of the two poems certainly succeeds in soliciting an imaginative stretch that sees the poet as retrospective conjurer. Together, 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and 'The Phases of the Moon' single out Yeats, or the image of poet, as a solitary seeker who must toil to articulate that Unity of Being which he has claimed as his Christ. Since poets are the 'prophets and apostles, priests and missionaries, of this Redemption' (Yeats, 1988: 78), the composition of poetry itself becomes a type of mediumship. This is a practice that we know Yeats was deeply familiar with from his and George's creation-conveyance of Robartes's discoveries in *A Vision*.

The religiosity of the creative task, Yeats claims in the second volume of *Autobiographies*, figured early in his life as the faith he was born into and from which he continually crafts his 'new religion':

I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and in poems only, but in tiles round the chimney-place and in the hangings that kept out the draught (1999a: 115).

Unity of Being, as Yeats's Christ, has for its church a poetic tradition that should not be discovered, as Robartes notes in 'The Phases of the Moon', 'in book or manuscript' alone (Yeats 1997: 165). This tradition must also be manifest in the tangible, physical world, like Blake's 'Imagination', touching 'nature at one side, and spirit on the other' or the physical appearance of the mental image of Hamsa's Lord (Yeats 1988: 78). Since Yeats's Christ is Unity of Being, it follows that his church is the poetic tradition he identified with.

Calvary as Completion

While Yeats's understanding of Christ evolves syncretically and seems far from the orthodoxies of Roman Catholic and Protestant Evangelical traditions, the archetypal figure or symbolic value of Christ proves critical to the expression of his 'new religion'. Indeed, in the Yeateses' AS of 31 January to 5 March 1918, a distinction is made between a symbolic Christ and a historical Christ when the following question is presented:

15. Is the spirit in a sense the body of christ, it being the immortal body.
15. It is difficult to say yes because a million years hence may have been more christs but if you believe the symbolism & not the historical christ it is so (Yeats, 1992a: 326).

Symbolically, then, the spirit can be viewed as the body or vehicle through which Unity of Being is expressed. Earlier in the abovementioned session, 'spirit' is described as 'the intermediary between man & divinity both in life and after' (Yeats, 1992a: 321). In the same way that, traditionally, Christ's crucifixion resulted in his later resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would serve as an intermediary between humanity and God, so does Yeats's Christ (Unity of Being) present an intermediary between humanity and divinity. Later, in contextualizing Blake's Christianity, in 'William Blake and His Illustrations to the Divine Comedy' (1924), Yeats again advances the metaphor by referring to a 'historical Christ':

The historical Christ was indeed no more than the supreme symbol of the artistic imagination, in which, with every passion wrought to perfect beauty by art and poetry, we shall live, when the body has passed away for the last time; but before that hour man must labour through many lives and many deaths (Yeats, 2007b: 102).

While the figure of Christ is used in a similar and largely symbolical way by Yeats, he does connect his conception of Unity of Being with a variant of the historical Christ in the play *Calvary* by revealing to a dying and rejected Christ, the God of dice (Yeats,

2001a: 335). In this view, the historical Christ's experience in *Calvary* is akin to Hamsa's initiation into the realisation of the Self, especially considering the First Musician's remark that 'Christ dreams His passion through' (Yeats, 2001a: 330). While on the cross, Christ is encouraged by his deathbed companions, the gambling Roman soldiers, to 'Die in peace' as they perform for his benefit 'The dance of the dice-throwers'. According to the Third Roman soldier in the play, this is a dance that Christ would have known, 'If he were but the God of dice [...] But he is not that God' (Yeats, 2001a: 335). The dice imagery is explained in Yeats's note to the play in which Robartes is quoted as conveying the Judwali belief that all things are divided into Chance and Choice. If a human is to 'throw from the dice-box there would be but six possible sides on each of the dice, but when God throws He uses dice that have all numbers and sides' (Yeats, 2001b: 697). 'In God alone, indeed, can they [Chance and Choice] be united, yet each be perfect and without limit or hindrance' (Yeats, 2001b: 697). This description of unity, of resolving a set of opposites, is further reminiscent of Yeats's descriptions of Blake's divided portions of Universal Mind and Dante's perfect proportions and divine blessedness.⁸ In fact, in Yeats's note to *Calvary*, he contrasted his own note to the long notes that 'Dante put to several of the odes in the *Convito*' (Yeats, 2001b: 695) thereby presenting the content of the note and the play as analogous to the Unity of Being Yeats associates with the *Convito*. Yeats's own note consists largely of a passage from Robartes's 1917 letter to Aherne that recounts Robartes's time living with the Judwalis and his retelling, recorded by Aherne, of *Three Songs of Joy* which was 'written by a certain old Arab' (Yeats, 2001b: 697). These quoted passages read like the text from *A Vision*, interspersed with Yeats's description of the bird-symbolism used in *Calvary*. While *A Vision* was published in 1925, five years after the publication of *Calvary*, Yeats nevertheless 'had begun to compose the dialogues between Aherne and Robartes that comprise the first drafts of the book [*A Vision*] [...] as early as 1917' (Mills Harper and Paul, 2008: xxx). When writing the note to *Calvary*, Yeats certainly had in mind the mysteries presented in Robartes's papers (and hence, *A Vision*) and connected them directly to the symbols and characters in *Calvary*.

Most explicitly, Yeats connects Robartes's retelling of 'certain marks on the sand' made by a "'Daimon" or "Angel"'—who either has the shape of a beast or a bird, depending on the subjectivity or objectivity of one's nature (Yeats, 2001b: 696)—with Yeats's own use of 'birds as symbols of subjective life' in *Calvary* (Yeats, 2001b: 695). As

⁸ Additionally, in *A Vision* and his other prose Yeats repeats the belief that 'Christ was the only man who measured six feet and not a little more or less, and was perfectly shaped in all other ways' (2007c: 9); 'Christ alone is exactly six feet high, perfect physical man. Yet as perfect physical man He must die, for only so can primary power reach antithetical mankind' (2008b: 154).

with the tracing of characters upon the sand in 'Ego Dominus Tuus', to call to 'my own opposite' (Yeats, 1997: 161), who is also 'the mysterious one [...] And look most like me, being indeed my double' (Yeats, 1997: 163), the Judwali belief is that someone with an objective nature will have a Daimon taking the form of a beast. Conversely, someone with a subjective nature will have a Daimon taking the form of a bird (Yeats, 2001b: 696). Yeats explains that by employing 'lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan' in *Calvary*, he intended to increase 'the objective loneliness of Christ' (2001b: 696). The 'lonely birds' as 'natural symbols of subjectivity' appear as Christ's double who, as in 'Ego Dominus Tuus', 'prove of all imaginable things/The most unlike' (Yeats, 1997: 163). While paradoxically being Christ's double, the birds in *Calvary* are most unlike Christ in that they 'served neither God nor Cæsar, and await for none or for a different saviour' (Yeats, 2001b: 696).

If the God described by the old Arab via Robartes in Yeats's note to *Calvary*, can be aligned with the God of dice in the play itself, then we may interpret the historical Christ's despair at the commencement of the dance of the dice-throwers ('My Father, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' Yeats, 2001a: 335) as a realisation of that universal whole from which God throws his dice. This realisation is, moreover, of the mental creation of '[t]he cross that but exists because He dreams it' (Yeats 2001a: 330). Since Yeats imparts this Judwali knowledge of Chance and Choice through Robartes, the dance of the dice-throwers is also associated with another dance with supernatural effect in 'Rosa Alchemica' where members of the Order of the Alchemical Rose dance across a depiction of 'a pale Christ on a pale cross' so as to 'trouble His unity with their multitudinous feet' (Yeats, 2005a: 189). In 'Rosa Alchemica', three years prior to the publication of *Calvary*, Yeats placed the unity of the historical Christ in contrast with the multiplicity of beliefs held by members of the Order of the Alchemical Rose. Before his initiation could be perfected, the narrator of 'Rosa Alchemica' must partake 'three times in a magical dance, for rhythm was the wheel of Eternity' (Yeats, 2005a: 188). This antique dance takes place in 'a great circular room' with 'an immense rose wrought in mosaic' on the ceiling and 'a battle of gods and angels' depicted about the walls (Yeats, 2005a: 188). As the dance proceeded, the dancers were 'tracing upon the floor the shapes of petals that copied the petals in the rose overhead' (Yeats, 2005a: 189). Much like the shapes in the sand from 'Ego Dominus Tuus', the tracing of shapes in 'Rosa Alchemica' result in a conjuring. Gradually, the mosaic petals mimicked by the steps of the dance, 'as they fell, shaping into the likeness of living beings [...] and soon every mortal foot danced by the white foot of an immortal' (Yeats, 2005a: 189). The mortal and immortal are drawn into the same realm through shapes and images. This unifying effect provides further insight into the result of the dance of the dice-throwers in *Calvary* who also

dance, not on, but around Christ as they ‘wheel about the cross’ (Yeats, 2001a: 335). A similar conjoining of opposites is implied by the connection between the two dances.

Conclusion

The 1937 passage in which Yeats so firmly states that Unity of Being is his Christ also reveals its close connection to *A Vision*—and therefore also the poem it is prefaced by: ‘The Phases of the Moon’. This poem is entwined with the poem ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’ and, as illustrated by this paper, both engage with Yeats’s concept of the Mask: an anti-self, or opposite that is ritualistically called forth through shapes or images.

Yeats expresses the belief that this type of conjuring is primarily the duty of ‘poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians’ (1999a: 115). The creative tradition he forms a part of, as a poet, provides him with multiple sources for his conception of a personal Christ. Hence, from Yeats’s 1937 articulation of faith emerges an amalgam of those sources that were central to Yeats’s syncretic search for meaning. Through Dante, Blake, the Upanishads, along with the symbolic strength of the archetype of Christ, Yeats conveys what he considered to be the core of his belief. Namely, Dante’s influence emphasized for Yeats the idea of a perfect or rightly disposed body and soul. Similarly, Blake’s conception of a return to or awareness of Universal Mind signifies a unification through ‘Imagination’. Like ‘Universal Mind’, a union with the ‘Universal Self’ that Yeats came to know from the Upanishads is realised through initiation.

As this article has explored, Unity of Being represents, then, Yeats’s layered understanding of what the AS controls referred to as ‘Complete harmony between physical body, intellect & spiritual desire’ (Mills Harper and Paul, 2008: 237 n46), yet it also relates to the greater unity between the individual and shared universal existence. Yeats’s Christ, his symbolic salvation, lies in his embodiment of that whole: that Unity of Being, arrived at through the creative imagination.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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